

REIGATE HEATH

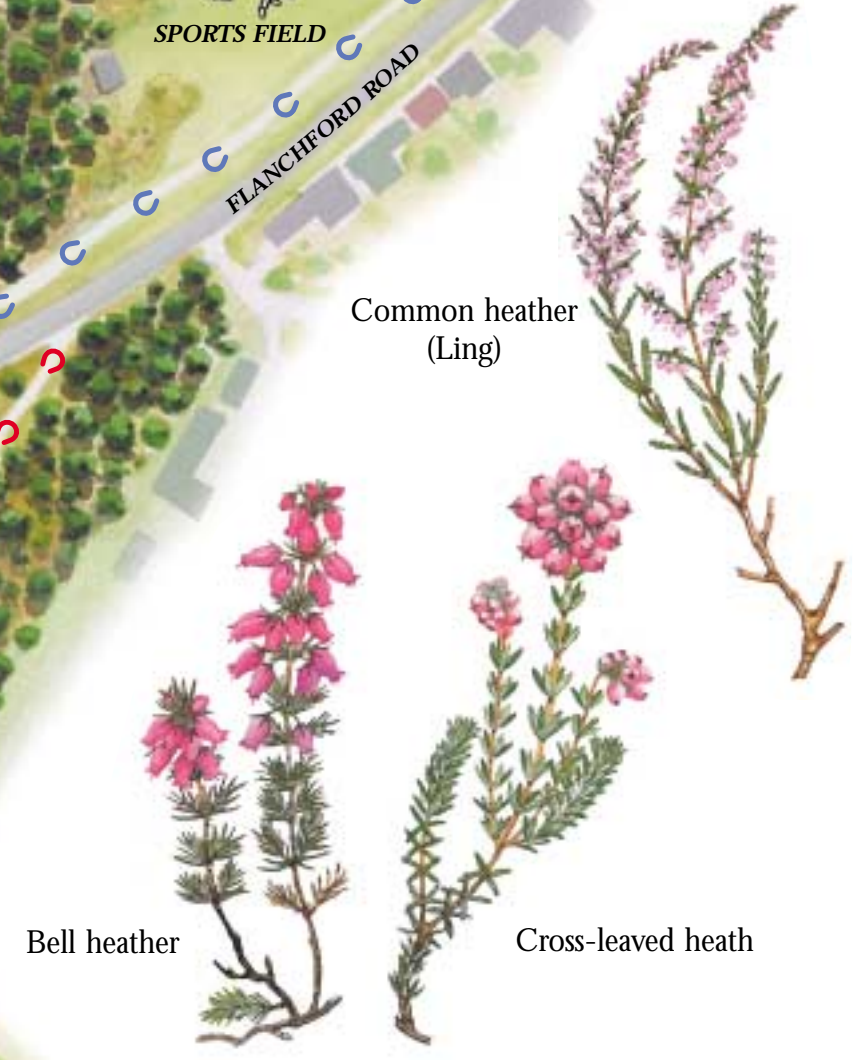
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE



Bronze Age Tumulus

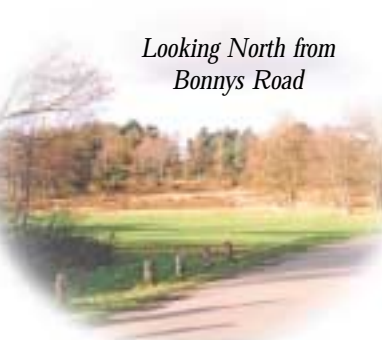


- Public Bridleway/Footpath
- Permissive Horse Ride/Footpath
- Public Footpath
- Tumuli
- Bus Stop



REIGATE HEATH is a 51 ha (120 acres) **Site of Special Scientific Interest** owned by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council. The history of the Heath dates back over 4000 years. Heathlands were created during the prehistoric period when the poor soils of the area were exhausted by early farming activities. This resulted in sandy soils of low fertility which could only support non-aggressive plants such as heather, gorse and other typical heathland vegetation. Heathlands were used by commoners for grazing over many centuries. In the 20th century, changing farming methods and urban development meant a loss of 85% of the heathland of Surrey since the late 18th century. Of the heathland that remains nearly 25% has been lost to scrub. This means that heathland is an increasingly rare and valuable habitat, of which Reigate Heath is the largest example in East Surrey.

Natural History



Several habitats are to be found on Reigate Heath. As well as lowland heath, there is dry acid grassland, alder woodland (known as 'alder carr'), and recent secondary woodland, which all support their own special and characteristic species.

Three native species of heather can still be found on the Heath today; common heather (Ling), bell heather and cross leaved heath. Until recently, the areas these species cover were becoming increasingly small owing to a number of pressures. Lack of grazing has resulted in an increase in the number of trees and scrub on the Heath. This in turn has meant that heather has been unable to compete because of a lack of light. The Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers have been clearing areas of scrub and bracken to increase the amount of heather area. Similar work has been done by the Golf Club. Wild flowers to be found in the heathland areas also include harebells, and the rare dwarf gorse.

Over a number of years the water table has fallen in the area of Reigate Heath. Most affected by this drop are the areas of alder carr. Alder is a tree that flourishes in wet conditions. Although the alder trees are still present, the drier conditions have resulted in a loss of many species. It is possible to see how much the soil has dried out, and therefore shrunk, because the alders are now on their own raised 'islands.'

The woodland areas support many typical species. Bluebells and wood anemones are abundant in spring, as are many interesting fungi later on in the year. Animal species seen on the heath include common lizards and slow worms as well as the occasional grass snake. Sparrowhawks are often seen flying through the woods. During the winter months look out for the bright red and green crossbills that can be seen feeding in the coniferous woodlands.

To protect the heathland, it is essential that invasive species such as bracken and tree species are controlled in order to prevent natural succession leading to the Heath reverting to scrub and thick woodland.

History and Archaeology

Evidence exists of human activity on Reigate Heath for at least 4,000 years. Finds from this time onward include worked flints and hunting weapons. By the Bronze Age, (2500-700 BC) the Heath was largely clear of trees. Around this time, a bowl barrow cemetery was established on the Heath: the burial mounds (tumuli) are still visible today, often topped by large pine trees planted by the Victorians.



By medieval times farms surrounded the Heath. It is likely that it was used by local commoners for grazing their livestock. Very little changed until the 18th century when the Reigate Heath windmill was built near the site of the local gibbet. Today the lower part of the mill has been converted into a chapel possibly the only example of this in the world.

During the 19th century the Heath was increasingly used for leisure. A short lived race course was constructed, which ran across the Heath. Among the jockeys who used the course was Captain Becher, after whom the famous Becher's Brook at Aintree is named. The Reigate Heath Golf Club was formed in 1895. Its nine hole golf course is still very popular today.

In the 1860s a mineral water factory was built in what is now Bonny's Road. The owner Mr. James Bonny had a 300 foot well dug. The factory produced mineral water for nearly 100 years until it was finally closed in the 1950s.

Reigate Heath Today

The management of the Heath today is focused on conservation and recreation. The Heath was designated a **Site of Special Scientific Interest** in 1955, because of its heathland habitats and the rarity of many plants. All management within the **Site of Special Scientific Interest** is carried out in partnership with English Nature, the government agency responsible for ensuring that all **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** are sensitively managed.

The Heath is used for many forms of leisure. These include horse riding on the horse ride and bridleways. On the sports field area cricket is played in the summer and football in the winter. The Skimmington Castle is a traditional 17th century ale house, which makes a refreshing diversion from the Greensand Way and the North Downs Way.

Some of the Heath is leased to the Golf Club, who maintain it in keeping with the Councils policies. The rest is managed by the Council who have also set up the Reigate Heath Management Steering Group. The Group consists of representatives of the main users of the Heath. It meets regularly with the aim of balancing the needs of the many who use the Heath, and to maintain the Heath as the beautiful place it still is today.

- #### Follow the Country Code
- Enjoy the countryside and respect its life and work
 - Guard against all risk of fire
 - Fasten all gates
 - Keep your dogs under close control
 - Please clean up after your dog
 - Keep to public paths across farmland
 - Use gates and stiles to cross fences, hedges and walls
 - Make no unnecessary noise
 - Users of the Heath are asked to respect the bye-laws.
 - Please take your litter home with you.

- #### Horse & Pony Riders' Code
- In order to conserve Reigate Heath as a nature reserve please keep to the permissive ride which follows the perimeter of the Heath
 - Please take care when passing other users of the Heath
 - Please report any problems regarding the permitted ride to the Countryside Officer at Reigate and Banstead Borough Council