



Viewpoint

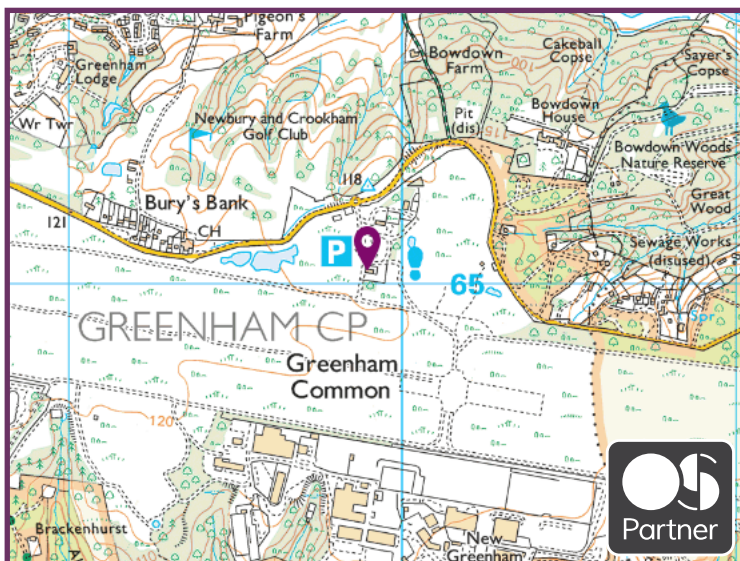
Common people



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location: Control Tower, Greenham Common, Berkshire RG19 8BZ

Grid reference: SU 49896 65041

Directions: Park at Bury's Bank Road, Thatcham. Enter the common and stop at the control tower.

Keep an eye out for: The grassy humps of old nuclear missile bunkers

Think of Greenham Common and you probably bring to mind images of women chained to a fence or holding hands beneath brightly coloured banners.

For almost 20 years this was the site of a women's peace camp. They were protesting against the government's decision to keep nuclear weapons here.

But as its name suggests, this is common land.

How did Greenham Common become a fenced off military site and how are people uniting to claim it back today?



From mountain-tops to town centres you're never far from a common. There are over 7,000 from Newcastle's Town Moor to Epping Forest. Commons originally date back to a time before the Norman Conquest when villagers were granted rights to use 'common' land to graze livestock, collect firewood, fish and dig peat for fuel. These rights often made the difference between starvation and survival.

Like wasteland we still find in towns and cities today, the areas often designated as commons were normally on thin soils too poor for growing crops. Poet John Clare described them as "left free in the rude rags of nature" and they still retain this sense of uncultivated wilderness today.

Greenham Common has long been used in times of war and conflict. It was the site of a battle during the English Civil War in 1643 and just over a hundred years later 6,000 troops camped here before fighting in the Battle of Culloden. Fast forward to the nineteenth century and a firing range was built during the Napoleonic Wars with France. Little trace was left on the landscape however until the Second World War when the land was requisitioned by the government. They identified the long, flat plateau (which runs east-west into the prevailing wind) as an ideal site to build a runway for the RAF and US Air Force.

The US Air Force returned to Greenham during the Cold War. They expanded the base and the runway. In 1981 six massive bunkers were built to house 96 cruise missiles and their mobile launchers. A 9-mile perimeter fence was put up to block off the area. What was once common land had become a militarised site.

From 1981 until 2000, thousands of women camped out at Greenham Common in a non-violent act of protest against the threat of nuclear war. Many were mothers who felt compelled to act for their children and future generations. Can you imagine what it was like here then? Spending harsh winters in sleeping bags, no lavatories, no washing facilities, no shops...

A year later they hatched a plan to totally surround the base with protesters. 35,000 supporters turned up linking arms and pinning objects like baby clothes, bottles, photos and teddy bears to the fence. It became the biggest women's demonstration in history.

If you look around today you can still see some of the womens' artwork on the perimeter fence. But this is no longer a site of protest. The cruise missiles left Greenham in 1991 and though the women's actions might not have stopped them, they did change the nature of protest. Whether mobilising against fracking or joining the Occupy movement, people are less afraid to take a stand.

In 2000 the perimeter fence was finally removed. An Act was passed to restore rights of public access and today the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust are working to restore the common back to heathland. Heather and gorse flower where bombers once took off. The runway has been broken up and used to build a local school. Thanks to people power and the resilience of nature, the common is once again a place for everyone to enjoy.