

Stevenage Heritage Bike Ride



Stevenage Cycleways History

Stevenage was designated in 1946 as Britain's first New Town, which was a movement centred on progressive social reforms to address inequality (particularly the impoverished and bombed-out living conditions for many people living in London). Stevenage New Town was a new vision of modern living in which all people have fair access to housing, employment, green spaces, shops, services, and art – all connected by easy transport links.

Eric Claxton was Stevenage's lead engineer, and he considered the New Town project as a chance to honour the heroes of the Second World War by providing a safe, convenient, and modern environment for all people to live in. Cycling was becoming popular in the 1940s, and Claxton feared that people would be discouraged from the mode by the hostile road environment. He had witnessed the Dutch cycling system and thought the model could be popular in the UK. As the country's New Town pioneer, Stevenage was the place.

The cycleway network's construction began in 1955 in conjunction with the primary road system, and by the mid-1970s, the network entailed over 40km of infrastructure. This network became – and still is – the country's most robust fully segregated road and cycling/pedestrian infrastructure. It became a leading global example and was the subject of many lectures, books, and study tours.

Concerns over fair access to safe, healthy, and sustainable travel still resonate in today's society, making this incredibly forward-thinking cycling/pedestrian network even more valued.



1 Fairlands Valley Park



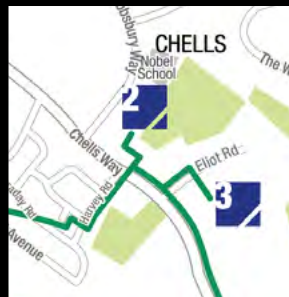
The ride starts at the park information banner on the fence between the Sailing Centre and Stevenage Cycle Hub. There are toilet facilities at Costello's Café next to the Sailing Centre.



The 1966 New Town Master Plan outlined how the park would become the town's principal area of recreation, with artificially created lakes as well as green spaces. The major development work was undertaken by Stevenage Borough Council in 1971, with the official opening of the lakes, by Sir Alec Rose, in 1972. The park is sited in a dry valley, and so it was necessary to rely entirely upon the surface water, which drained into the valley from Pin Green to create the lakes.

2 Polar Bear

by Mark Harvey



The Polar Bear, made of Portland stone, is one of the best known sculptures in town. It was placed in the Glebe in 1964. Most of Harvey's sculptures have not survived because they were made of wood.

3 Three Geese

by David Noble



This sculpture was made of reinforced concrete with a resin coating. Noble, who was also part of Digswell Arts Trust, also sculpted Seated Figures, which is at The Towers.

4 Shephall Green



Shephall Green comprises the original triangular village green and settlement directly around it.

The area was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, and the buildings within this conservation area illustrate its history from the 14th century (St Mary's Church), to 17th century timber-framed buildings (Shephallbury Farmhouse, The Old Rectory, and 23 Shephall Green), to the 17th/18th century (The Red Lion Public House, Fullers Mead and Mead Cottage (4-5 Shephall Green), and 9 Shephall Green), and up to the late 20th century. The surrounding playing fields are also remnants of old farms, and many of the trees in the green are also historic.

5 Broadwater Neighbourhood Centre

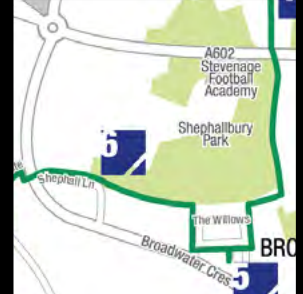


Broadwater, or Bradewatre, was originally a place of more importance than Stevenage itself. There had been an Anglo-Saxon settlement here in the 5th century or even earlier, but it subsequently declined into little more than a hamlet.

Broadwater Neighbourhood Centre also best illustrates a Stevenage New Town neighbourhood. This approach to community living included a shopping centre, pub, church, green spaces, health clinic, school, children's centre, and varied housing – including for the elderly and people with disabilities. The whole neighbourhood design was progressive and attention to detail apparent. This is reflected in its conservation area status.

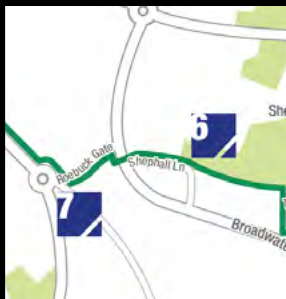
6 Shephalbury Manor and Coptic Cathedral

The Coptic Cathedral can be found on the other side of the park



This manor had many uses over the years. In its early days, it was a family home for the lords of Shephalbury, until it was sold in 1939. During the Second World War, it was used to house evacuees and then as a convalescent home for Polish officers. It then had a life as a Polish boarding school from 1950–1957, followed by a school for children with behavioural challenges in 1959. It was bought by the Coptic Church in 1991, who built a cathedral in the grounds that you can see today.

7 Roebuck Inn



This is one of only ten Grade II* listed buildings in Stevenage (there are only two Grade I buildings).

This beautiful timber-framed building dates to the 15th century, with 16th and 17th century additions as well as a modern L-shaped addition to the rear.

Dick Turpin is said to have escaped through a secret passage at the Roebuck Inn to escape the local Justices of the Peace.

8 The Fossil Tree

by John Mills



Photo credit:
Jim Brown

The Millennium Milepost was unveiled in 2000 as part of the millennium longest cycle ride event! Sustrans commissioned hundreds of mileposts using four designs by four artists from the UK's four countries. This design was created by Brighton-based John Mills, entitled The Fossil Tree, which takes the form of an abstract tree with relief imagery of fossils depicting the passage of time from early primitive creatures to the ultimate demise of fossil fuel driven technology.

9 Underpass Number 1

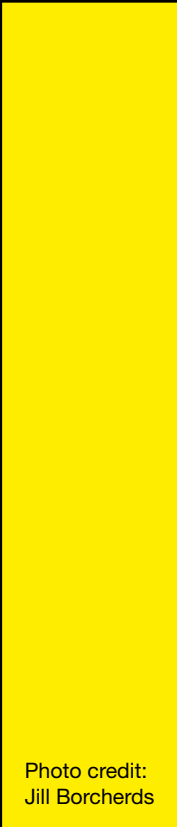
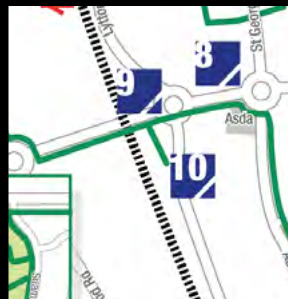


Photo credit:
Jill Borchers

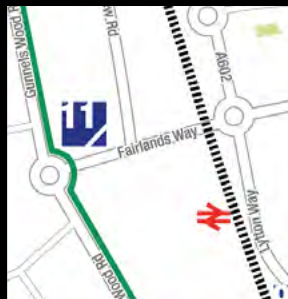
This is very significant in cycling history. It was the first underpass built after cyclists blockaded the A1 to demand their right to access, which resulted in the planning and construction of Stevenage cycleways.

10 Six Hills



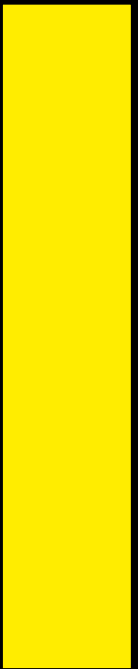
Six Hills are a collection of Roman barrows that date from about 100 AD and probably marked the cremated remains of a local wealthy family. These barrows form the largest surviving group of burial mounds dating to the Roman period in England and are a scheduled ancient monument.

11 FIRA Building



The New Town's pioneering post-war ambitions attracted the Furniture Industry Research Association to build their headquarters here, designed by one of Britain's leading post-war practices: HKPA. FIRA was the direct result of the government's post-war restructuring and was led by Jack Pritchard, who also commissioned the famous Isokon Building in Camden, London. The FIRA building takes after the Isokon's modernist International Style.

12 John Lewis Warehouse/Costco



Stevenage also attracted John Lewis, who built this building in 1963. It was co-designed by the 60s superstar Felix Candela, with Yorke, Rosenberg, and Mardall (who also co-designed Barclay School) and is widely considered a creative masterpiece because of its shell concrete roof in the shape of hyperbolic paraboloids. It's also notable as the site of the company's first computer, installed in 1963. Today, it is a Grade II listed building.

13 Robot Family

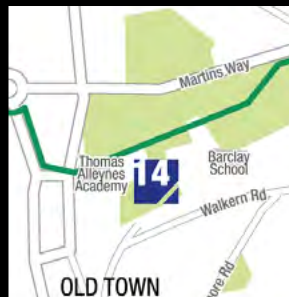
by Simon Jones



Photo credit:
Tina Walker

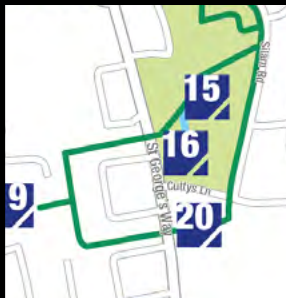
Simon Jones has done a number of other sculptures in the Symonds Green area during his time with the Stevenage Development Corporation from 1974-1980, including Playing Cards, Wonky Clock, and others.

14 The Avenue



The gates to The Avenue were restored in 2015 by the Stevenage Society for Local History! Notice the panel at the entrance for more information on its history.

15 Town Centre Gardens and Women and Doves



Please dismount from your bike as you go through the Town Centre and the gardens.



Photo
credit:
Tina
Walker

The Town Centre Gardens are a fine example of the many green spaces provided through New Town planning. It combines both natural pre-existing features, such as trees and a natural spring, with landscape design. The pond features the bronze Women and Doves, designed by David Norris in 1981, which echoes the park's social and natural ethos and which won the year's Otto Beit medal for sculpture.

16 Scenes from Everyday Life

by William Mitchell

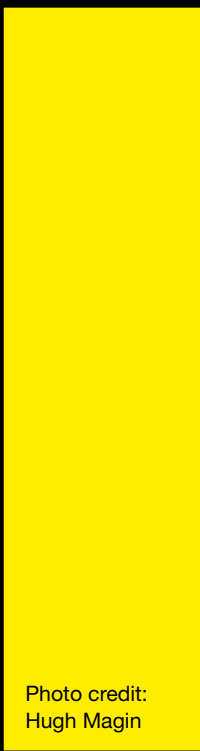
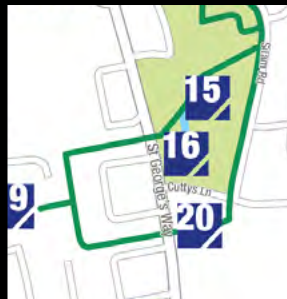


Photo credit:
Hugh Magin

The cycleways' use of concrete, played with to create a variety of textures, must have intrigued the artist William Mitchell – a giant of post-war public art, who also worked extensively in concrete – because he was commissioned in 1973 to produce this relief about modernism and public life.

17, 18 Joyride and Lewis Silkin



Photo credit:
Pauline Maryan

Located on the Clock Tower and Fountain is a bronze relief of Lewis Silkin, who was the driving force for the New Towns Act 1946 as Minister of Town and Country Planning.

Adjacent to the Clock Tower and on the raised platform is the bronze Joyride sculpture, which demonstrates the soaring spirit of a woman and child, symbolic of the New Town being carried by the Old Town.

Both of these artworks were created by Franta Belsky, who was a major contributor to sculpture in Britain.

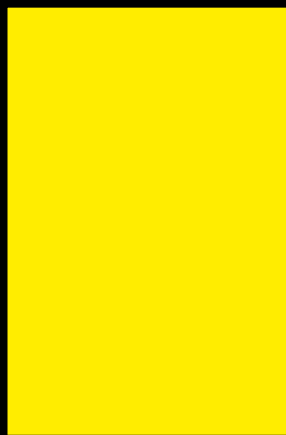
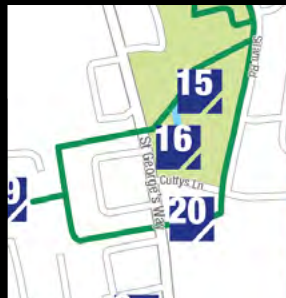


19 The Clock Tower and Fountain



The Clock Tower and Fountain, Joyride, and surrounding buildings are iconic symbols of Stevenage New Town. The spatial planning and architectural design that went into the Town Centre was all very cutting-edge for its time and was meant to represent the revolutionary social ideals of the New Town movement.

20 St Andrew & St George and An Urban Elephant



Stevenage's St Andrew & St George – the country's largest parish church built since the Second World War – was designed by the famous architects Seely and Paget. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother attended both the laying of the foundation stone and the finished building's consecration. It's celebrated for its modernist experimentation with precast concrete arches and exterior panelling.

The church also houses the Museum, which ran an arts competition in 1992; this resulted in *An Urban Elephant*, seen outside the Museum's entrance. The elephant represents beasts of burden, the hooks symbolise local industry, and the tower references the Clock Tower.

21 Totem Poles

by Dennis Heath



Photo credit:
Tina Walker

These sculptures were made of Larch wood and carved with a chainsaw. Dennis Heath was a member of the Digswell Arts Trust at the adjacent Fairlands Farmhouse. He also produced Friendship and Peace in Millennium Gardens.

Acknowledgements



This heritage ride was developed by Stevenage Borough Council, Tina Walker from Cycling UK Stevenage (www.cycleinstructor.co.uk), and Stevenage Museum.

Many thanks to the Mayor of Stevenage, Jim Brown, and Cycling UK and Breeze Ride Leader Jill Borchers for also providing expertise and to the Council's portfolio holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture, Councillor Richard Henry, for his continued support. All photos are supplied by Stevenage Museum, unless stated otherwise.

Photo
credit:
Trevor
Coulart

Heritage Bike Route

The ride starts at the park information banner on the fence between the Sailing Centre and Stevenage Cycle Hub. There are toilet facilities at Costello's Café next to the Sailing Centre.

Follow the route marked in green to see our art and architectural heritage.



