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- WPC - Home
- Your Council
- Facilities
- Open Spaces
- History
- Useful Links
- Contact Us



Bower Heath

Butterfield Nature Reserve

Devil's Dyke

Folly Fields

Gustard Wood

Marshall's Heath Nature Reserve

Melissa Field

Nomansland Common

River Lea

The Meads and Meads Dell

A-Z of Services

[A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [D](#) [E](#) [F](#) [G](#) [H](#) [I](#)
[J](#) [K](#) [L](#) [M](#) [N](#) [O](#) [P](#) [Q](#) [R](#)
[S](#) [T](#) [U](#) [V](#) [W](#) [X](#) [Y](#) [Z](#)

The River Lea is one of the main reasons why Wheathampstead is located where it is. The first human immigrants after the last Ice Age came from the continent up the Thames and the Lea and settled in the valleys that were rich in woodland and pasture. The remains of tools from the Stone Age, Iron Age and Bronze Age have been found in this area. In the first century BC, the Catuvellauni tribe settled here and this part of the Lea Valley has been occupied ever since. Following a treaty between King Alfred the Great and Guthrum the Old in 886, the river formed part of the boundary between Saxon England and the Danelaw, though this boundary was moved several times in later years.



The river may derive its name from the Celtic 'lug' meaning 'bright', hence Lughton, now Luton. Both the river and the town may have been named after Lugh, the Celtic god of light and of the harvest.



The source of the Lea is a natural spring that rises from the chalk aquifer at Leagrave in the Chiltern hills north of Luton. It flows some 42 miles through Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and north-east London, where it becomes the Lee Navigation, and discharges into the Thames at Bow Creek. Tributaries further downstream include the Ash, the Rib, the Mimram, the Beane, the Quin and the Stort, all of which are officially classified as chalk streams - shallow, fast-flowing and high in nutrients. There are only about 200 such streams in the world and most of these are in England. Chalk streams support a wide range of wildlife including species such as otters, water voles, mink and kingfishers and many species of coarse fish.

The Lea at Wheathampstead is not officially classified as a chalk stream because a large proportion of the flow consists of treated effluent from the sewage treatment plant at East Hyde. This means that the river is cleaner than most rivers in England but the high levels of phosphates and nitrates disqualify it as a chalk stream. Nevertheless wildlife, both flora and fauna, flourishes.

[Important Dates](#)

The river enters the parish of Wheathampstead about 200 metres east of Batford Mill on the Lower Luton Road and leaves at Flint Bridge, which is also the boundary between the Ayot and Brocket estates. Riparian landowners in this stretch include private house-owners, farmers, livery stables, the Parish Council, the Verulam Angling Club and the Ayot estate, based at Waterend House.