



Introductory Walk - THE VILLAGE

This short walk will serve as an introduction to the village and give some idea of the shape and nature of our local landscape.

Take the Manor Road/High Street junction as a central and convenient starting point and walk down the High Street towards the river. Look at the lovely cottages and houses and try to visualise the row of elms that dominated this street in yesteryear.

On your left, just before the Greyhound, is the area where the smithy, the fire station and the lock-up once stood. Turn right at the end of the walled garden and into the entrance signed 'Private Drive to Walliscote House, Walliscote Lodge, Walled Garden Retreat, Walled Garden House' and 'To the Church' and 'Thames Path'. Stroll gently down this short but pleasant avenue to the Church. Note the new Rectory on your left. The Church is splendidly situated at the centre of the old village by the river and has a history worthy of investigation and if you have time go round to the Saxon entrance on the south side, look in and up to see the previously hidden strange figure (gargoyle?).

A path (marked 'Thames Path') leads left across the churchyard and carries on down a narrow walled alleyway to the side of the Mill Pond. This is a most attractive and historic area, the Mill is mentioned in the Domesday Book. Nonetheless it is a private area and we only have a right of way to and from the Church. Just before you rejoin the main road by turning left alongside the Mill Pond you will see the landing steps on your right, now fenced and, as you reach the road, the slipway on your right. These are both for the use of the villagers. Turn right onto the Toll Bridge (always a point of interest and debate) with its new, modern, swipe card operated barriers. Today there is no charge to walk over the Bridge but until decimalisation of the currency it used to cost us a halfpenny for each journey across the bridge on foot. Stop on the bridge and look upstream to the lock, look downstream to the distant hills described in the walks, and then look back to the village and one of the most pleasing and photographed views of the Mill Pond. This area would have been used as the Mill Wharf and so imagine the bustling scene of yesteryear as barges loaded and unloaded items such as corn from the mill and wood from the nearby timber yards and woodland.

Walk back to Whitchurch and cross to the pavement on the right hand side. As you pass Thames Bank, the white house on your right, you may like to note that some of the preparations for "D-Day" were carried out here and it is rumoured that Eisenhower was resident for a while. Note the stump of what was a magnificent Wellingtonia - struck by lightning in 2007. The Americans also 'occupied' other parts of the village during this time. There is a brief view of the old Rectory on your left and you reach the Ferryboat Inn. Carry on round the corner, again try to visualise the 19 elms that extended up the left hand side of the High Street (and to which drunks were chained). Turn right into Eastfield Lane, which starts at the side of the Greyhound.

This area is part of the flood plain and you will soon see a number of newly constructed houses on your right all of which have special foundations for their location. Under your feet at this point is a culvert where a land drainage scheme secretly flows through the village. There is a suggestion that the culvert might have been part of the defensive ditch for the riverside village.

What was once the village bowling green is now the site of two houses and as you walk along the lane you will see the infilling and the modernisation of the cottages that has taken place. The lane is still a mixture of fields and houses with the river Thames just two fields away on your right. As you reach the

end of the present developed area and enter the 'green belt' there is the lovely setting of the cricket field, now proudly owned by the village as its village green, and the excellent view to the hillside and what was an even more magnificent backcloth of beech trees until the storms of 1989 and 1990. We lost more trees in 2007.

Carry on to the Primary School, the second one to be built in the village; the first was sold when there were insufficient children in the village and history nearly repeated itself in the 1990s. Turn left up the allotment footpath (now called Muddy Lane by the schoolchildren and their Mums) and walk gently up to Hardwick Road. The distant views are excellent and it was a favourite area of mine when I frequently met badgers late at night as I walked my dogs. The hedges at the top of and the bank opposite the end of the path were also used by glow-worms in the late summer - possibly too much artificial light now. You will pass the village allotments, now in good use again and, as you near the top, go into the area on your right to see the village Maze. Find your way to the centre and, if the sun is not obscured, stand on the month, act as the gnomes, and check the time.

Turn left onto Hardwick Road, past another two 'new' houses with their super view of the village green. On the opposite side the Hillside development stands on the site of an old Victorian house. Walk up the road in front of these houses, at the left hand end the footpath continues along in front of the next houses and along to drop down near the main road. Immediately opposite is a set of steps, go up and follow the footpath which runs in front of the old School House and School and the lovely line of cottages tucked into the side of the hill. This is almost certainly the original village road. The path emerges onto Hardwick Road with another new development opposite and drops gently down to the High Street. The shop opposite, now an art gallery, was once the village store and Post Office, the cottages which form the lovely row on your right were originally owned by Simond's brewery and had the cobbler's shop on the right hand end and a public house (the Royal Oak) on the left.

Cross over the road with care and walk down the High Street, White Hart Cottage on your right was yet another public house (The White Hart!). I believe the cottages on your left form the oldest part of the village. As you return to your starting point you can reflect that the major houses in the village, together with others in the immediate area, and the local farms provided the main source of employment for the villagers of the past.

Whitchurch-on-Thames is a lovely historic village, beautifully situated. If you have been fortunate enough to do this walk in the spring the High Street is a picture of blossom and the woods a mantle of light green; but you will be even more fortunate in the autumn, for then the colouring and the tints of the trees are magnificent.

N.B. *The Thames Path (the long distance footpath, which follows the river from the Thames Barrier for 175 miles to its source near Lechlade) passes through the village. Just as you did it crosses the Toll Bridge and then past Church Cottages, the Mill and across the churchyard past the Church before returning to the High Street and up to the narrows and onto the bridle path to Goring (Walk 3 to Hartslock Wood).*

Hardwick Road and the path through Hartslock are also part of an ancient pre-Saxon packhorse route from Reading to Crowmarsh Gifford, called the Tuddingway (Tudda was a tribal chieftain and the Ing was the area under his control).

Just recently our section of the Tuddingway from Goring to Reading has become part of the King Alfred long distance cycle route.