



## **Walk 4 - ON THE WAY TO MAPLEDURHAM**

This walk will take you in the direction of Mapledurham, a distance of about five miles; allow two hours. The walk is beautiful all year round but Whitchurch is at its best in early spring and late autumn.

Walk up the High Street and into Hardwick Road, past the Swanston Field houses, until the road emerges from the trees and bursts into the light. There is a path (the Jubilee Path) at high level that starts at Primrose Hill and runs parallel to the road, which may be a safer option, as in Walk 1. Carry on to the black gates at the lodge to Hardwick House; note the notices on the gates. The walk to the gates passes through some lovely countryside, with hills on your left and the river valley stretching away to your right. The scenery as you enter the tree lined avenue can be most rewarding.

Carry on to the entrance to Hardwick House, taking the second path from the left (which is the obvious bridle road). The road (still the Tuddingway) leads past Hardwick House and just enables you to see its shape and character as you walk by and then continues gently along. On your left there are several identical mounds which contain the air raid shelters from WW2. Shortly afterwards on your left if you look up you may spot a charming thatched cottage on the edge of the woods above you, this is Straw Hill and it was possibly used to entertain house guests who had been walking in the woods. You reach a pair of cottages and a second set of black gates, go through the pedestrian gate and in the distance you will see Mapledurham, its lock and Purley across the river. This area abounded with rabbits when I first walked along it.

After about a hundred and fifty yards you will see a kissing gate on your left. Go through and head up the hill towards the woods on the top left hand side (this is Westford Hill Copse) and you are now in Mapledurham, the woods on your left form Whitchurch's eastern boundary. If you stop for a breather you will enjoy the view. Reading, Purley and Mapledurham are to your left hand; as your eyes follow the curve of the river upstream you will see the distinctive white of Whitchurch Toll Bridge in stark contrast against its dark background. At the top left hand corner of the field is another kissing gate. Go through and take the path immediately and directly in front of you; it is a narrow path and bears right and drops slightly to soon reach a wide path sweeping down from your left. Continue straight onto this path as it falls and then levels out midway between valley floor and hillside.

So many trees fell in the 1990 gales that it has taken years for the tracks to be re-established as they were when I first wrote these walks, but your path meanders pleasantly through the beech woods until you reach a junction of paths. The one on your right is the bridleway to Mapledurham, yours is the one immediately ahead on the right hand side of the clearing, about 10 meters after the start of this path there is a fork and of the two footpaths now with a footpath post take the left fork - it rises and gradually works its way uphill through Hollycopse. The path emerges between a house and a cottage (the house was once the King Charles Head pub where Charles drank when he was allowed to visit from his imprisonment in Reading to play bowls here in 1648 - the year before his execution).

As the road turns left and flattens out you will see a kissing gate and a gate on your left. Go through the kissing gate and turn left immediately (there are usually horses in this field). Your path follows the hedgerow to another kissing gate in the bottom left hand corner of the field leading into the wood. Go through and turn right on entering the wood; again the path is waymarked and slopes gently downhill; as it meets another track at right angles go straight across and meander down to the valley floor. Here your path meets another at right angles, go straight on to this new path and follow it uphill until you come to a junction of tracks. Go straight across until you reach a cross road with a major path.

If you turn left here the path will lead you down to the junction of paths at Hardwick House. If, however, you turn right you will emerge from the woods by Path Hill Farm, go past the old cowsheds and dairy buildings (now the Outdoor Centre) and then turn left onto the metalled road. This road leads gently and pleasantly to the Baulk; take the path through the kissing gate and drop down to Path Hill. Cross over the road with care and through the kissing gate opposite into the field (Bec Tythe), follow the line of the hedge to a pleasing view of the valley with the slope on your right leading up to our Iron Age encampment,. Go through the kissing gate and then turn left and follow the fenced path to Hardwick Road (take care as you approach the road, particularly with children and dogs - the path leads directly onto the road).

Turn right onto and along Hardwick Road to return to the village.