



Walks around Whitchurch-on-Thames

All the walks will start from the junction of Manor Road and the High Street, as did the introduction.

Walk 1 – HARDWICK WOODS

This is a relatively short walk, about two and a half to three miles, say a leisurely hour from the High Street and back again.

Walk up the High Street, cross over to the right hand side pavement and follow it round as it leaves the High Street and joins Hardwick Road. Take care through the defile where there is no pavement; eventually the pavement restarts and passes the entrances to Swanston Field with Hillside on your left. As you approach the opening to the allotment footpath cross over to the drive of Primrose Hill and up to the Jubilee footpath at high level above the road. Keep up at the high level until you reach the old farmhouse of Bozedown Farm. Canada geese used to settle in the fields opposite; however now you will see many alpacas and perhaps hear their guard's unusual warning cry. The old farm outbuildings, now Chalkhills, formed a winery until just recently and after the driveway to the present farmhouse you will see where the vineyard stretched up the hillside. Bozedown Farm is now a stud farm and the home of the alpacas.

The footpath continues along Hardwick Road until you reach the black gates, the entrance to Hardwick House and its estate. On your right just before the entrance there is Lin's Veg Shed, worth noting for your return. Next to it is Sheepwash Lane, which is a public footpath and could form a small diversion to your walk to go down to the river and use the lovely oak seat, keeping an eye open for Ratty and Mole. This is one of only three public access points on our side of the river, the other two are the landing steps and the slipway adjacent to the Toll Bridge. It is thought that as well as providing a ford where we could wash our sheep it may have been used as an access route 'a warpath' by the Danes in their forays and battles against the Saxons hereabouts. As you start your return look left, you may see Loddon lilies growing there.

Please take note of the notices at the black gates. Continue your walk along the maple tree lined road, this area has recovered well from the devastation which occurred in the storms of January 1990 (we lost over 2,000 trees in and around the village then and quite a large number in January 2007). The woods still dominate the scene above you and in the distance; they are at their best in early spring and late October. You will see the sweep of the fields to the river; the stables and the many horses in the fields below. If you see a dark, damp, patch of ground in the field to your right this is a Saxon jug well where clean water emanates from the hills behind.

As you walk along you will pass Gardener's Cottage and the entrance to the old nursery gardens for Hardwick and the first, and now derelict, Real Tennis Court (the second, operational one, is nearer the house!). As you walk past the wall overlooking the gardens the path splits into four; follow the one immediately to your left, the second leads to Mapledurham, the third and fourth obviously to Hardwick House. Take this extreme left hand path (known locally as the 100 steps); and follow it round in its gentle swing to gain height; we lost a large number of trees in this area. As you near the top of the rise look at the pit on your left (now fenced - for safety); was it a bear-pit, a cock fighting pit, or just an elaborate ice house? Perhaps none of these is correct, it may have been a secluded place of worship, possibly for the persecuted local Roman Catholics.

Follow the path through the woods past the wood cutting area and the seat dedicated to Lady Phoebe Rose. On this occasion do not take any of the paths to your left or right. As the path dips then flattens out carry on straight ahead until you emerge from the woods past the former cowsheds and milking parlour of Path Hill Farm (now the Path Hill Outdoor Centre) and immediately turn left onto a metalled road which will lead you pleasantly to the Baulk and its woodland.

Go through the newly installed kissing gate as the path drops steeply down to Path Hill. Stop at the side of the right hand plantation (just to your right was where an IRA cache of arms was discovered!). Look across at the rounded feature of our hills, this is the edge of the Iron Age fort that sat on the plain above and you can see the entrance route from the field below.

Cross over the road with care, go through the new kissing gate and into the field beyond, this field is called Bec Tythe (the field below is Lower Bec) and must indicate the time when our Saxon Lord (Wigod) had his Manor taken from him by the new Norman Lord (Milo Crispin) who had been given 88 Manors by William the Conqueror. Milo obviously sent the proceeds of the tithe to support Bec Abbey in Normandy. Strangely the village today is twinned with La Bouille, which is very close to the Abbey.

Follow the line of the left hand hedge, through another new kissing gate to the edge of the next field. A fenced track now leads south towards Hardwick Road; take care as you approach the road. You can now return to your earlier route and the village.