

Blackwater Valley Nature Walks

Pirbright, Brookwood Circular

A mix of canalside, farmland, heath and manicured gardens.

Start your walk at Pirbright where there is a large car park on Avenue De Cagny. Nearest postcode GU24 0JT.

Cross the road to the cricket pitch and ahead is the small road called The Gardens which you should follow.

Walk past the houses to the end of the road until you find a gate on the left into Brookwood Cemetery. Enter and turn right, then first left up what is known as Pine Avenue. Part way along on the right is the entrance to the American Military Cemetery where you turn right. Check out the Bald Eagle on the top of the flagpole! Follow the middle track through the cemetery into the Commonwealth section and as you near the end of the graves look to your left and a group of Giant Sequoia trees around a monument and see elevated exit gates. Take one of the gates (usually the left is open) and turn right onto the track!

Follow the track until you see a big metal fence and path to the station on the left opposite a noticeboard. Walk up to the station gate and open it (it looks locked but it often isn't.) Walk through the tunnel to the other side, if the barriers are closed a station man will let you out. If the station gate is locked press the green call button and the station man will release the gate lock for you.

Exit the station, turn left and then right down the road and cross the A324 straight on into Sheets Heath Lane. Follow this to the other side of the canal bridge and turn left joining the towpath. Here you can admire all the gardens of the lucky houses with canal access! You should see plenty of wildlife on the canal which is not heavily used by boats. Moorhens and Coots, maybe even a Little Grebe. In Summer, Great St John's Wort and Meadowsweet are flowering along here. Yellow water-lilies are bursting into flower.

Soon you reach a road bridge so go under then up to the footbridge and cross to the other side of the canal. Turn right along the canal bank. Again this part has a lot of water birds, mainly Mallard, Moorhen and even Kingfishers may be perching on waterside vegetation or flashing along above the water. Terrapins may be seen here, look on the floating timber. There is also a good stretch of woodland holding many birds including Nuthatches. You may also see Grey Wagtails here near the locks.

Pass the next lock and reach Cowshot Bridge. Turn left here under the railway bridge. Cross the road to the opposite side. Look for the footpath sign to the right of the property entrance by the trees and follow the path to Vapery Lane. Turn left into this minor road where traffic should not be very busy.

Follow this road past all the houses and take the path to the right of the Noticeboard and postbox. Emerging on the next road, cross carefully into West Heath. This nature reserve is being managed to try and encourage the rare heathland species to return. Stonechats,

Chiffchaffs and Whitethroats can be found here and Willow Warblers often sing through the summer. Very soon there will be a gate on your right onto the heath. (Before you enter this gate you should be aware that the exit from the heath is only 25cms wide. If you had a large dinner or are wearing too many clothes you will need to carry on the straight path to the next road, turn right immediately following the bridleway sign and enter via the main path there. You meet the narrow exit off the heath about half way across and so carry on.)

If you entered the first gate on the right, cross the reserve on the narrow path slightly aiming left towards the other side and exit via the rather tight 25cms gap in the posts and turn right. Areas are fenced off for livestock grazing the land to help the heather recover. Exit West Heath via the gates and cross the road onto the footpath/farm track and follow that through the Farm buildings. You should see Swallows and House Martins here in summer and from July, hundreds of Jackdaws gather in the fields.

After the Farm pass the pond on the left with geese and ducks and, next on the right, you may see some rare breeds of pig wallowing in the mud and maybe sheep in the fields. This long countryside path leads to a cross roads after a low building on the left where you take a left, following the bridleway stay slightly right at the next path split and cross over another path then carry on to join a vehicle track from the house.

Keep in the same direction and keep following the vehicle track you may see the backs of some houses to your right.

Keep left onto Mill Lane, passing a post box and walk back towards Pirbright on the metalled road. This is a quiet lane with some nice hedgerows and trees. To your right you may see some huge old dead oaks in the fields. Some of the houses have beautiful gardens with ponds worth a look for birds and butterflies in summer. After about half a kilometre (1/3 mile) after Manor Farm, watch for The Manor House sign on the left and a public footpath sign on the left, it starts as a driveway.

Follow this path along the hedgerow and enter the next field via the gate, keeping right. Exit the field and turn right towards the church. In the churchyard near the exit to the right is the grave of Sir Henry Morton Stanley, the explorer who famously searched for the missionary, David Livingstone. Stanley died in 1904. Exit the churchyard after some exploring and follow the lane into Pirbright. Turn left, pass Lord Pirbright's Hall and you will see your car on the right.