

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. 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. 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 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 Johns Wort and Meadowsweet are flowering along here. Yellow water-lilies are bursting into flower.

Soon you reach a 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 can 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. Soon there will be a gate on your right onto the 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.

Cross the reserve on the narrow path towards the other side and exit via the rather tight 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. This long countryside path leads to a cross roads at Vine's Farm where you take a left, following the bridleway in the straightest line you can until you join a vehicle track from the house.

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

Keep left onto Mill Lane, passing a post box and walk back into Pirbright on the metalled road. This is a quiet lane with some nice hedgerows and trees. Some of the houses have beautiful gardens with ponds worth a look for birds and butterflies in summer. To your right you may see some huge old dead oaks in the fields,

At the T junction where you meet the A324 turn left over the bridge and on the footpath. Soon you reach White Hart Corner where a pub drink or meal may appeal but first you need to decide if you would like a visit to the pretty church where in the churchyard you will find the grave of Sir Henry Morton Stanley, the explorer who famously searched for the missionary, David Livingstone. Stanley died in 1904. You find this by turning left into Church Lane and walking a few hundred metres. Then retrace your steps turning left at the green to return to your car.