

Hook and Rotherwick

A farmland walk with a pretty village with pubs, woodland and ponds. (Some of this is dormouse country but you're very unlikely to see one! They love hazel trees.)

Start from street parking near the junction of Sheldon's Lane and A30 in Hook. With your back to the A30 walk along the Lane passing Butts Meadow, Middlemead and Garden Close on your right. The road bends to the right and near to the crown of the bend on the left, there are northern red oaks (north American), mixed with English oak and ash trees. Soon just before you reach Goose Green, a turning on the left, a footpath heads down the slope, the one you need to take.

This path takes you into woodland, over a wooden bridge and boardwalk and you keep left and follow the path as it emerges with a field to your left partly obscured by a recently laid native hedgerow. Continue along the edge of this pleasant track as it bends right and soon woodland appears on your left. Don't turn left before the woodland. Continue past the trees until you emerge into a field and turn left there along the edge of the field. This is currently grassland with flowers, butterflies and insects to investigate. Keep along this field as it bends right, through a gap where a hedgerow meets it, until it reaches a gate onto a wide track.

Turn right onto this solid woodland lined track past the old farm buildings and the thatched Runtons Farm house on the right and very soon you meet a footpath crossroads. Turn left. In a short while the footpath divides and you take the right-hand option across the field. Listen in spring and summer, even in late winter, for the sound of skylarks filling the sky. With luck the farmer will have left some patches of bare earth in the fields for them to breed in. This path will take you to the middle of the village of Rotherwick and if you look along to your left you will see the Coach and Horses pub. I recommend you visit the village pond and the attractive church they are both a short distance to the left. There are the traditional yew trees in the churchyard where Goldcrests will join with birds of the tit families and typically, robins, wrens and blackbirds to enjoy the trees and hedgerows. Outside, roadside, there are some large lime trees and oaks.

The village pond has been neglected and is now very full of reedmace (bulrushes) and in danger of drying out. It has moorhens in it. The duck house can still be seen in the middle. There will be dragonflies and damselflies here in the summer months.

Returning now along The Street pass (or stop) at The Falcon pub. Continue on across the cross roads and woodland appears on your right. Keeping on the road, the houses all disappear and soon, after the 'no speed limit' signs there is wide track into the woodland on your right with a five-bar gate and a side gate. Enter the woodland here. Follow this track quietly, roe deer and muntjac are all present and can be quite visible in front of you. The mixed woodland is a haven for birds so nuthatch, treecreeper, jay, great spotted woodpecker, chaffinch and all the tit family should be present all year. In summer blackcap, chiffchaff should be heard. In autumn fungus is abundant.

This path eventually leads to Readen Pond but the woodland has been sold off in parcels at the time of writing this report, so the pond may not be accessible on future visits but don't worry, you are on a public footpath.

Before Readen Pond a wide track joins your path from the left, behind you. (You could possibly continue on that to Readen Pond, if accessible, you may chance seeing a heron on the water's edge or moorhens or mallard through the trees, ponds are a magnet for all wildlife). Where the wide track from behind meets your path as mentioned above, you continue across that track, the fence on your left shows the way. That is the correct (public) footpath to follow even if you decide to sneak a look at Readen Pond.

Following the public footpath, cross a small concrete footbridge, and soon emerge from the woodland and follow the hedge-line until another path crosses your path. Turn sharp right here and follow the woodland edge until you meet the road. The field is fallow at the time of writing and should be interesting for flowers and insects. Cross the road here onto the track opposite.

This track divides very soon and you should go left where the signs are passing between a few interesting ponds. I need to visit these ponds more often but they are quite typical of the small ponds that the rare garganey duck uses on passage in spring and autumn. Normally a few mallard and moorhen could be found and grey herons are bound to drop in. The ponds have a lot of reedmace but might attract reed warblers to breed. After checking out the nice wild environment around the ponds with some nice teasels to attract winter goldfinches, continue on this path through the meadows along the line of sturdy oak trees, listen for woodpeckers and nuthatches here tapping on the branches, then up to the top of the gentle hill.

At the top of the hill there is a footpath sign going in four directions! Keep your eyes on the sky, these fields will be hunting grounds for kestrels and you may see them hovering above the grassland. Take the left-hand route and follow it to the other side of the next copse in front of you. The farm is on your left. Turn right there descending the hill, still enjoying the open meadows and hopefully, the butterflies, crickets and flowers if the season is right.

Don't turn off this path and you will pass a house on your left at the bottom and continue on the path with the tree line on your left and a hedgerow bordering a pond on your right (this pond dries out a lot in summer). The habitat will be attractive to many native birds plus warblers in the spring and summer like whitethroats and blackcaps. You continue with the trees on your left and then a meadow on your right, stay on the path to the corner, almost to a metal kiss gate you see on your left.

Here I suggest straying off the public footpath. (If you choose not to stray, carry on through the kiss gate and follow the path to Reading Road, turn right and walk back to Hook Village Centre). My preference is a well-used path by local people on your right, follow it a short way and it enters the woodland on the left. Enter the woodland and keep to this path, ignoring minor paths off it until it meets a public footpath crossing it – there is a public

footpath signpost. Turn left and follow this path until it eventually meets a road known as Great Sheldons Coppice.

You can turn right here, it leads straight back to your car. Alternatively, cross onto the footpath opposite and follow that pleasant path to Reading Road, close to the village centre where you can grab a coffee, stop at a pub for lunch or shop for a picnic! Your car is to the right just along the A30 at Sheldons Lane.