

Odiham, Greywell Moors and Basingstoke Canal

A lovely country walk mixing farmland, a riverside nature reserve and some of the most undisturbed Basingstoke Canal.

I suggest parking roadside at RG29 1FU which is free and unlimited at the time of writing. Beware some street parking is time limited so check that. Alternatively, there is a car park in Deer Park View marked off the High Street nearby.

Head west, towards the mini roundabout at the end of High Street and carefully, cross directly into West Street. Before crossing you may see or hear a small rookery on the right in the trees close to the roundabout. Go down West Street to the bottom and carry on in the same direction still in West Street and pass the school on your right. After the second school entrance when the hedgerow starts there is a footpath up the steps on your right. Follow this path until you are roughly in line with the buildings and look for a stile on the left and cross here. Now follow the path across the field aiming for the opposite side. There's a single small tree in the field so keep left of that. Often cattle will be grazing here.

When you reach the hedgerow and footpath stile, cross it and carefully, go straight over the road to the next path opposite. This heads diagonally to the right across the corner of the field, goes through a hedgerow across what was a fallow field on my visits and after following the path through another hedgerow turn right on the path and exit onto a quiet lane. Turn left and walk a short distance along the lane looking for a footpath on the right. This path crosses a large field which can be a bit muddy after rain but is generally quite solid. At the bottom of the field go through the gate in the next hedgerow which should have plenty of birds like blackcaps, garden warblers and chiffchaffs, maybe even yellowhammers with their 'little bit of bread and no cheeese' song. After passing through the hedge turn left and enter Greywell Moors Nature Reserve via the gate – it can be muddy after rain.

Depending on the time of year you will find many birds, butterflies and plants like sedges and rushes here. Look for the purple southern marsh orchids that flower in May, June and July and purple loosestrife in June to August which is a major nectar source for brimstone butterflies, red-tailed bumblebees and elephant hawk moths. Yellow loosestrife is found here as well flowering June to September and may attract the yellow loosestrife bee. There is a lot of wet woodland with alder being the predominant tree and some nice deformed oaks as well. A conservation herd of cattle is often on the reserve and they are often near the fen, the wet area where springs feed pools surrounded by reeds and which hold species of duck and occasional geese in the winter. Keep going all the way along the reserve enjoying the nature until you pass a place where cut trees are stored on your right and the path turns right down to a gate and a T junction. Turn right here.

This next stretch is very beautiful with the marsh on your right with its birds and aquatic plants and the river and wide waters of the Whitewater on your left. Behind the waters you will see phragmites reedbed and should hear reed warblers and reed buntings in the summer. Sparrowhawks are likely to be seen above you and in March they may be displaying high in the sky, often you may be attracted to them by the sound of crows, rooks

or jackdaws challenging them. Working along the path you will soon see the picturesque mill, worth a photo! Pass the mill and turn right along the riverbank. This lovely stretch is a real chalk stream with clear waters, watercress and possibly even a kingfisher perched over the water looking for a fish. Part of the path is a boardwalk. Eventually, the path reaches St Mary's churchyard a pretty spot with yew trees and the porch is maybe, somewhere to sit and eat some lunch. There is a single Commonwealth war grave here.

Exit the churchyard and cross over into the field opposite along the marked path in the same direction as the previous path. Follow this across the field, where you may see pied wagtails or possibly, grey wagtails, and head towards the far-right corner towards the trees and river bank. Climb the stile when you reach the gardens and follow the path to the narrow lane and turn left. There's no footpath here but traffic is low and just before you reach the T junction you'll see your path up the steep slope on the right. You are now over the entrance to the Canal's Greywell tunnel, famous for bats and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its bat colonies. Natterers, Daubentons, whiskered, Brandts and brown long-eared bats, even a greater horseshoe bat have been recorded here.

Crossing over the tunnel you join the towpath of the Basingstoke Canal. Most of the year this stretch has little grebes (also known as dabchicks) and many moorhens. There will also be good butterflies and aquatic plants in the undisturbed water – boats are not allowed this far. Following the towpath you can enjoy the canal's natural environment with lovely hedgerows and flowers like stitchwort and celandine. Soon you reach Odiham Castle just off the towpath. This is well worth a visit being a free, important, historical site also known as King John's Castle and has a strong connection with the signing of the Magna Carta. After a look around continue on the Canal towpath.

Pass two bridges, the first a lift bridge serving a lane, the second under a fairly busy road and continue along the towpath. The path bends firmly to the left, then more gently to the right and soon another farm track bridge appears. (There is a short cut back across the fields here but barely worthwhile as the paths can be muddy and it only saves a couple of hundred metres). Continue along the canal towpath and leave the canal at the next road bridge turning right. Here is The Waterwitch pub, often very welcome on a hot day! This may provide an alternative place to park - if you get permission and want to enjoy a lunch or refreshments here – RG29 1AL. Alternatively, just follow the lane up the hill which leads back into Odiham High Street so keep right and at the far end is the car park or your roadside car. You will pass coffee shops and other pubs/hotels and shops on the way. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I do!