

# Swallowfield, Farley Hill and Blackwater River

## A walk in varied countryside with farmland, parkland, hedgerows and river meadows

Start your walk at Swallowfield Parish Hall car park. RG7 1QW. Leave the car park and turn left. At the roundabout take the path to the left through the brick gateway into Swallowfield Park. This is a permissive path the public have enjoyed for many years. This is traditional parkland and as you approach the bridge you will see the many old trees and possibly livestock grazing the grassland. A dead tree on the right once housed Little Owls.

Cross the bridge and turn right following the path on the river bank, this is a pretty stretch but the vegetation is so lush that in summer the river might be difficult to see. You will pass a barn owl nesting box to the left and a route through to the weir of the water gauging station on the right. Now, pass into the parking area for All Saints Church (on my last visit the stile had been removed.) This area is good for birds so if you have binoculars have a look around. Also, to the left of the church there is some wildflower meadow worth a look in spring and summer.

Enter the churchyard by the iron gates and pass to the right of the church following the path through the graveyard and exit to the right crossing the road towards a gateway. Go through the gate and turn left. This hedgerow is glorious in summer. Blackberries, sloes, even damsons are visited by bees, hoverflies and butterflies and the hedgerow is alive. In spring Lapwings have bred in the field to the right and Fieldfares and Redwings congregate in winter. Keep on this path and it passes through the hedge and continues on the other side. Here parkland is visible with old oaks often with Red Kites and Buzzards sitting on them or hunting the area. Sheep often graze here. Follow the path to the road.

This road tends to be a bit busy in weekday rush hours but otherwise is quite quiet. Turn left and continue until you reach a driveway on your left to Tanner's Farm then a lovely old farmhouse. On your right you will find a track so turn here into the woodland. This is a short uphill stretch to endure so take your time and enjoy the peace and birdsong and wildflowers. Stay on this track and it eventually turns into a strong gravel drive leading to a tarmac road passing the first properties at Farley Hill. You join a road called Priest Hill which comes from the right and keep straight on. You meet a crossroads and go straight across into a road called and signposted Bunces Shaw.

Farley Hill must be a lovely place to live! Stay on this road and when you reach a nice cottage and garden on the left look for a footpath on the right along the edge of the big pine trees. The path passes between the woodland and some horse pasture. A family of Mistle Thrushes was looking for insects or worms in the paddocks on my last visit. The path opens out now with the cricket field on your right and some nice Scots Pines come into view. At the end turn right passing the cricket club and then left when you reach the T junction. When you reach the large property on your left look right for a signposted path which can be muddy after rain. Take this path partly rhododendron lined, past the old church, now

converted into a residence and passing the playing field and Victory Hall until you meet the road.

Take care here crossing to Sandpit Lane on the other side. This quiet lane now drops downhill and back up again. At the top you will reach woodland that is full of bluebells in spring. Take the track on the left following the bluebell wood for a while and then enjoy the old hedgerows. This can be quite wet and muddy at times especially in winter. Keep on this track until it meets a lane. Turn right here down to Jouldings Farm.

At the Farm take the Blackwater Valley Path to the right, across the field. There is an alternative that follows closer to the river but it is not easy on the ankles with holes and a lot of plant growth. Follow this riverside path now through gates and across bridges until it meets Ford Lane named after the ford to your left! This is too deep for vehicles but is a good place to watch for wildlife.

Stay on the Blackwater Valley Path by crossing the road and follow the line of the path through newly planted young trees not crossing a footbridge to your left and keep to the line of the river. Just around the corner the path passes the joining of the Blackwater River and the Whitewater and becomes The Broadwater. In summer after low rainfall, the Whitewater can hardly be seen!

This area can be good for birds, Yellowhammers are still present despite big declines in recent times. Listen for the song 'little bit of bread and no cheeeese'. You might well catch a glimpse of kingfishers, reed warblers and whitethroats to name just a few others.

The Blackwater Valley Path continues along the river bank through a lush meadow before turning in to the right along a path best for short people! Watch your heads because there are low branches! The path is rich in life and worth exploring before it twists and joins Nutbean Lane. Turn left here and enjoy the hedgerows and lane side life. You will pass the cemetery on the lane and a visit to the back of it will give a view of the riverside meadows. In autumn and winter the fields can enjoy visits by many geese including some rather unusual species. A few Snow Geese from a local population may still survive and a Bar-headed Goose has turned up here many times. Most likely are Canada Geese and Greylags but also birds from another local population of Barnacle Geese can be seen.

Return to the lane and turn left continuing to the end. Now comes an important choice. You can turn left and follow the road the short, winding but risky way back to All Saints Churchyard and the riverside path or, my advice, is to turn right and walk along the road to the George & Dragon (stop for a drink if you like!) and turn left up the adjacent footpath behind the pub. This will meet the footpath you enjoyed on your outward journey so turn left and it will take you back to the gates at the back of All Saints Churchyard.

From All Saints you retrace your steps back on the riverside path to Swallowfield Parish Hall.