

Rotherwick, Hartley Wood Common and River Loddon – Long route

This beautiful countryside walk is packed with nature interest. It includes farmland, a little known Common, woodland and several encounters with the River Loddon and the Lyde.

Start in the village of Rotherwick near to the Church. There is a bit of roadside parking in front of the church and in front of the school a few yards away. The nearest postcode is RG27 9BG. Alternatively, there are two pubs in the village but using their car parks means you should use their hospitality. The Coach and Horses can be found on 01256 768976 and The Falcon on 01256 765422. There is no regular public transport available.

Start with a walk through the churchyard amongst the yew trees. Some of the church is early 13th C and it was never dedicated to a saint so is just known as Rotherwick Church. There is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission sign on the gate and I found two graves with the normal white stone headstone. **Leave the churchyard at the back left-hand corner** and cross the field to Frog Lane. **Cross the lane onto the wide farm track** and head for the woodland. **Pass the woods and turn right at the end.** In spring you may see your first bluebells here. Keep your eyes open for buzzards and red kites. In spring, blackcaps, nuthatches and tits and woodpeckers may be heard in the trees with the stock doves making their strange oooue-oooue calls from the bigger trees where they may find holes to nest.

The path follows the edge of the woodland and becomes a hedgerow. **At a farm gate on the right exit the field and turn left into the quiet lane**, the hedgerows were full of birds and flowers when I walked in winter and spring. You pass a lovely copse where blackbirds were ferociously challenging something, possibly a tawny owl. **After a left-hand bend look for a footpath sign on your right.** Enter the field here and follow the path along the hedgerow. Listen for skylarks, whitethroats and garden warblers. **At the end of the first field keep going** in the same overall direction but you need to angle left a bit to cross and join the path down the edge of the next field. **At the end of this field use the gateway opening in the edge, and then keep left down the field edge to the lane.**

Exit left onto Rotherwick Lane, a little busier than the last one but still a quiet lane. This leads you into Hartley Wespall. There are many options here but I'll keep it easy. At the road triangle **follow the footpath sign into the field opposite you.** This is left of the bus shelter and postbox. **Follow the path along the woodland edge on your right**, keep your eyes open for the uncommon grey partridge that have been sighted here and brown hares that I saw in winter. Count the hedgerows that come from the field edges on the left. On your right is Hartley Wood Common. **When you meet the third hedgerow coming from your left you should enter the wood on your right at the side of a crude wooden barrier.** (You can continue on the field edge path to the gate at the end if you wish and not visit the Common but I think it's definitely worth the small diversion).

The Common, mainly oak, holly and hazel, appears little used except for local dog walkers and possibly pheasant shooting, the blue feeding barrels etc are still very evident. Consequently, I am suggesting the better, easier paths I found that keep you on the route. There is a lovely mix of habitat from bramble and scrub to some lovely mature trees but paths are not all very clear. In my winter visit I heard woodpeckers, jays, jackdaws, long-tailed tits and saw bullfinches). In spring flowers were abundant, especially greater stitchwort.

You enter the wood through an obvious holly lined path it immediately reaches lovely open woodland with big oaks. Next, a short way, is an open area like a cross path junction where you **turn left following the best path you can see.** Follow this open route now and enjoy the quiet luxuriant growth, there will be many birds but not always noisy! **Keep on this path in the same direction and don't divert at any point.** Eventually the path narrows after you may have seen the fencing of old pheasant pens on your right, providing plenty of evidence that pheasants and red-legged partridge have been kept here in the past for shooting. **The open path narrows and seems to split left and right so take the right side,** still straight on, and you will soon see an open clearing possibly with a bit of a muddy pond after wet weather with a dominating oak tree behind it and then the end of the wood. If unsure just keep going until you can see the end of the wood and fields beyond.

Here at the back of the clearing, almost the end of the wood, take a narrow path on your left. Follow this over fallen branches if any, as it meanders around for a while but **be alert for a tree on your right with a painted red spot. At this tree turn right in front of it and your path out of the wood will be shown by red spots on trees, barrels etc.** On the way you will pass a boggy, marshy area on the right which we can see from the other side soon. You will soon emerge on the woodland edge path you abandoned at the third hedgerow. That adventure is over! **Turn right.**

Go through the metal kiss gate and walk to the concrete bridge. You are now standing over the River Loddon in some lovely water meadows, it's a lovely spot. Little Egrets were seen here in December. Cattle grazed in spring. Enjoy the view of the river and over old water meadows. Turn back towards the gate but head slightly left to the fence and you can then see the reedbed and marshy spot you passed on the way out of the woodland. I would expect to find reed buntings and other reed loving species, chiffchaffs and chaffinches here in summer. **Exit back through the field gate and turn right along the edge of the field.** This path now goes along the field edges on obvious paths with the hedgerow on your right. **Finally cross a field onto a lane and turn right.** Follow the quiet lane towards Hartley Mill.

Very soon, you reach Hay's Farm and **look for a footpath on your right crossing the Lyde River,** a crystal clear chalk stream. You can see Hartley Mill further down the lane. **Crossing the Lyde, take the footpath to the left,** cross the field, you may be sharing with sheep. **Go through the next gate.** The public footpath splits (but it's all in one field) so **go to the river bank on the right** – this is the Loddon, a tributary of the Thames that meets it at Wargrave, east of Reading. In summer this is a place to sit, opposite the beautiful alder trees, maybe picnic, and enjoy the view and listen and watch for the wildlife. Kingfishers are possible, grey wagtails, wrens are seemingly always there. Cuckoos and swallows and house martins

were all seen here over the fields. At the end of the field there are a few steps up to a bridge over the river. **Cross the bridge and follow the path** with native hedgerows along the side of a golf course. (Sadly, quite a lot of old hedgerow has been sacrificed on the right-hand side by the land owner and lies in piles). We found yellowhammers and lesser whitethroat in the hedges here. Soon a house appears on the right, then a lane. **Follow the lane to the left and at the next road junction join the footpath sharp left** inside the hedgerow running parallel to Wildmoor Lane. You will probably see some golfers here.

This path follows the hedgerow and drops to a gateway with a pond on your left. The pond is worth checking for dragonflies and birds, coot with young were there in spring. **At the lane you need to cross into the woodland opposite.** The path through here is obvious, children may enjoy playing in the shelters built by other children while you find a nice log to sit on! Continue on the path until you virtually reach the end of the woodland. **Turn sharp left at a T junction and follow the obvious path** (a signpost appeared inaccurate so just follow the path) and you soon reach the lane. On the way woodland flowers and woodland birds will be there to accompany you. **Turn right onto the lane and follow it to the end.**

Turn right now and pass a farm pond on the left, another quiet lane, a lot of comfrey, the organic gardener's friend, flowering on the right opposite the pond. Comfrey is full of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus all needed by growing plants. Follow this nicely varied lane to where it turns right BUT you **follow the footpath sign to the left after the house.** This stretch is a wide path through generous hedgerow and finishes at a gate with a steep stile! **Cross the stile and turn left, crossing another stile very soon after.** Keep to the left hand side of the field and **yet another stile appears and over you go!** Stay on the right hand side of this field and if you're lucky you can **go between the trees, through the gateway** without crossing another stile! With the woodland on your left now, enjoy the richness of the bramble and natural hedgerows next to some lovely old woodland, sadly, visitors are not welcome in there! In spring and summer the bramble will have birds nesting and feeding, butterflies and insect life. In autumn the migrating warblers will form their fat reserves by eating the copious quantities of blackberries.

At the end of the field cross another stile and look right across the track for the next one, roughly in the same direction. Next down the hill, over another stile and you are in the valley bottom. The Loddon is in front of you so **follow the path to the right and cross the bridge.** This is a lovely spot and great to see swallows and martins in early spring and probably in summer and autumn feeding on the rich insect life. As with all these places red kites and buzzards could be anywhere but watch also for hobbies, they are much smaller, fast and feed on dragonflies and damselflies. Reed warblers and reed buntings may be heard and seen in the reed fringes and waterside scrub.

After the bridge continue straight on between the trees and cross the wide open field in a more or less straight line. In winter and after heavy prolonged rain this field floods. It may hold snipe and lapwing and other birds of a wet environment. (If flooded you will need to pick your way around the left-hand edge but turn right before the main flooded ditch and cross the bridge in the middle where the signpost points you to the gate out of the field.) **Cross the next field, exit via the gate and then cross the next to the gate in the corner.**

Turn right down the track a few yards past the tree line on the left and **go through the gate on the left into another field**. **Cross this field, then the next, exit onto a track, cross the track angled slightly left into the next field and head across to the opposite corner**. You may well have had a few horses for company on the way. **Next a footbridge crosses the Lyde river, then on the other side turn right along the path following the field edge**. At the end of the field is a T junction **turn left at the track crossing your path**. You may hear yellowhammers or skylarks here, whitethroats at the bottom of the slope and woodpeckers, green and great-spotted in the trees. As you rise again the path reaches a field. **Turn right and immediately left after the ditch along another field edge**. The path has been ploughed here but follows the edge of the field. When you reach the field corner the path goes into the often rich undergrowth on the left. **Turn left down the dip and emerge into a more open area and follow the wide track up the hill opposite**. You now have a golf course and a hedgerow on your left and woodland on your right. Woodland flowers are still on view here so bluebells, greater stitchwort and lesser celandine will be evident in spring.

After leaving the woodland **continue following footpath signs** across open bits of the golf course into trees opposite, you may spot a building through the foliage on the right. **You will then see a vehicle track heading off right so take this**. It will turn into a lane which takes you back to Rotherwick passing Tylney Hall, a place to stop for afternoon tea or, at least, to listen for ravens as you pass, we heard them several times in this area. Also, in the woodland ditch on the right soon after the big house and walled garden, banks of spring primroses, you may see the skunk cabbage plant. This is beautiful to look at when it flowers in spring but is invasive and can suppress native waterside plants. **On reaching the main road turn left and take the path on your right** that goes past the (overgrown) village pond and its duck house and you will see the church where you started in front of you.