

Crondall and Bentley

Farmland, hedgerows and woodland delights via two lovely villages

1. Either park in Pankridge Street where there is plenty of street parking and walk along Pankridge Street west towards the Plume of Feathers pub and turn left into Church Street or you may be able to park in front of the church as there are many spaces there. Many house sparrows and collared doves in Church Street. Take the footpath between the school and the churchyard.
2. As you progress behind the houses, you may see starlings that nest in some of the roofs. At the next path junction after the houses, go through the narrow gap, stepping over the log into the open field and continue down the field-edge to your left following the hedgerow. The farmland has many skylarks in spring and the hedgerow has yellowhammers and linnets. (You will pass over the route of the new Southampton to Heathrow oil pipeline - the land has been restored and just some new hedge planting is evident.) Continue along this hedgerow path in the same direction through another hedgerow junction staying left of the fields. You find yourself following a farm track, ignore the right hand track into the middle of the field and continue on keeping left straight up over the top of the hill. There are chiffchaff's, chaffinches and song thrushes. In spring will soon pass a little patch of bluebells in the woodland at the side of the path. At the end of the path drop down the steps where you will meet a lane.
3. Turn left. Take the first turning right, signposted Bentley and follow this lane. After a while you pass farm buildings and you may see swallows over the nearby fields. They nest in the stables at the back of the main farm buildings. I went to have a look. Keep following the lane to the right until the next right-hand bend.
4. Take the footpath through the field on the right-hand side. You are now on St Swithin's Way. When you reach the first hedgerow, you will see a black poplar tree immediately on your left, and in spring, you may see the large red catkins laying on the ground. Continue through the hedgerow and follow the narrow path at the side of the field straight ahead. The tall tree on the right at the woodland corner is full of parasitic mistletoe. Carry straight on across the next field and down the hill following the St Swithin's Way signs until you reach the bottom and cross a small footbridge.
5. Turn right, then quickly left onto the wide woodland track. In spring you may see more bluebells, red campion and oxeye daisies in the open woodland here. In May I heard cuckoos. Ignore the track crossroads and continue on following the track around to the left until you reach a gate and a lane.
6. Turn left, and then right at the next lane. This has a footpath marker post. Continue along the lane bending around to the right. At the crossroads cross straight over and look for the footpath gate on the right-hand side.
7. The path crosses a horse paddock to a gate just to the right of the garden. This paddock is lovely when dry but if after wet conditions it has horses in it, it can be very sticky! After exiting, via the gate to the right of the house garden, keep to the right and enter another field by another gate and continue through two more. You are still on St Swithin's Way. Cross the next big field. As you reach the next hedgerow look carefully for the St Swithin's Way sign on a pole pointing off to your right and follow this to the bottom of the hill and the small bridge.

8. Follow the diagonal path up across the field towards the big metal gate. Go through the gap in the hedge and follow the path in the same direction until you reach the hedgerow. Turn left on the path or on the lane. You can see the village of Bentley ahead of you.
9. If you took the path, exit at the next gate. Proceed to the next road junction and turn left. Pass the school and turn right at the private driveway sign (also a public footpath).
10. Passing some houses, there is a lovely picnic place over to your left and some benches to sit upon. Follow the path to the road and turn right. You will now pass the Village Shop and post office and the Star Inn and reach the crossroads with Bentley Memorial Hall opposite.
11. Turn right. Keep going until the footpath runs out. Now you have to suffer the quiet lane for about 50 yards and after the next track on the left look for some steep steps up on the left. Follow this path but it is eroding so take care. Primroses adorn this path in the spring, then stitchwort, bluebells and herb robert. Continue under the private footbridge up to the next junction.
12. Turn right along the narrow lane towards the church hidden on the left behind the trees. Turn left at the postbox. Now enjoy the walk past the church along this lovely beech tree-lined track, rich in flowers. You soon reach Bury Court house. Continue in the same direction through the gate and on the lane. Stay on the lane and head up the hill between the cottages to the gate and stile.
13. Enter the field and continue up the hill on the left-hand side of the hedgerow. (You will cross more of the Southampton to Heathrow pipeline excavation here, now restored and invisible.) Continue to the lane via the stile.
14. Turn right and stay on the lane. Listen for skylarks. Pass several tracks and houses, including Oast houses and ascend the next Hill. At the crossroads continue straight over. Soon you see a road junction directly under some overhead power lines and turn off to the right until you reach Swanthorpe House.
15. Take the track to the left, a public footpath. We now follow this path for approximately 1 km. After the last house enter woodland that has a lot of spring woodland flowers. There will be lots of common birds including goldcrests and coal tits as you pass a fallen log and emerge into a field.
16. Keep left along the field edge and the path enters Lee Wood, a flower- rich woodland following a farm track. (When I walked it at the end of March, I found a great deal of lesser celandine and also carpets of wood anemone, later some early purple orchids, bluebells and wood spurge). In the woodland, ignore the first footpath sign to your left and keep going. Look out for bullfinches, blackcaps and garden warblers until you are emerging from the wood.
17. Immediately before exiting the wood turn left at the footpath signpost just inside the trees. After just a few yards exit the wood to your right and follow the path along a recently planted line of hedgerow trees. Ahead of you, in the distance to the right, you can now see Crondall. You may be able to listen to the skylarks and whitethroats as the footpath curves around between the large fields. At the farm buildings, keep following the path to the left until you emerge onto a lane. Keep going towards the houses and eventually the Church. Retrace your steps to your car.

There's a little café in front of the church and The Plume of Feathers pub at the bottom of Church Street where you may seek a reward!