

## Rotherwick, Hartley Wood Common and River Loddon – Shorter 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 left at the T junction** passing the chocolate box thatched cottage on your right. **It is virtually a straight line back to Rotherwick now.** You pass Wildmoor Farm and a nice view from a bridge over the Lyde River. The water meadows often hold cattle but could have snipe in winter and yellow wagtails in summer. Hobbies may feed over them in summer. You will soon enter a golf course your path being tight on the left-hand side and a large reed fringed pond will be seen on your right. This held tufted duck, wigeon, mallard and Canada geese in winter. Your path soon meets a stile and very shortly afterwards a few footpaths cross but you stay on the same path in the same direction, don't turn right or left! You are on the edge of woodland but you soon meet a quiet lane.

**Turn left (effectively straight on)** and this lane 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.