

Wellesley Water Meadows, two rivers and Bramshill North

A varied and interesting walk on footpaths, quiet country lanes, open fields and through wildlife rich parts of Bramshill Forest

The suggested starting place is Wellesley Water Meadows, a SANGS close to Riseley Mill. Nearest postcode RG7 1XX. There is a car park there for about ten cars and if, full, a couple of roadside spaces further up the lane by another entrance gate. There is limited public transport via No 7 bus from Reading to Fleet via Hartley Wintney, on Sundays the route from Reading terminates at Riseley. The nearest bus stops will add a few miles to the walk.

From the car park at Wellesley Water Meadows **take the path on the right-hand edge of the field**. Follow the edge of the many new planted trees which you will see in various places around this SANGS. These will look really good in a few years. The path drops gently downhill until the planted trees stop. **Then turn right at the path direction sign** so the hedge is on your left and you will now be facing the picturesque River Whitewater. **Turning left follow the river bank**, worth looking for Kingfishers here, many plants including some bluebells and some lovely old riverbank trees and you will soon meet a gravel track. **Take the right-hand side** and follow it around the field edge stopping here and there to view the river. This path will swing around and take you to a boardwalk, **enter the gate and cross the marsh** looking for butterflies, dragonflies and flowers.

Exit the boardwalk via the gate and turn right. In spring and summer, you should by now, have heard whitethroats, garden warblers, blackcaps and chiffchaffs. You would also most likely have heard and seen skylarks, red kites and buzzards. In autumn, I found a mix of geese in the adjacent fields, possibly from the birds kept in Wellington Country Park just across the lane. This field edge has many planted young trees that will add much to the wildlife here in future years. Following the field edge, you soon **approach the corner, turn left and exit the gate onto the lane where you turn right.**

Follow the lane until a left-hand bend where a sign shows you the next path to your right , a Restricted Byway (immediately after a blocked field gate.) This lovely path then takes you between some lovely hedgerows with many birds and wild flowers such as lesser celandine, greater stitchwort, bluebells and more. The path finishes far too soon **at a minor lane where you should turn right**. This next short stretch is part of The Devil's Highway! There is a population of house sparrows in the garden of the house opposite. The lane edges have many wild flowers and you notice School Road coming from your left, continuing in the same direction. This road takes you to a lovely spot over the River Whitewater and in the middle is the boundary sign to show you where Berkshire and Hampshire meet. I found several clumps of the bright yellow marsh marigolds here in spring.

Next you reach a sign BRAMSHILL. On the left is a ford over the River Blackwater. Where lane turns right **you should cross a stile in the hedgerow right in front of you into a field**. The path goes left and follows the Blackwater river bank with some nice views and wildflowers and birds to enjoy. The path then turns right at the hedgerow in front of you and you follow that out of the field passing two gates into the lane beyond. **Turn left along the lane and enter Bramshill via the next gateway on your right.**

Turn left and follow the path with the open area and deep ditch on your right. In the birch, in spring, willow warblers sing and possibly stay although many now breed further north. Butterflies and dragonflies/damselflies will be seen here in the summer months. At the next path crossroads take the path to the left back to the lane. Foxgloves may be seen here in the summer months.

At the lane turn right and pass a couple of properties and drives before a **double width drive appears on your left with a five-bar gate on the right side with a stile next to it (the gatepost sign says Well House Farm).** Hop over the stile and follow this path through a narrow passageway until you emerge next to the River Blackwater. The path then crosses a bridge over the river and then joins the Blackwater Valley footpath before reaching a gate and turning left into a lane. This is definitely horse country so you are likely to see paddocks and riders but the pleasant lane bears very little traffic. Follow it past a few properties and buzzing hedgerows and eventually reach a T junction. **Turn right at the T junction** and follow the lane back to the Blackwater and a ford with a footbridge. There is a nice picnic spot on the right where a brief rest stop might reward you with sight of a kingfisher and grey wagtails.

Cross the footbridge with the mill weir on your left and follow the lane which splits. **Take the right-hand gravel track option (see the Wokingham Way sign on the traffic prohibition sign).** Follow this until you reach another gate which pass and turn immediately right. Although adders are reported here I have never seen one and the usual common-sense rules of keeping to the paths and keeping dogs under close control are more than adequate. (NOTE: For the next mile or so the plan is to keep to public footpaths. If Forestry Operations apply they rarely affect these paths and if they do expect signed diversions to be in place.)

You soon reach a crossroads with power lines passing overhead, see the footpath sign beyond and cross straight over. This can be a bit wet after rain. Soon it opens up and the gorse bushes are home to many whitethroats in summer. Flowers will be seen, looking in the ditches on the left. Cross the next crossroads going straight on, there is a footpath sign and when the woodland encloses you, partly hidden on the left is a pond with reed fringes. Coots, Canada geese and reed warblers are the minimum you should find here. The reed warblers in the phragmites reeds are always hard to see but have a distinctive song, chattering, punctuated by whistles and odd notes, often continuing for a long length of time. (The art of seeing them is to find where the song is coming from and watch for the tops of the reeds to move as they move from one to another).

Cross the next crossroads in the same direction, again some mud may be there after rain. I think the footpath sign has been lost here but the ground post remains). The wettest part of this section contains many wild flowers in summer. In one area, primroses are all over the ground in spring. Passing through the trees you eventually reach a nice forest pond. Little grebes breed here and coots. I have chased a few dragonflies in September without positive identification. At the pond you need to go straight on in the same direction, so to keep your feet dry (☺) **turn left and then keep right onto a wide forest track – do not go left or right at the pond.**

Follow this track and after a hundred yards/metres or so the area on the left opens up and a **path appears on your right. Turn right here.** There is some wooden fencing acting as a gateway to go through. The path has a lot of pendulous sedge along it. Soon after this the path splits, the main path may seem to go right but you should stay left up a very short slope and very soon after you will see another footpath sign to reassure you. Follow this and reach a major track. **Turn left and take the next track on your right** again with a footpath sign on the fencing. Take care here to follow the narrow path on the right, not the wider track into the trees to your left. This path winds around a bit but keep following any signs you see and crossing any crossroads and you will eventually reach the edge of Bramshill, a wide track and the lane beyond. **Enter the lane and turn left.**

Follow the lane until you **see and enter another lane that appears on your right at a very sharp angle.** This lane serves just a handful of properties so is very quiet. It has nice hedgerows, some old trees and birds and flowers to enjoy. Often red kites are over the fields on your left. Towards the end you'll see the place to buy your next car on the left (☺) and a gate and stile in front of you. **Cross over the stile and turn right.** The stables here have swallows in the summer so you may see and hear them over the paddocks. Immediately on passing the stables use the gate on the left and cross the paddock under the wires to the gate on the other side. These wires have a lot of perching swallows at the end of the summer, ready for their migration. **Cross the sleeper bridge and follow the field edge.** There are sheep grazing here at times and a hedgerow full of bees and butterflies. At the end of this field **pass through the metal kiss gate and drop down to the footpath and turn left.** This field edge has another great hedgerow on the left, whitethroats and blackcaps sing here as well as many of our common resident birds like dunnocks, robins and blackbirds.

At the end of this path, passing a second field on your right, you reach the River Whitewater. Lots of wild garlic greets you in spring and the path takes you over a wooden bridge from which grey wagtails were showing in May. It looks another good spot for kingfisher. **The path leads you to a track, turn right and reach the tarmac lane, again turn right.** This lane leads you back past a number of delightful properties on the right and mature woodland on the left to your starting place. A lovely walk I think on any day of the year, I hope you agree!