

# Around Ash Ranges

A great hilly walk around some wonderful heathland including lovely views and a stunning lake.

Start at Normandy Car Park at the corner of Hunts Hill Road and the A323 Guildford Road nearest postcode GU3 2DB. There are several free car parks on the left along Hunts Hill Road if this one is full. Cross the ditch at the left-hand end of the car park and follow the obvious path past the playground and sports facilities. Keep right of the sports building, cross the vehicle access road and follow the path in the strip of woodland parallel with the side of Hunts Hill Road.

This path leads you to the cricket pavilion and car park which you should cross heading left and then turn to the right keeping to the right-hand side of the cricket pitch. At the end of the cricket field turn right into the woodland and follow the path left. The path may be a bit indistinct here but where it splits you need to angle to the right and then you will see a bit of a hill and the path goes up to the top where it meets the A324 Aldershot Road. If you go wrong you should meet this road a bit too far to the left but no matter, it's easily rectified.

When you reach the A324 cross over. Go to the right-hand end of the houses where there is a track leading up the side which you should follow. This passes more property and you will see two gates. Carry on past the metal gate on the right following the track (I found loads of fungi in the open woodland to the left in October) and you will eventually reach the fence of Ash Ranges. You will now turn left and be following this path in various forms all the way around.

At times there will be opportunities to enter the many gates (when the red flags are not up) and walk along a wide track inside the fence. There are a couple of areas where this may not be permitted so you will find pathways blocked and you can return to the external path. This usually applies at the top of Normandy Hill (see map). This first section is very hilly (with some muddy patches) as you head west towards Normandy Hill, once over that it's not quite so hard!

You will drop down from Normandy Hill almost certainly outside the fence line and turn right. Keeping tight to the fence there is a steep ditch, it's passable but you may prefer to follow a path into the woodland and then follow the path back to the fence line. After a while you will suddenly find your way blocked by a residential property and have no choice other than to turn left along the dirt track. Next turn right into the unmade road BUT turn left at the junction with Cuthbert Road (ignore the road to your right towards the fence). At the end of Cuthbert Road turn right and pass the Swan pub, cross the road following the path into the woodland (with the car park on your right). You will soon see the fence in front of you again so start following it again, often there are tracks a few yards away or you can follow the narrow paths next to the fence.

Keeping to the fence line you will reach the canal on your left soon followed by Greatbottom Flash. Through the waterside vegetation there will be waterbirds like Coot,

Moorhen, Grey Herons and Mute Swans. In summer the reedbeds will hold Reed Warblers and the woodland has Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs and many common birds. The path here diverges a little from the fence and after a ditch you can get back to the fence line on the right or just keep going on the main track angling right when you can and you get back to the fence line. So, keeping to the fence line and suffering another hill you start getting some nice views of the heather again inside the Ranges. Down the hill you reach a right turn with the railway on your left and the ranges on your right. If the flags are down enter here and follow the fence line, it's a lovely walk on either side.

You climb a small hill where the railway bridge is and keep following the path next to the fence on either side. I love this area and have often seen Woodlarks and Tree Pipits, heard Dartford Warblers, seen and heard Cuckoos in spring and much more. Another hill takes you to the highest point on this side of the ranges so just keep going following the fence. There are a few gates allowing you to change sides if you can or want, I would stay in. You are now heading in the direction of Pirbright. Another mile or so and a few hilly bits will get you to a sharp right turn at Stoney Castle Ranges. Stay in or stay out but keep as close as you can to the fence line. Inside, the track leaves the fence for a while heading left through trees.

Before long there is another sharp right turn with an access gate. If you are inside the fence this is the last gate you can pass before you must leave the Ranges. When you turn right looking along the straight fence line you will see a hill, known as Chair Hill, in the distance. If you are following the internal track you must follow it to the gate at the side of the hill and leave there. (If you continue further along this edge you may soon be potentially trapped and forced inside the boggy Ranges area with no easy exit route). This long stretch is a nice walk with good views of heath or woodland right or left. Green Woodpeckers, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Jays and the heathland birds can all be found here. You may also find Silver-studded Blue butterflies flitting across the heather.

After Chair Hill, continue to follow the excellent path tight along the outside edge even where it suddenly gets very narrow (here the track turns into the woodland but keep to the fence), there is a glitch at one point with a few sleepers to get across a minor water course but you follow the path all the way to Henleypark firing ranges. From the entrance to the firing ranges you will leave the fence line for a while now.

Turn right, crossing the entrance track and follow the footpath sign through the small fishermen's car park. Cross the bridge over the stream and turn left. There is a small bench and table with a pond view here that can rest weary legs and help you refuel and spot some wildlife, birds, dragonflies, butterflies! Once rested continue along the same path past the lake. This is full of water lilies and late in summer has large flocks of Canada Geese. Swans, ducks and Moorhens are usually present and Kingfishers are regularly seen by fishermen. This is one of the few places I have seen Brambling, a bird that comes to Britain in winter. They flock with chaffinches in winter and can be told by their white rumps. Look and listen for flocks in the woodland to the left of the path, often they are feeding on the ground.

At the end of the path cross a small weir and turn right along the clear path with the lake on your right. You will soon meet a long straight track angling off to the left. Take this and follow it all the way through the trees until it almost reaches the road and reconnects with

the fence for Ash Ranges. Continue along the outside fence line. Next you have a choice. My preference 'Choice 1' is a little more difficult but is more interesting and has a few variable conditions. 'Choice 2' is simpler, slightly longer and involves more road walking.

Choice 1 - (GPX file includes this).

Continue along the fence line, with the road on your left, until you see a track appear inside the fence that joins the main inside track. Look left and there should be a gap to the road and an installation on the other side. There is a footpath sign for you to follow running down the right-hand side of the installation. This path can be overgrown with ferns and brambles at times but has always been passable when I've used it. At the end is a stile, cross it and turn right. This field may have roe deer and the bramble and scrub growth is good for butterflies, insects and birdlife. Follow the field edge towards the farm at the end until a clear path angles off across the field down to a gate and stile at the bottom of the slope. Cross the track here and enter the next field. This is often actively farmed and the path is often ploughed and not firmly reinstated by the owner so might be muddy and a little indistinct. You head to the left-hand tip of the woodland in the field in front of you then follow a similar angle, slightly left, to the far corner of the field. Here there is a stile. Cross it and the field following the footpath signs to the far-right corner. Here the path turns right crossing a high stile. This path meets a lane with houses on your right. Turn right and very soon across the road is a footpath into the woodland. Follow this and you will return to the bottom of Hunts Hill Road where your car is parked.

Choice 2 - (Blue line on map – GPX file does not include this).

Follow the fence line until it angles to the right. It then angles back to the left before angling right again. At that point, look for a gap in the woodland to your left and follow it to the road. There will be a house and garden on your left as you approach the road. Turn right along the busy road verge. You can soon cross the road turning left into the quieter Hunts Hill Road which leads you back to your car where it meets the Guildford Road A 324.