

WANTAGE AREA WALKS & CYCLE ROUTES



Route 1 - The Dudley Iles Nature Trail Part 1

This trail was inaugurated in July 1991 on the occasion of the official twinning of Wantage and Grove with Mably in France. The trail takes you through some of the old town, some new developments and some of the local countryside. This short version was compiled in July 2011 to mark the 20th anniversary of the French civic twinning and should take about 1 hour. The second part of the Nature Trail is described in a separately published route in this series - "Route 2 - The Dudley Iles Nature Trail Part 2: Grove Bridge via Crab Hill to Wantage".

"Leave nothing but footprints", "Take nothing but photographs"

1 The trail begins at the south western corner of the church near the war memorial. Go down the steps and straight ahead down Betjeman Lane. Cross the stream and turn right.



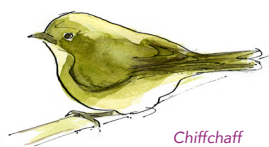
The stream is Letcombe Brook which is one of several chalk streams arising from springs below the chalk Downs. It flows northwards to join the Ock, which eventually enters the Thames. This clean river contains Trout, and smaller fish, Sticklebacks and Minnows. Beneath the stones are Crayfish (fresh water lobsters) which need well aerated water.



Stickleback

2 On the left of the path is an area of woodland which had been left to nature for 20 or more years before being turned into a small park known as Betjeman Millennium Park. This oasis of semi-mature trees, wild flowers and meandering paths was created in 1997 as a memorial to one of Britain's best-loved poets, Sir John Betjeman, who lived in Wantage from 1951 to 1972. The park has a poetry trail of stones inscribed with lines from some of his work, by the sculptor Alec Peever. There are also display panels, each set with adjacent seating areas, which give information about the poet laureate and the park. His former home is also visible from here.

Woodland birds live and breed here. Listen for Chiffchaffs - little olive green



Chiffchaff

warblers which arrive in March and sing their own name, and Blackcaps with a louder but mellow song.

On the other side of the brook are Snowberry bushes. The small reddish flowers unfold in May and later produce spongy white berries. This shrub is a native of North America and provides nesting sites for our warblers.



Snowberry

3 Continue along the path for 300 metres. The mill straddles the stream. There has been



The Mill

a mill here since Norman times. Grain grown on the Berkshire Downs is still ground using the great stones, which are now driven by electric motors.

Collared Doves are found everywhere in Wantage but especially around the mill where grain has been spilt. These little grey pigeons first appeared in Wantage in 1964 after they spread across Europe from the middle east. Most of the tame ducks here are semi-wild Mallard or wild duck. Due to human protection and inbreeding with domestic ducks, they have produced a variety of patterns.

4 Cross the road (be careful) and bear left through the small green. Across the side road is a house with a teddy bear window, associated with John Betjeman's story "Archie and the Strict Baptists".



Teddy bear window

Now take the small tarmac path between two houses. The small house on the right is the last remaining building from the canal wharf which was on this site. After 30 metres bear left and follow the old path alongside an old wall.



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Identify Herb Robert growing from the cracks in the walls and on the narrow verges together with the blue Periwinkle and white Dead-nettles.



Periwinkle

5 Pass a small children's playground and continue through the estate crossing three roads. Continue straight on at a gravel path. Here the path follows the old towpath towards Mably Way. Along the left side is a ditch which is the remains of the canal that terminated at the wharf near the mill.



Goldfinch

6 Cross Mably Way and join the path on the opposite side. You are continuing along the old Wilts and Berks canal towpath. Pass by the remains of an old lock. Watch for Goldfinches and Greenfinches feeding amongst the poppies and groundsel growing on waste ground.



Poppies



Groundsel

Building the canal began in 1796 and it opened in September 1810. The Wantage branch was $\frac{3}{4}$ mile long and was cut from the main canal at Grove bridge, across Belmont fields under the bridge to end at Wantage Wharf at the bottom of Mill Street.

7 The fields on the left as you walk along the canal towpath have been made into sports fields. The short grass is an advantage to many birds which feed on Earthworms, Leatherjackets (larvae of Caddis Flies) Wireworms (larvae of beetles) and flies. You will see small flocks of birds feeding.

Identify:-

Starlings - Small busy dark birds with bobbing heads and stabbing bills.

Rooks - Large black crows with grey faces which nest in colonies in trees nearby.



Rook



Jackdaw

fold line - non-printing

Jackdaws - Medium size crows with grey heads and black crowns often feeding with Rooks.

In winter Golden Plovers and black and white Lapwings sometimes feed here.



Lapwing



Golden Plover

8 Follow the towpath by the side of some allotments, go through the kissing gate, then a second gate, and cross the stream. Look for a Kingfisher - they are not uncommon and are often seen from the houses along the stream - indeed one road (a "Close") near the stream is called Kingfishers.



Kingfisher

9 Turn right at the main road and walk back into Wantage Town Centre turning right by the pedestrian light-controlled crossing along and up Grove Street.

10 Continue across the edge of the square, turn right towards the church and proceed to the church yard where you started this short walk.

Parish Church



The Parish Church of SS Peter and Paul - mentioned in the Domesday Book but the present building dates from the 13th century. The great east window above the main altar is 19th century and is a memorial to William Trinder. The west window is a memorial to Rev. Dean Butler, the vicar of Wantage from 1847 to 1880. He is particularly renowned for his commitment to education, and founded the community of St Mary the Virgin the largest community for women in the Anglican church. Grave stones - Examine the headstones in the church yard. You will see grey, green and orange patches of Lichens on them. Lichens consist of microscopic fungal threads (like the body of a toadstool) and very tiny green plants. The green plants provide the food and the fungal threads protect them and provide water and salts. Their growth is very slow and they live a very long time; some have been growing on their respective stones since soon after they were erected. Lichens are sensitive to air pollution so good lichen growth on walls suggests clean air. The orange-yellow encrusting lichen is found commonly on Wantage roofs. They are bright orange in the sun but green-yellow in the shadier places. Some kinds are spread by birds'

feet hence they are concentrated along house ridges or tree branches. The orange pigment can be used as a cloth dye.

Now you have completed the walk, why not visit the museum on the opposite side of Priory Road? We hope you have enjoyed your visit to the birth place of King Alfred.

Vale & Downland Museum



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Further copies of this route and others in the series are available from the Independent Advice Centre, Market Square, Wantage