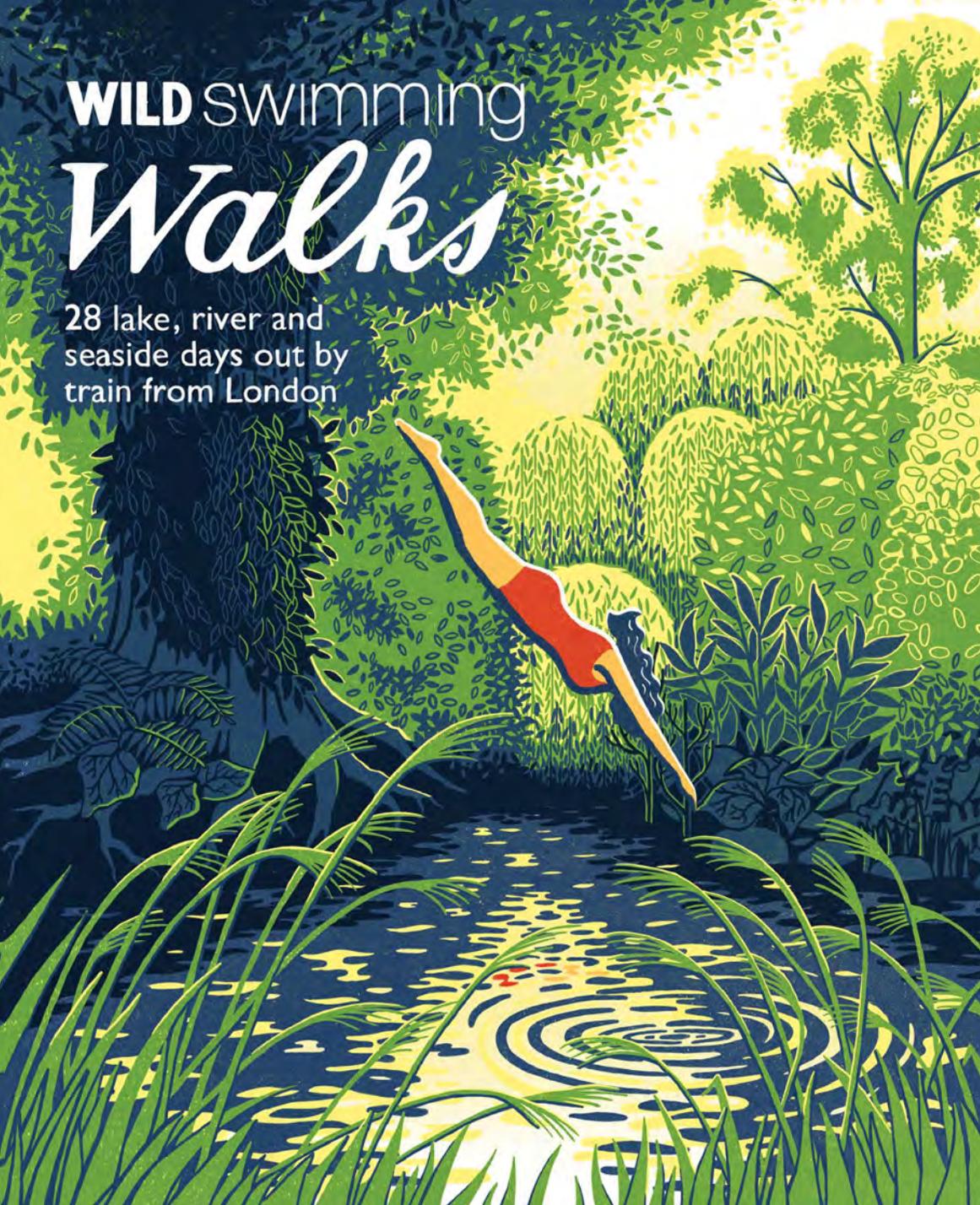


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The Kenwood Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath has been a women's swimming pond since 1926. World famous for its history and idyllic setting, it has become a magnet for London residents and visitors alike. Margaret Dickinson (editor) is a year-round wild swimmer, documentary film-maker and writer who campaigned to save swimming on the Heath.



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Walk 6

WATTON-AT-STONE TO HERTFORD, HERTFORDSHIRE

This gently rural walk follows the River Beane through different phases of its life, from rushing stream, to reedy pools, to the deep meanders of the final swimming place.

The Hertfordshire landscape exudes moderation. There are little woods, pocket-sized nature reserves and gentle undulations instead of hills. Even commercial monoculture and suburban sprawl, except around the biggest towns, occur as modest interruptions to the traditional rural scenery. The Beane, appropriately, is a river in miniature. It rises only a few miles above Watton-at-Stone and ends its life near our last swimming place when it joins the Lea. Yet in that short distance it matures and ages like the great rivers of the world, starting fast, shallow and fairly straight, becoming slower and deeper and more curvaceous, until it runs really deep and meandering over a flood plain to join the Lea, or more correctly the Lee, Navigation.

The natural sequence is partly obscured by centuries of human intervention. Water extraction from the catchment area recently caused part of the upper Beane to disappear. At Watton-at-Stone, a flow that once powered a large mill is now reduced to a trickle. The walk joins the Beane where it has been dammed to create water features for Woodhall Park, the neo-classical building which dominates the view as you approach. The lake, weir and weir pool there **2** date from 1775 when the present house was built.

Downstream from Woodhall Park the river reverts to a young stream rushing over stony shallows – no use for swimming, but the walk beside it is delightful **3**. We passed drifts of speedwell and watched a family of ducks play out a little drama as two dawdlers from the brood let out poignant distress calls and the mother duck struggled against the current to retrieve them.

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: 8 miles.

TIME: 4 hours.

MAP: OS Landranger 166 (Luton & Hertford) or OS Explorer 194 (Hertford & Bishop Stortford).

START POINT: Watton-at-Stone Station.

END POINT: Hertford North Station.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Train from King's Cross (weekends) or Moorgate (weekdays). Return from Hertford North; also possible from Hertford East but check whether your day return is valid on that line.

SWIMMING: In the River Beane, at least two possible places.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Woodhall Park; Lee Navigation; Waterford Heath Nature Park; St Leonard's church, Bengoe; Hertford historic town.

REFRESHMENTS: Two pubs in Watton-at-Stone, The Bull (tel 01920 831032) and The George and Dragon (01920 830285), both in the High Street. The Woodhall Arms, Stapleford (SG14 3NW, tel 01992 535123). Hertford pubs and cafés including an open-air tea place near the end of the walk.



The river runs on fast and shallow past the tiny village of Stapleford ③ and its church, St Mary the Virgin (a key is obtainable from a nearby house, and the Norman north door is worth a look). About a mile further on, near Waterford, where the land flattens out and the river starts to slow, there are more signs of human intervention as the area ④ was used for sand and gravel extraction until the 1990s, with quarrying to the north and settling beds to the south. After the works closed, Waterford Heath became a nature reserve noted for Grizzled Skipper butterflies, which feed on abundant wild strawberries, and according to the information board, is home to great horsetail, orchids, kingfishers and water vole.

In June there were lots of wild flowers including viper's bugloss, mallow and rosebay willow herb. Over the course of the walk we saw many species of butterfly including Marbled White, the beautiful velvety Ringlet, Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Small Skipper, Small White and Common Blue, as well as Banded Demoiselle damselflies. We heard garden warbler, blackcap, whitethroat and robin singing and saw a tree creeper.

Beyond Waterford Heath, Waterford Marshes ⑤ is a pleasant area of wet meadow where the Beane

at first runs wide and shallow – good for paddling – then passes through reed beds and becomes deep enough to swim, mostly about waist deep and still quite narrow. There is a distinct current here and the edge is a little muddy, but once away from the bank the bottom is firm and gravelly. At one point there is a convenient bench. Our swim was slightly marred by a herd of bullocks, which arrived just as we were getting out. Two of them started experimentally nibbling our clothes and the largest beast leant forward and prodded one of us on the bottom with his nose, as if to tip us amusingly back into the water. Despite their sweet breath and innocent eyes we were glad to get away.

After Waterford the walk leaves the river to take a shortcut across a bend and rejoins it by Hartham Meadow. It passes St Leonard's, one of only three churches in the county with an apse and 'a rare example of a virtually intact Norman village church' according to Pevsner (the 46-volume series of county-by-county architectural guides, *The Buildings of England*, by Sir Nikolaus Bernhard Leon Pevsner). You then descend to the river as it meanders across a flood plain to debouch into the Lee Navigation. This is where the best swims of the walk are ⑥, although they're only suitable for those happy to swim out of their depth. The river here is deep, fairly wide with a good stretch offering reasonably easy entry points. One drawback is that the area is so close to Hertford and Ware that it is busy with people and dogs on fine weekends.

The walk turns back to Hertford along the Lee Navigation, a waterway created by improving the River Lea in order to ship goods in and out of London. It has a special place in canal history because the Act of Parliament for improving the river was passed in 1425 and is the first Act for navigational improvement of any river.

DIRECTIONS

① WATTON-AT-STONE

Turn left out of the station along a road with a new housing development on the right. Just after this take a little cul-de-sac on the right, Glebe Close. At the end, take a FP on the left and almost immediately turn right on an enclosed path, which soon reaches a minor road (Church Lane). Turn left and by the church (St Andrew and St Mary) turn right into Perrywood Lane. After about 100 metres, just after a house, take a track left between metal posts. After passing a yard on the left, it becomes a grassy path. After sheds on the left, enter Woodhall Park Estate and take the left fork through two fields with distant views of Woodhall Park house. On reaching the busy A119, cross and take a driveway opposite, indicated by a footpath sign.

1.25 miles

② FIRST SIGHT OF THE RIVER BEANE

You reach the River Beane where a weir has created a lake upstream and a weir pool downstream. Continue to cross a stone bridge over the Beane then turn right to pass between the river on the right and Home Farm buildings on the left. After the buildings the track veers left.

At the next junction turn right on a track over a stone bridge. Here we join the Hertfordshire Way (HW), which we follow to the outskirts of Hertford. After crossing a second bridge, look out for a kissing gate in a metal fence, to the right. The path heads diagonally across a field with the river away on the right. (This stretch might be swimmable, but soon there is a weir after which the river becomes fast and shallow).

1.75 miles

③ TO STAPLEFORD

The path goes to a stone wall, which you cross by a ladder stile. Continue beside the river, ignoring a cross path, to the hamlet of Stapleford, where the path comes out on a residential road. At the junction with a minor road, turn right and then left on a path by the church (St Mary the Virgin).

2.5 miles

④ TO WATERFORD HEATH

The path hugs the river until, after about half a mile, it veers away, goes slightly uphill and turns right on a farm track to join a road at a right angle bend. Go straight on to a road T-junction. Turn left and after a few yards take a footpath to the right across Waterford

Heath and under the railway to emerge on a road in a small housing estate.

3.75 miles

⑤ WATERFORD MARSHES

Continue along the road to a junction. Turn right and almost at once take the HW footpath on the left across Waterford Marshes, where there are possible swimming places. The path eventually leads to the main A119 road.

4.5 miles

⑥ ENTERING HERTFORD

Turn left on the A119 and walk along it to a little bridge over a water channel and just afterwards take a path to the left along the edge of the channel.

⑦ TO ST LEONARD'S

Continue under the railway. At the next junction, where you meet a metallised surface (there is a bridge to a private road on the left), continue straight on past Molewood House (on the right), between steep, wooded banks on the left and the River Beane close beside you on the right. After about a quarter of a mile, as the houses on Molewood Road appear, take a sharp left turn on a path uphill with steps, leaving the

DIRECTIONS

HW. Pass Fanshawe Street on the right. At the top, continue along Church Road, passing Elton Road on the right. At the T-junction at the end of Church Road, turn right into Duncombe Road, pass Cross Road on the left and where Duncombe Road becomes Farquhar Street, opposite Bye Street, take a footpath on the left between walls. On reaching Bengoe Street, cross over and turn right downhill. Towards the bottom take a path left, signed for the Norman church of St Leonard, with steep wooded banks on your left. Soon our old friend, the river Beane, reappears. Pass a footbridge and tennis courts on the right. A section of the HW comes in from the right. Next there is Hartham Grazing Meadows information board. Continue uphill to St Leonard's church and past it, signed HW, Ware Park Road and Hertford Lock, also Old Bengoe House. To the east of the church, pass through a wooden kissing gate into a meadow. Descend to a footbridge over the River Beane, where both upriver and downriver there are good swimming spots. **6.25 miles**

8 THE LEE NAVIGATION

From the footbridge take the path straight on across the meadow to a bridge over the Lee Navigation at Hertford Lock. Cross and turn right along the towpath, signed to Hertford. At the first bridge over the Lee do not take a path off left signed to the centre of town but at the next bridge your path leaves

the waterside. Follow it up left; turn right over the Lee and then left over another waterway. To explore the centre of Hertford, turn left on a long bridge above a weir following signs to the town centre or castle. To go directly to the station, turn right down some steps, cross another bridge and turn left on a path signed to the Leisure Centre, passing the long weir on your left. The path passes Hartham Leisure Centre, a play area and tea stall and goes under a bridge to come out on a grassy area near a big Sainsbury's.

7 miles

9 TO HERTFORD NORTH STATION

Leaving Sainsbury's to your left, take Port Hill road to cross the Beane. At the junction with another section of Port Hill turn left and soon turn right onto Port Vale. Just after Beane River View and before the Two Brewers and George Street on the right, turn left into a car park to reach an enclosed footpath, which later bears right. Follow it with the river on your left until you reach Beane Road. Turn left for the station.

8 miles

Margaret Dickinson, Liz Valentine.

