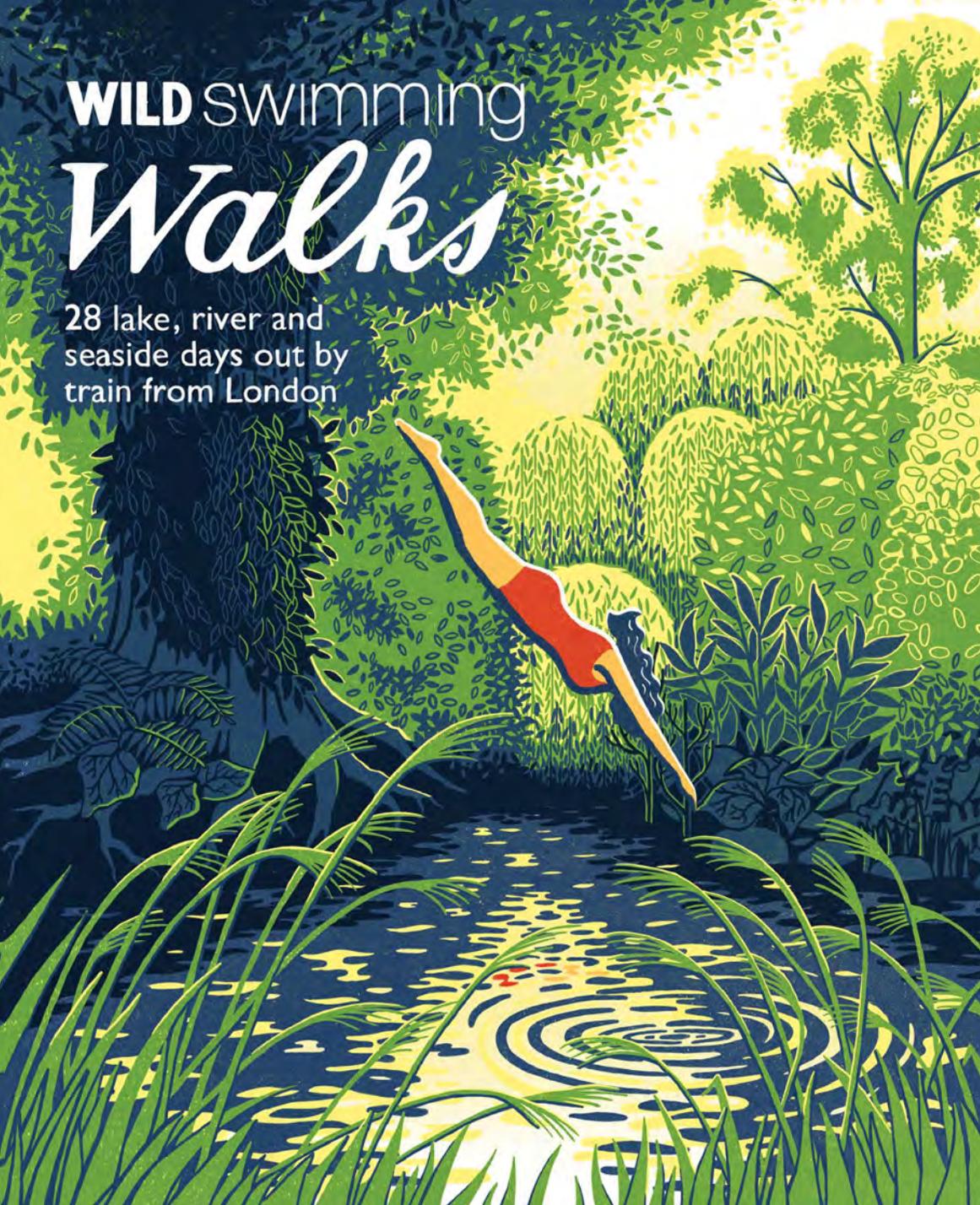


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The Kenwood Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath has been a women's swimming pond since 1926. World famous for its history and idyllic setting, it has become a magnet for London residents and visitors alike. Margaret Dickinson (editor) is a year-round wild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



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Walk 14

SHIPLAKE CIRCULAR, OXFORDSHIRE

A varied walk starting along the Thames Path, where there are several places to swim, and returning over farmland with extensive views of the Thames Valley.

This is a lovely walk along the Thames Path from Shiplake to Sonning and back through contrasting scenery. There are several good swimming places along the Thames here. The first is just after you join the river, but be careful of passing boats in summer. Another good place out of term time is a little further on opposite Shiplake College Rowing Club ❶. There is no privacy for changing, beyond that offered by some bushes and mature trees.

The area around Shiplake has been cultivated since at least Saxon times, with strips of land rising from the river through meadows to woodland on higher ground. Binfield Heath, as the name intimates, was poorer land with common grazing rights. It is thought that the Vikings came up river as far as Shiplake. In more recent times, settlement has been determined by the creation of Shiplake Lock by the Thames Water Commission in 1773, and Shiplake station on the branch line (now known as the Regatta Line) from Twyford to Henley in 1857. Wargrave and Shiplake hold an annual regatta, the largest on the Thames after Henley. Shiplake featured in Jerome K. Jerome's novel *Three Men in a Boat* and George Orwell spent some of his childhood here.

Sonning Bridge ❷, built in 1775, contains a curiosity in the form of a postbox between two arches of the bridge, which appears to be a folly. 'BIO' at the centre of the bridge marks the border between Berkshire and Oxfordshire, formerly that between Wessex and Mercia. Binfield Heath Non-conformist chapel ❸ was built of Bath stone in the Gothic Revival style in 1835, but it was closed on the two occasions we passed. (There is, however, a public toilet here, which was open.) Shiplake church ❹, dedicated to St Peter

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: 7 miles.

TIME: 4 hours.

MAP: OS Landranger 179 (Reading & Windsor) or OS Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West).

START POINT: Shiplake station.

END POINT: Shiplake station.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Train from Paddington; change at Twyford for Henley branch line. Free parking at Shiplake station.

SWIMMING: In the Thames between Shiplake and Sonning.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Sonning Bridge, Binfield Heath church, Shiplake Copse, Shiplake church.

REFRESHMENTS: The Flowing Spring pub near Dunsden (RG4 9RB tel 0118 969 9878); The Plowden Arms, Shiplake (RG9 4BX, tel 0118 940 2794); The Baskerville, Lower Shiplake (RG9 3NY, tel 0118 940 3332).

WEEKEND SUGGESTION: Combine with walk 13, Marlow Circulars (see this for details).



and St Paul, was also locked when we visited. It contains French 15th-century stained glass but was much restored in 1869 – its main claim to fame is that the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson married Emily Sellwood here in 1850.

Shiplake Copse is noted for bluebells in spring. In August red kites, swallows and house martins wheeled overhead; Peacock, Speckled Wood, Small Whites and even a Brimstone butterfly fluttered amongst the flowers, while brown Hawker dragonflies and pretty blue damselflies skimmed over the water. The wild flowers, beginning to fade, still made a spectacular display bordering the Thames Path: greater common willow herb, Himalayan balsam, purple looestribe, meadowsweet, hedge cranesbill, dock, angelica and marsh fleawort.



DIRECTIONS

1 STATION TO RIVER

Turn left from Shiplake station then left into Mill Road – there is no pavement. Continue past Lashbrook Mead (on the left). Continue on the road ahead (note Thames Cottage, Baskerville Lodge, Appletree Cottage). Turn left at Lashbrook House, signed for the Thames Path (TP), right over the bridge and through two kissing gates to a small road. Turn right here (TP sign) and soon left (signed FP to Shiplake Lock and road sign TP to Sonning), through a kissing gate (right) to a meadow and path.

Arrive at the River Thames and note the weir after a few yards. Pass through another kissing gate. This is the first swimming spot. Continue over a wooden bridge, which can be muddy. Arrive at Shiplake College Rowing Club, another possible swimming place, and observe the beautiful flow of the River Thames.

1 mile

2 THE THAMES PATH

Follow the river for about two miles to Sonning Bridge.

3 miles

3 LEAVING THE RIVER

Walk up to the road and turn right along the pavement to reach the French Horn Hotel, a very smart country hotel with restaurant and beautiful gardens. There is a lovely picnic spot with a bench opposite the hotel at the river's edge beside a car park. Leaving the river, take a walled tarmac path past Furleigh Cottages. Turn left at a small road, passing an ancient brick and timber barn (on your left). Continue past The Homestead, ignoring a sign to Reading Sailing Club. Pass Dunsden Lodge, through a gate to a busy



DIRECTIONS

road. Cross this road (B478) into Pool Spring Lane opposite.

3.25 miles

4 TO BINFIELD HEATH

At the 'No entry' sign at the beginning of the road go through a gate on the right onto a footpath with allotments on your right. Continue parallel to the road through two fields and into a third, from which you turn left to rejoin the road. Turn right onto the road and note The Flowing Spring pub on your left. The pub has a casual and relaxed atmosphere with a garden, benches and homemade food (including gluten-free and dairy-free). At the junction with another busy road (A4155), cross and go up steps to a permissive path. Turn right into a field with a hedge on your right, then take steps down to a fence (FP sign on fence). Turn left, then follow the blue arrow uphill along a fenced bridleway, with lovely views. At a crossing track (red brick Bints Farm is visible to the left), keep straight on along a slightly sunken path to reach the road ahead opposite Dragon Cottage. You have arrived at Binfield Heath.

4.5 miles

5 SHIPLAKE COPSE AND SHIPLAKE CHURCH

Turn right and pass Binfield Heath church. Follow the road past a letterbox (on the right) and turn right into a field (FP signed Shiplake 1 ½ miles). Turn right along two fields – there are open views across the Thames Valley to Berkshire. In the far corner of the second field,

bear right a few paces over a stile to enter Shiplake Copse and walk down through woodland. On emerging, follow a yellow arrow guiding left to the next field. There is a lovely view as you follow the path right. Keep left to another field defined at a marked stile. (If in doubt, follow the general direction.) Cross a field to a white cottage. Turn right at the road (Plough Lane) and continue to the main road (A4155), with the Plowden Arms on your right. Cross and go up Church Lane opposite, signed to Shiplake church.

6 miles

6 BACK ALONG THE RIVER

Leave the church by the front (south) gate and take the path downhill (signed public bridleway). Continue downhill and turn left at a junction. You return to the river and Shiplake College boat yard. Turn left and retrace your steps, following the Thames Path sign. At a gate by the bridge turn left then turn right at the road, past a 'Restricted byway only' sign. Turn left at the TP sign, over the bridge, right onto the lane, and back to the station.

7 miles

Olga Way, Liz Valentine.

