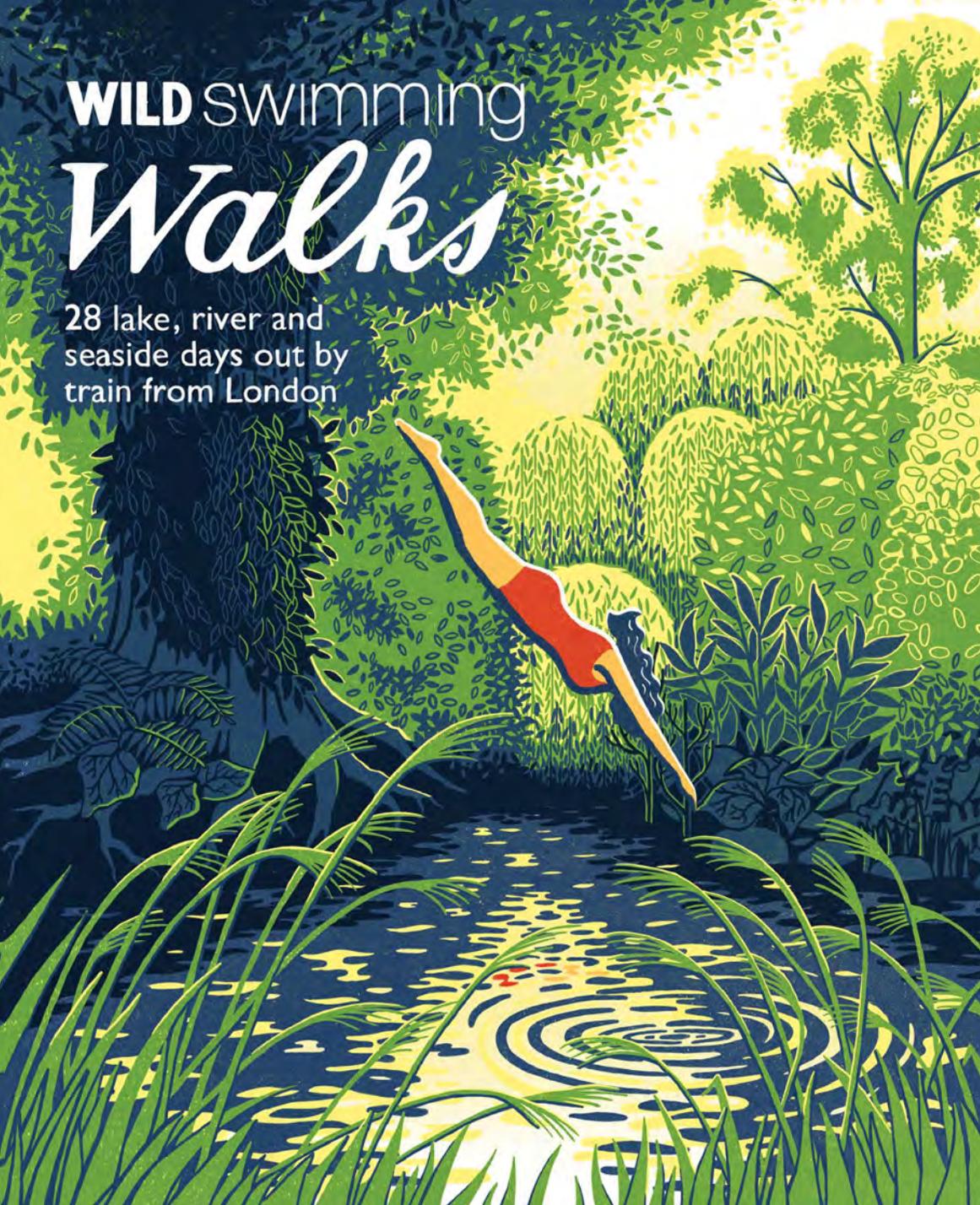


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The Kenwood Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath has been a women's swimming pond since 1926. World famous for its history and idyllic setting, it has become a magnet for London residents and visitors alike. Margaret Dickinson (editor) is a year-round wild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



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Walk 17

A WALK AROUND PORT MEADOW, OXFORD

A gentle stroll around the historic water meadows that inspired *Alice in Wonderland*, and back along the Thames Path to Oxford.

This walk, on a lovely May morning, is a paradise of wild flowers, bird life and history. The path out of town runs along the Oxford Canal, lined with narrowboats, and offers a view of the Italianate square tower of St Barnabas church. It calls to mind John Betjeman's *Myfanwy at Oxford* with the line 'Tubular bells of tall St Barnabas'.

Port Meadow, grazed by cows and horses for 1,000 years and mentioned in the Domesday Book, is a lovely expanse of land running beside the Thames, flooded when the river is high and blazing with buttercups and white hawthorn blossom in the late spring. The grazing rights now belong to the commoners of Wolvercote, the charming little village at the north end of the Meadow. This is the setting and inspiration for the opening lines of *Alice in Wonderland* when Alice was 'beginning to get very tired of sitting with her sister on the bank' and the closing lines where Alice sees 'an ancient city and a quiet river winding near it along the plain'.

Beside the meadow is a nature park, created several decades ago by Oxford City on the site of a vast rubbish dump. On a recent visit a young red kite tried to hover, unsuccessfully, and a skylark rose from the grass.

Wolvercote is home to several good pubs, and a bridge takes the walker over the Thames to head back into town along the Thames Path, past the site of Godstow Abbey 4. Rosamund Clifford, a famous beauty (known as Fair Rosamund) and mistress of Henry II, was buried there when she died circa 1176. The nuns of Godstow seem frequently to have got up to mischief with the young men of Oxford – how many students must have undertaken the walk out to Godstow in the abbey's medieval heyday!

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: 6 miles.

TIME: 3 hours.

MAP: OS Landranger 164 (Oxford); OS Explorer 180 (Oxford).

START POINT: Oxford Station. Alternatively, the bus station at Gloucester Green, about a quarter of a mile east of the railway station.

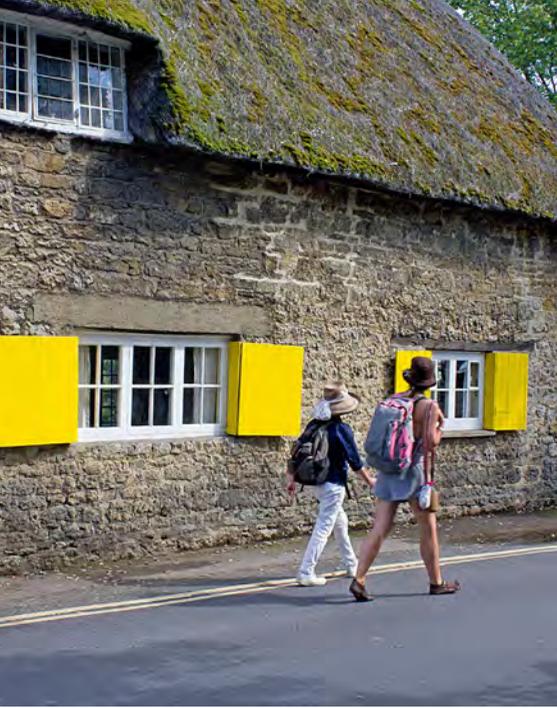
END POINT: Oxford Station, or Wolvercote and return to central Oxford by bus.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Train from Paddington; Oxford Tube, a fast coach service from Victoria Coach Station.

SWIMMING: River Thames.

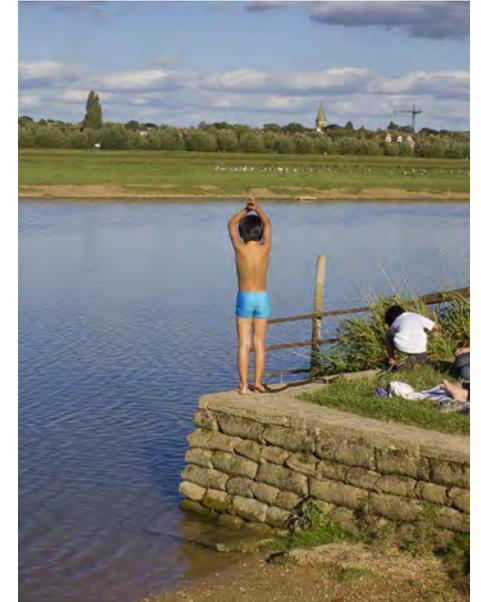
PLACES OF INTEREST: Ruin of Godstow Abbey, Wolvercote.

REFRESHMENTS: The Anchor (OX2 6TT, tel 01865 510282) and The Trout (OX2 8PN, tel 01865 510930) at Wolvercote; The Perch (OX2 0NG, tel 01865 728891) and countless eateries in Oxford.



Along the river there are lots of wonderful bathing spots, with a gently shelving grassy shore, although we found little cover to change behind, save a few clumps of hawthorn and bramble. The Thames here is relatively clean and shallow at the edges.

Iris Murdoch, who was a big outdoor swimmer, wrote in a piece in the *New York Review of Books* in March 1993: 'On hot days in the Oxford summer, my husband and I usually manage to slip into the Thames a mile or two above Oxford, where the hay in the water meadows is still owned and cut on the medieval strip system. The art is to draw no attention to oneself but to cruise quietly by the reeds like a water rat: seeing and unseen from that angle, one can hear the sedge warblers' mysterious little melodies, and sometimes a cuckoo flies cuckooing over our heads, or a kingfisher flashes past.' This sounds like a spot just north of Wolvercote, but the drifting method works well in the meadow too.



DIRECTIONS

1 OXFORD CANAL

Turn left immediately on leaving the main entrance of the station and follow signs to the Oxford Canal. Take the green cycle path between the station car park and the Said Business School. The path swings to the right after about 100 metres. Shortly after, turn left down Stable Close, across Rewley Road, and along Rickyard Close to the canal. Turn left along the canal,

crossing the Rewley Road bridge, then turn right along the footpath and over a narrow pedestrian bridge to join the canal. Walk north (left) along the canal path, admiring St Barnabas on the far side the canal on the right. At Bridge 240 (all the canal bridges are numbered) come up to road level, and turn left past the recreation ground (if you want to visit The Anchor, follow Aristotle

Lane eastward). Head east along Navigation Lane and take the continuation along a dirt path over a railway bridge.

1.9 miles

2 PORT MEADOW

Emerge onto a concrete path running north south along Port Meadow. Instead of following it, turn right through the gate into Burgess Field Nature Park and

DIRECTIONS

follow the gritted track. After 0.9 miles it splits: take the left fork through a metal gate over a wooden bridge.

2.8 miles

3 WOLVERCOTE COMMON

You now leave the nature park and are at the part of the meadow known as Wolvercote Common. Ahead is a row of houses: cross the open ground over the low bridge, heading towards the houses at the

right end of the row. If you want to end the walk now, go through the Jubilee Gate onto a road where there is a bus stop for the number 6 bus, which will take you back to central Oxford. However, to continue the walk, turn left across the common, skirting the houses and admiring the views of Cumnor Hill. Aim for a small wooden gate between a car park and a thatched cottage, which will let you out onto the road.

2.9 miles

4 GODSTOW ABBEY

Go along the road, crossing a narrow bridge and passing The Trout. A second bridge takes you to a gate on the left side of the road, which leads to the Thames Path. This is where the path passes the ruins of Godstow Abbey and Godstow Lock. The next mile of riverside offers the best swimming spots – and a turn-off to The Perch inn. This is a long stretch of riverside walk, lovely on a fine day.

4.76 miles

5 FROM BLOSSOM'S BOATYARD

At Blossom's Boatyard, you have a view of an Oxford University planning mistake: graduate housing near the railway called Castle Mill, jutting up over the trees. Turn left over the arched metal bridge, walk another 200 metres along the stream then cross a second metal bridge to the left to return to the main stretch of Port Meadow. The middle of three paths from the bridge heads back to the concrete strip and the entrance to the path by the nature park, which takes you back to the canal.

5.35 miles

6 TO THE STATION

Follow the canal path back to the railway station. There is an M&S and several food shops in the station, for a hungry swimmer to recover before catching the train home.

6 miles

Frances Cairncross

