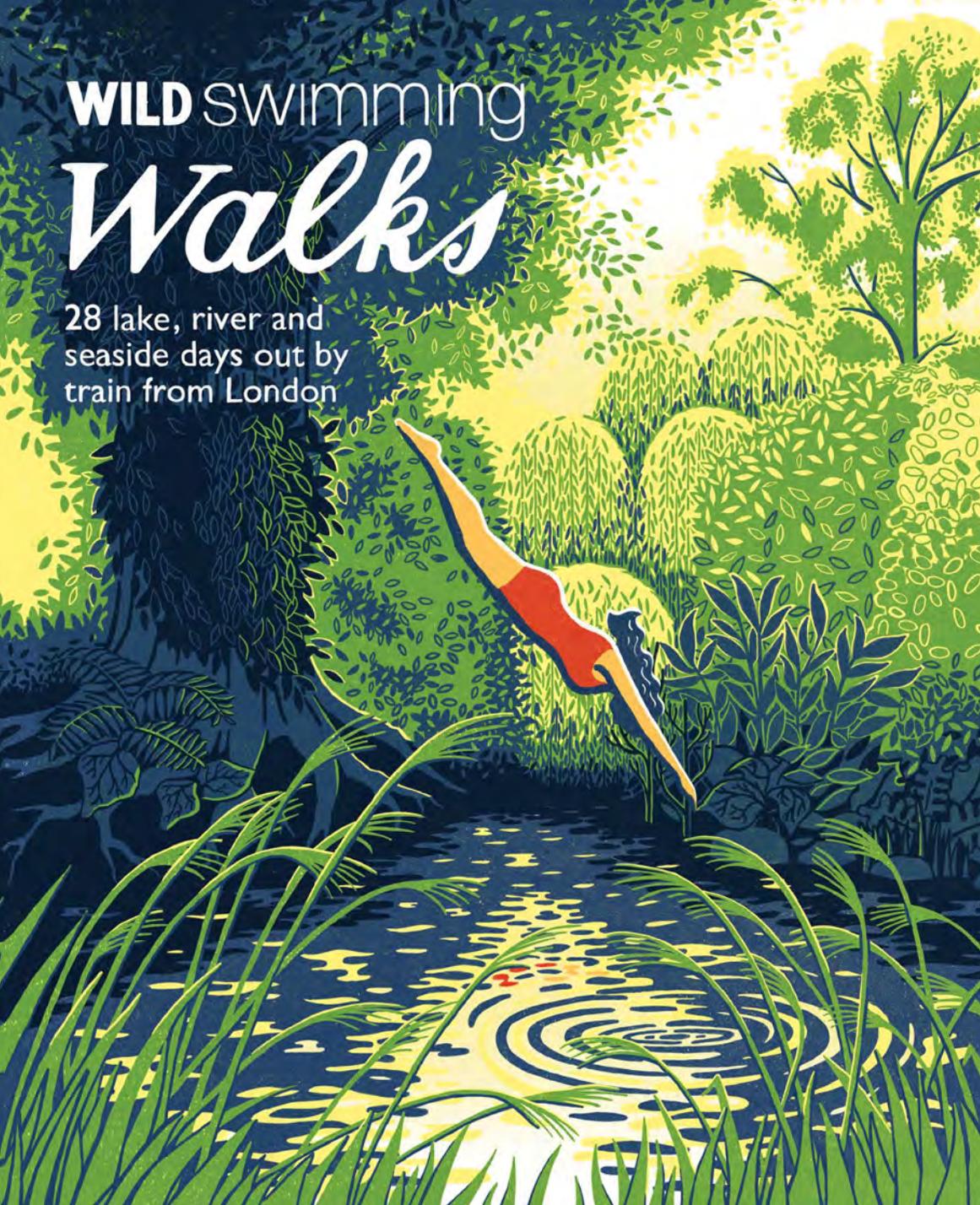


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The Kenwood Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath has been a women's swimming pond since 1926. World famous for its history and idyllic setting, it has become a magnet for London residents and visitors alike. Margaret Dickinson (editor) is a year-round wild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



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Walk 13

MARLOW CIRCULAR, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Two circular walks from Marlow, starting out over wooded hills in the Chilterns then dropping down to the Thames, with several opportunities for river swims.

This walk sets off over wooded hills then drops down to follow the Thames. This is regatta country, homeland of all kinds of leisure boating from competitive rowing to genteel idling. The famous event is Henley Royal Regatta held around the beginning of July, but Marlow and other river towns have less formal regattas with a mixture of serious sport and family fun. This part of the Thames could be where Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows* coined the phrase ‘messing about in boats’ and it is certainly the setting for some of the adventures in the comic novel *Three Men in a Boat*. Sadly for swimmers, the motor launch dominates the waterway now, but you still see skiffs and dinghies and pass places where you can catch the smell of varnish and hear the squeak of rowlocks.

The first opportunity to swim is near Medmenham ⑧, although the flow can be brisk. The lane leading down to the river ends at a slipway where there used to be a ferry. The service stopped running years ago, but the site is marked by a ceramic-tiled memorial, ironically celebrating a Parliamentary battle to make it a public service. This is a good spot for a picnic as the grass is mown and there are a few benches. Access to the water is relatively easy because the bank is reinforced with concrete, the water at the edge is quite shallow and the river bottom firm.

Aston ⑬ has beautiful water meadows with good swimming, down the lane by the Flower Pot Hotel, and Hurley has a popular beach at the far east end of the island, behind the locks. Another good place to swim is near the end of the walk opposite Bisham Abbey ⑫ where the river is calm, deep and still.

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: Marlow Circular 11 miles; Marlow Extended Circular 16 miles.

TIME: Marlow Circular 5 hours; Marlow Extended Circular 7.5 hours.

MAP: OS Landranger 175 (Reading & Windsor); OS Explorer 172 (Chiltern Hills East) and, for Marlow Extended Circular, OS Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West).

START / END POINT: Marlow Station

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Train from Paddington; change at Maidenhead (hourly service at time of writing).

SWIMMING: River Thames.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Marlow's old streets and riverside; World War I training trenches Davenport Wood; Medmenham Iron Age fort and St Peter and St Paul church; Homefield Wood nature reserve; Bisham Abbey

REFRESHMENTS: Marlow for shops, cafes, pubs and restaurants. Extended Circular: The Flower Pot Hotel, Aston (RG9 3DG, tel 01491 574721).

WEEKEND SUGGESTION: Follow Extended Circular as far as Hambleton Weir but, after crossing the Thames, follow well marked Thames Path to stay in Henley. Next day take a train one stop or walk on the Thames Path to Shiplake and do the Shiplake Circular (walk 14). Swiss Farm camping (RG9 2HY, tel 01491 573419). Hurley Riverside Park (SL6 5NN, tel 01628 824493) is a good base for swimming and has tents in place for hire.



Marlow is an old market town, which probably developed because of its bridge over the Thames, a timber version of which existed by 1290. It has some attractive 17th and 18th century houses and famous visitors include Percy Bysshe Shelley, who stayed there with Mary Shelley in 1817 while writing *The Revolt of Islam*. To arrive by train you change in Maidenhead onto a charming branch line nicknamed the Marlow Donkey, probably after the type of engine used in the time of steam trains.

Both versions of the walk begin by heading out of the town into the chalk hills ②-⑤ where buzzards and red kites mew and soar on the thermals. On the way up we saw purple and white violets in March and a mass of poppies in June. Homefield Wood ⑤, a nature reserve, is a good place for orchids and butterflies at the right time of year. You may see deer there and also in the woods dropping down towards Medmenham.

Historic sites include the remains of Bisham Abbey near the end of the walk ⑫, World War I training trenches in Davenport Woods ④ and an Iron Age hill fort above Medmenham, its ramparts forming the steep bank on the left of the lane leading to the village. The church of St Peter and St Paul in Medmenham ⑧ has a Saxon foundation, was rebuilt in the 12th century, expanded in the 15th, and extensively restored in the 19th.

The Marlow Circular passes a weir ⑩ where you can see the only surviving capstan wheel on the Thames. They were used to winch boats upstream, and this one, which has recently been restored, dates from 1300 and was preserved by Viscount Devonport, its 20th century owner. The Extended Circular takes in Hambleden Lock ⑮ where it crosses the river by a long, narrow footbridge with beautiful views of the old mill buildings and the weir.

DIRECTIONS

Both walks

① MARLOW

From Marlow station walk in the direction the train was travelling to a nearby road junction and take Station Road, the second left, passing a pub called The Marlow Donkey on your left. Ignoring side turnings, go past the car park of The Prince of Wales on the left, and a rather grand town house, Marlow Place, on the right. Go on to Marlow High Street where you can see Marlow Bridge away to the left. Cross and go straight on

along Pound Lane, ignoring side turnings, to reach Henley Road (the A4155).

1.25 miles

② INTO THE HILLS

Cross Henley Road and take a small turning opposite (almost straight on but slightly to the left) and after 50 metres turn onto a waymarked FP on the right. Follow it between fences across a field heading slightly uphill to a wood. Pass a building on the left and continue alongside a plantation of young deciduous trees.

③ When you reach Davenport Wood, a beautiful beech wood, follow waymarks for the Shakespeare Way and later also the Chiltern Way. Take care as there are a lot of side paths. Continue to a narrow road.

2.5 miles

④ THROUGH THE WOODS

If you followed the correct path you will see on the other side a sign about WWI training trenches. If not, walk up or down to find the sign, then cross and go roughly straight on, taking care again as

there are several tracks. A white sign on a tree indicates the direction along a rather faint path, which heads steeply downhill through the wood to a field, where it starts to go gently uphill and becomes a narrow fenced path beside a field. Go over a stile and turn left to cross the valley, ignoring a cross path, and continue until you reach a small road.

3.25 miles

5 HOMEFIELD WOOD

Turn right onto the road and very soon turn left onto a signed path through Forestry Commission Homefield Wood, a nature reserve. Continue in a slight valley with trees each side. Turn left at the first waymarked cross path, marked with white arrows, leaving the Chiltern Way. Follow the path up a wooded bank, steep in places. At the top leave the woodland and join a track passing a house (Flint Cottage) on the right to reach a small road. Turn right and very soon turn left onto a marked FP with a stile.

4.75 miles

6 DOWN TO THE VALLEY

Go over the stile and keep to the left-hand side of the field. On reaching a kissing gate, join a crossing path, bearing right towards farm buildings. Pass through a kissing gate in a fence, to the left of the farm buildings, and continue through two stiles in quick succession to the farm drive. Continue through the farm buildings, passing the farmhouse on the right. Go through a gate on the right to cross a very large field. The path is faint but a few clues suggest its route – the posts of a former gate and a small

single post. The best guide is a line of telegraph wires. Pass underneath and walk parallel to them, keeping them well to your right heading towards a gate on the far side.

7 Go over a waymarked stile to the left of the gate. The path is supposed to cut across the corner of the next field bearing left, but if you cannot see it go round the edge turning left after the stile, then right at the corner, to follow the field edge to a waymarked stile leading onto a quiet road, Bockmer Lane.

6 miles

8 MEDMENHAM AND THE RIVERSIDE

Turn right on the road and follow it down under beautiful beech trees for about half a mile to Medmenham on the main A4155 with a former pub (The Dog & Badger, now closed) on the right and a church opposite. Cross the main road and take the quiet road on the left of the church to reach the river at an abandoned ferry crossing. This is a good place to swim and to picnic and is where the Extended Circular diverges.

7 miles

Marlow Circular

9 FROM MEDMENHAM

Retrace your steps towards Medmenham and, just before a little bridge, turn right onto a signed path, narrow and partly fenced. Follow it through kissing gates, with a stream on the left and houses on the right, to a meadow where you bear half right and pass through more kissing gates to a lodge on the far side. Go through the lodge gate and turn left onto a track to the main road.

7.5 miles

10 HURLEY WEIR AND HARLEYFORD

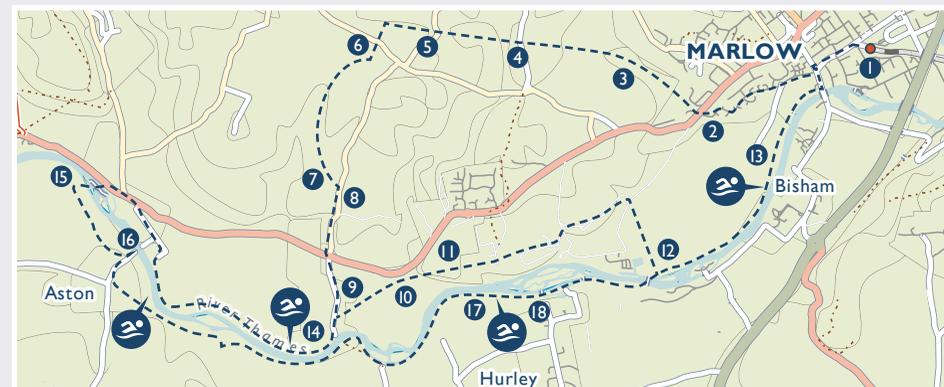
Turn right onto the road and almost at once take a track off to the right, which passes through a wood then runs parallel to the Thames, but fenced off from it. Listen and look out for kingfishers here. There are chalk cliffs on the left. Soon you pass Hurley Weir capstan wheel.

11 The path leaves the river, rises and passes through a tunnel. At a path junction with a gate on the right, bear sharp right keeping the fence on your right. Enter Harleyford Golf Course (on your left). Continue, past Home Farm on the right, to the club house. Follow the FP signs, cross a driveway and take a FP downhill, cross another drive and you soon reach a meadow, across which you can see the river below on your right. You may also glimpse Harleyford Manor behind you to the right. Continue to a junction at East Lodge, where you take a lane to the right to pass Lower Grounds Farm with an outbuilding on saddle stones, which were originally used as supporting bases for granaries, hayricks, and game larders. This brings you back to the river where you join the route of the Extended Circular.

9 miles

12 TO BISHAM ABBEY

Turn left to follow the river path. After 5 or 10 minutes you will see buildings on the far side of the river which include the remains of Bisham Abbey. Around here there are possible entry points for another swim. Further down there is a good view of Bisham church on the far bank.



13 MARLOW

Follow the path into Marlow. At Marlow Bridge turn off the river path, go up to the bridge, turn left and shortly turn right onto Station Road to return to the station.

11 miles

Marlow Extended Circular

14 FROM MEDMENHAM RIVERSIDE

Go upstream along the Thames Path, keeping close to the river – there are more possible places to swim here. Still beside the river, go through a wooden gate into a field. From here there is no access to the river. Follow the edge of the field keeping the hedge on your left and go through a metal kissing gate to join a narrow, tarmac track. When the track bends right to reach a main road at Mill End, take a small path straight on to a driveway and turn right to the road. Turn left along the road to reach a FP on the left to Hambleton Weir.

9 miles

15 HAMBLEDEN WEIR

Cross the river by a long bridge and turn left downstream on a metalled track that soon veers away from the river. Follow it slightly uphill looking for a FP to the left that takes you onto a narrow road at the hamlet of Aston. (Alternatively, if you want to swim leave the metalled path to stay beside the river then walk up the road to Aston.)

9.5 miles

16 CULHAM COURT

Turn right up the road to pass The Flower Pot Hotel on your right then turn left on a waymarked FP (the Thames Path) just before the drive to Culham Court. Pass the walled grounds to join a track leading past another house on your right, then join a narrow road and pass a house on the left. Take a signed FP left through an iron wicket gate, down to the river and along the bank through a pleasant meadow. A second swim is tempting, but access to the river is impeded first by undergrowth and then by moored boats. At Medmenham Ferry,

opposite the earlier swimming place, swimming is possible.

17 A little further down the river there is a good view of Danesfield House standing on a chalk cliff on the far bank. Continue to Hurley Riverside Park, a caravan and chalet park where there is an open grassy area by the river and another swimming opportunity.

12.75 miles

18 HURLEY

Near Hurley there is a complex set of weirs where the river splits into different channels around islands. The path crosses one channel, crosses back again, passes a huge marina, enters a wood then crosses the river onto the north bank, where there is another weir and moored boats. Just after the weir where a path joins from the left, you rejoin the Marlow Circular.

14 miles

Then follow Marlow Circular, steps 12 & 13, for a total distance of 16 miles.

Margaret Dickinson, Clarissa Dorer, Liz Valentine.