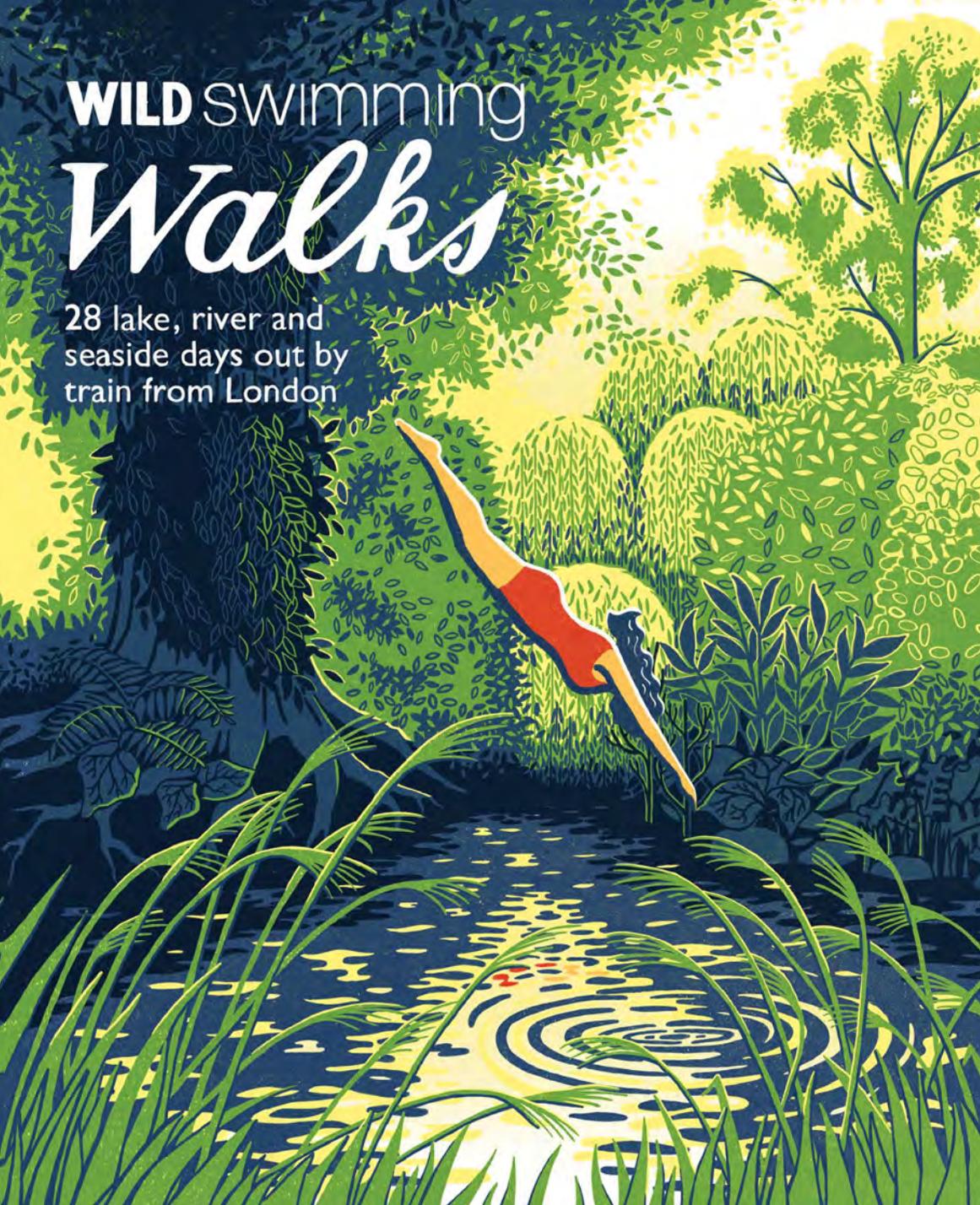


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The Kenwood Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath has been a women's swimming pond since 1926. World famous for its history and idyllic setting, it has become a magnet for London residents and visitors alike. Margaret Dickinson (editor) is a year-round wild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



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Walk 19

BENFLEET AND LEIGH-ON-SEA, ESSEX

This walk takes in a tidal creek, a ridge-top castle and a seafood extravaganza in a lively fishing village, plus swims in the Thames Estuary.

This walk picks its way fastidiously through the heavily industrialised Thames Estuary. Despite never being far from a power station or oil refinery, the route benefits from the particular peace that comes from tidal waters, whether you're watching moored boats gently bobbing in the current, or the uncanny transformation when water turns to mud and boats are stranded at unexpected angles. The return leg of the walk takes you back centuries in your imagination, visiting the remains of a castle on a stretch of untouched hillside.

The swim is dependent on the tide and the variants of the main route are suggested not only for different lengths, but to help you plan your arrival at Leigh beach when the tide is right, preferably not more than two hours before or after high tide.

From Benfleet station you find in front of you Benfleet Creek (Hadleigh Ray on some maps), a tidal stream connecting to the Thames. Our walk takes you along the creek, passing many boats, some of them houseboats. The path follows the top of a high dyke created to prevent flooding. The salt marsh below it features assorted flotsam and jetsam; we saw small, dried-up crabs. A little way along, you could divert across Two Tree Island, now a nature reserve and an important stopping-off point for migrating birds.

The creek opens to the Thames Estuary at Leigh-on-Sea. You walk past some large cockle sheds, traditional home of the cockle trade, and the working dock ③. Old Leigh is a single street lined with fishermen's cottages, pubs, restaurants, shellfish stands and a gallery or two. It is picturesque but also still a working fishing port. This, and the throngs of people out enjoying themselves, makes the atmosphere special. It feels far from London but, in an odd way,

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: 8.25 miles for Benfleet Circular (options of 4, 5 and 5.25 miles).

TIME: 5 hours (2, 3 and 3.5 hours for options).

MAP: OS Landranger 178 (The Thames Estuary); OS Explorer 175 (Southend-on-Sea & Basildon).

START POINT: Benfleet Station (Leigh Station for optional route).

END POINT: Benfleet Station (Leigh or Chalkwell Station for optional route).

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Train from Fenchurch Street, London.

SWIMMING: In the Thames Estuary at Leigh-on-Sea.

PLACES OF INTEREST: The old cockle sheds and two excellent fish and seafood stalls (perhaps consider bringing a cool box), art gallery, restored fisherman's cottage in the heritage centre, all in Leigh-on-Sea; ruins of medieval Hadleigh Castle; views of Olympic mountain biking track.

REFRESHMENTS: The Crooked Billet (SS9 2EP, tel 01702 480289) and The Peterboat (SS9 2EN, tel 01702 475666) plus bars, cafés and seafood stalls in Leigh-on-Sea; Salvation Army Tea Room at Hadleigh Farm (SS7 2AP, tel 01702 426268).



part of it – a slice of old East End culture, cockles, whelks and all, transported to the seaside.

At the end of this so-called High Street – the real high street is up the hill and called the Broadway – is the children's beach. For a conventional swim, time your arrival close to high tide so you can swim from the sand. We swam about three hours after high tide and had to wade out a long way, but the mud underfoot was firm and not unpleasant. Some lads were jumping off the dock into deep water. Low tide has its own attractions. We stayed for a while and the scene when the tide had retreated was alone worth the walk.

All that was left of the sea was a narrow channel, with mud flats and eelgrass beds stretching out into the estuary. Children and teenagers were swimming in the waist-deep channel or sliding on their bellies down mud slopes into the water. The mud flats have deep channels carved within them and there was something primeval in seeing mud-covered children disappearing and reappearing, apparently from the mud. If you are tempted to try a bit of mud larking yourself, there are showers at the sea end of the toilets so you can restore a somewhat civilised appearance before leaving the beach.

The return route to Benfleet is via Hadleigh Castle. The path starts next to Leigh-on-Sea station and very quickly you are in fields. As you

start to climb, you get a different perspective on the Thames Estuary, with refineries and power stations appearing and the occasional large ship, if you're lucky. The walk is fairly flat until you come to a gate in the hedge and an idyllic grass path leads up towards the castle ⑥. For a moment modern life disappears – you might catch a glimpse of a knight sleeping under one of the little oak trees. As you walk up the grassy ridge the two end towers of the castle come into view, one leaning in a Pisa-esque fashion. A last scramble and you are within the walls of the castle, which was enlarged by Edward III to protect the estuary from attack by France. At that time, before the building of flood defences, the water would have lapped the ridge the castle stands on.

This is a fantastic castle to explore: a single information board, walls you can climb, and a sign stating that the opening hours are 'Any reasonable time'. We're still puzzling over what would be an unreasonable time...

Next to the castle is the site of the 2012 Olympic mountain biking event. The track is due to open for public use in 2015. The castle tea room and surrounding farmland is owned, surprisingly, by the Salvation Army. Originally the Army ran the site as a 'colony' where destitute men from London were sent to do character-building work before being sent home or to the real colonies to work. The farm later became an establishment for 'juvenile delinquents' before making a final transformation into today's tea room and rare breeds farm, which are run as training projects for people with 'barriers to employment'. The café is a bit gloomy and institutional inside but the tables on the terrace have a lovely view of the farm and the distant estuary. From the castle it's a peaceful walk down the hill and through fields back to Benfleet.



1 BENFLEET

Leave the station through the exit to the right by the ticket office. Benfleet Creek is on the other side of the road. Don't cross the road but turn left on the road and follow it to the corner where the road turns right to cross the creek. Take the path ahead passing the flood barrier on your right. Pass Benfleet Moorings. Follow the path along the dyke, with the creek on your right.

2 miles

2 BENFLEET CREEK

Where Benfleet Creek divides, the path tracks the smaller of the two branches, north of Two Tree Island. Cross a road and then a path. Take the lower of two paths, between the bank and the water. (For Two Tree Island turn right on the road and follow footpath signs once on the island.)

3.15 miles

3 INTO LEIGH-ON-SEA

The path joins a road, passing Leigh-on-Sea station on the left, and curves round Leigh Marina. Follow the road past the green cockle

sheds. Walk along High Street until you come to the sandy beach and the swim spot. Alternatively, turn right after Osborne's and walk along the sea front until you have to return to the High Street.

3.75 miles

4 OUT OF LEIGH-ON-SEA

To see more of Leigh-on-Sea, from the beach take the footbridge over the railway line, turn right up the hill, then left up Church Hill. Retrace your steps to the station. To continue our walk back to Benfleet, pass the station on the north side and walk past a taxi rank and through a car park. At the end of the car park, walk across the grass to pick up the marked path, along Castle Drive, on the far side. Walk to the end of the tarmac.

4.75 miles

5 TO HADLEIGH CASTLE

Take the footpath that heads off to the right round the field. Follow the path as it winds gently up then gently down until you reach a gate on your right in the hedge. Go through and up the grassy path. At

the top, go through the green kissing gate and turn left to climb up to the two towers of the castle.

5.75 miles

6 HADLEIGH COUNTRY PARK

Leave the castle by the gate at the back. Follow the stony track ahead if you want to visit the tea room and farm. Otherwise, turn left through the gate and follow the track down the hill towards the Thames. Just before the bottom there is a grass path going diagonally right to a kissing gate. This leads to the gravel track/cycle path. After a while cross a cattle grid into Hadleigh Castle Country Park. Before a second grid leave the cycle path and walk straight on, taking the grassy path across the field then running along the hedge on your right.

(For the Leigh Circular, the path crossing the railway branches off south just after the first cattle grid.)
7 miles

7 BACK TO BENFLEET

The path gradually converges on the railway line and you will begin



to see landmarks you passed at the start of your walk. Follow the bridleway, which is signed, until it narrows to a path between two high hedges, then a wider gravel path. Come out in Station Road with a view of the estuary. Turn left and walk down to Benfleet Station.

8.25 miles

Route options

Benfleet to Leigh (4 miles): Follow step 1 then after about 1.5 miles, before the creek divides, look for a

track on the left leading to a gate to a level crossing over the railway. Cross the railway and walk to a T-junction where you turn right. Refer to steps 5 and 6, but in reverse, to guide you to Hadleigh Castle and then Leigh-on-Sea, where you can catch the train home.

Benfleet to Chalkwell (5.25 miles): As above, but continue walking from Leigh-on-Sea between the sea and the railway to Chalkwell, the next station along the line.
Leigh Circular (5 miles): Stay on the

train to Leigh-on-Sea station. Follow directions from step 4 to 6, but after the first cattle grid look for the path on the left crossing the railway (the same path as for Benfleet to Leigh, above, but from the other direction). Take this and continue to the embankment by the creek then turn left to return to Leigh along the creek, following steps 2 and 3.

Ros Bayley, Maggie Jennings, Clarissa Dörner.