

Islington u3a Longer Walks Group

Walk Title	Aldermaston to Woolhampton via Frilsham	Walk No.	570
Area	Berkshire	Type	Linear
Date	Wednesday, 27 th May 2026		
Distance	14.4 miles (23.2km)		
Timing	5.5 hours walking time + travel + lunch stop. Allow 9 hours in total. Therefore, expect to be back in Islington by 7pm.		
Meeting up & travel	<p>Meet in the main concourse, Paddington train station by 9:20am to take the 09.32am Cheltenham Spa train, change at Reading (09.55/10.12, Newbury Train, usually departing from Platform 2), arriving Aldermaston at 10.25.</p> <p>Return trains from Woolhampton (Midgham Station): xx.23 (change Reading).</p> <p>Buy a return ticket to Midgham (boundary station West Drayton) £14.25 with SRC.</p>		
Route	<p>This walk explores a surprisingly quiet part of the commuter area that is West Berkshire, less than an hour from Central London. It is a mildly undulating landscape with some fine views over unspoilt countryside - the West Berkshire Downs, part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and consisting of a mix of ancient woodlands, commons, fields and pretty villages with pleasant, historical pubs.</p> <p>The route passes through the chalk stream river valleys of the Kennet, the Bourne and the Pang, where you'll also find some evidence of traditional water meadows.</p> <p>A long section of the walk leads through the elevated Bucklebury Common, one of the largest commons in Southern England. In the main this consists of a variety of woods, but you'll also walk through one of Berkshire's largest heathlands and see part of a famous Avenue of Oaks.</p> <p>At the end we walk through the landscaped Midgham Park.</p>		
Lunch	The Pot Kiln Frilsham, Yattendon, RG18 0XX https://thepotkiln.co.uk/ (01635 201366)		
Dropping out	By taxi from the lunch stop to Midgham station		
Suitability	<p>This is a relatively long walk, in rolling (rather than hilly) countryside. 2-3 stiles and maybe 10% road walking.</p> <p>Wear comfortable walking shoes/boots and bring poles if you use them. Check the weather forecast for temperature and likelihood of rain and wear or bring an extra layer or waterproofs accordingly.</p> <p>Members should advise the Walk Leader of their 'ICE' (in case of emergency) if they have any health concerns.</p>		
Facilities	There are toilets on the trains and at the pub in the middle.		
Walk source	Saturday Walkers Club https://www.walkingclub.org.uk/walk/aldermaston-to-woolhampton-via-frilsham		
Maps	OS Explorer: 159 (Reading, Wokingham & Pangbourne) & 158 (Newbury & Hungerford)		

	OS Landranger: 174 (Newbury & Wantage) & 175 (Reading & Windsor)
Leader & contact details	<p><u>Walk Leader</u>: Sara Hayes</p> <p><u>Beforehand</u> sarahayes100@gmail.com</p> <p><u>On the day</u> 07791 894442</p>
Interesting facts	<p>St. Mary's, Beenham Valence/Beenham Valence has never been part of the village name, but – reputedly meaning ‘on the spur of a hill’ – clearly refers to the position of the church itself. Beenham derives from Saxon ‘Beena’s Hamme’, ie ‘Benna’s Meadow’. The current church building is from 1859, after several earlier buildings burnt down (the original 12th century one did so in 1794 after lightning struck). Its peal of six bells gave name to the local pub.</p> <p>River Bourne/River Pang The River Pang is a small chalk stream river, and a tributary of the River Thames. It runs for approximately 23 km (14 mi) from its source near the village of Compton. To the east of Bradfield, the Pang is joined by the River Bourne, which has its source near the village of Chapel Row, eventually entering the Thames in Pangbourne. Rivalling theories contend that – either – the river’s name is a backformation from the villages’ name, or that – in contrast – the village is named after the river. The river and its water voles are thought to have inspired Kenneth Grahame's character Ratty and his book <i>The Wind in the Willows</i>.</p> <p>Bucklebury Common/Estate Bucklebury Common is an elevated common consisting of woodland with a few relatively small clearings, it encircles the settled localities of Upper Bucklebury and Chapel Row and is one of the largest commons in Southern England covering 350 hectares (860 acres). It includes the famous mile-long Avenue of Oaks at Chapel Row, ancient woodland at Holly Wood and one of the largest areas of heathland in Berkshire. The Avenue of Oaks is perhaps the most celebrated area of Bucklebury Common. The inner row of Oaks was planted to celebrate Queen Elizabeth I’s visit to Bucklebury and the outer row was planted to commemorate Wellington’s victory at Waterloo in 1815. New trees have been planted over the years. Since the Enclosure Act the area is privately owned by the Bucklebury Manor estate, the oldest landed Estate in Berkshire and one of the oldest Estates in the country, but has public access on a network of public rights.</p> <p>Water Meadows along Chalk Rivers Strictly speaking, not every level grassland beside a river is a ‘water meadow’. Water meadows were the high point of late medieval agricultural engineering. The idea was imported from Holland in the 16th Century as so many agricultural advances have been. It consisted of an interlocking system of small channels. One series was linked to a head leat which carried water from a point higher up the river. Water in these channels flowed along the crests of low ridges built across the field. From them the water overflowed down the sides of the ridges into the second series of ditches that took it back to a lower-level channel where it continued down the valley. This irrigation did not aim to flood the ground, but to keep it continuously damp. Chalk water contains calcium and other nutrients. It slowed as it passed through the stems of the grass and deposited some of its load thus fertilising the field. Because the spring water in the river was likely to be warmer than late winter air it also warmed the grass, causing an early growth of</p>

grass. In-lamb ewes were fed on the grass to give them a boost before lambing. They dunged the grass which then produced a heavy crop of hay. Working water meadows have now largely disappeared.

Brockhurst & Marlston House Schools Marlston House is a listed country house prep school set in 24 hectares of beautiful undulating gardens and parkland. Brockhurst (boys) and Marlston House (girls) are independent and boarding twin schools, sharing the same estate.

River Kennet The Kennet is 72 km (45 mi) long, the largest Thames tributary and one of England's most important chalk streams. It has an extensive range of rare plants and animals that are unique to chalk watercourses. One of the sources is Swallowhead Spring near Silbury Hill in Wiltshire, the other is a collection of tributaries north of Avebury near the rural settlements of Uffcott and Broad Hinton which join up with the waters from Swallowhead Springs near West Kennett Long Barrow. It flows into the Thames at Reading.

North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

(AONB) The North Wessex Downs AONB is located in the counties of West Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. The name North Wessex Downs is not a traditional one, the area covered being better known by various overlapping local names, including the Berkshire Downs, the North Hampshire Downs, the White Horse Hills, the Lambourn Downs, the Marlborough Downs, the Vale of Pewsey and Savernake Forest.

The AONB covers an area of some 1,730 km² (670 sq mi). It takes the form of a horse shoe on its side, with the open end facing east, surrounding the town of Newbury and the River Kennet watershed. The northern arm reaches as far east as the suburbs of Reading in mid-Berkshire, whilst the southern arm similarly reaches Basingstoke in northern Hampshire. The western extreme of the AONB reaches as far as Devizes. The highest points are the 297m summit of Walbury Hill, situated southwest of Hungerford in West Berkshire (and the highest point in southern England east of the Mendip Hills), and the Milk Hill – Tan Hill plateau northeast of Devizes in central Wiltshire, at 295m above sea level. At its northeast extreme, the North Wessex Downs AONB faces across the Goring Gap to the Chilterns AONB on the other side of the River Thames.

Beyond the town of Marlborough, the downs (now called the Marlborough Downs) sweep in a semicircle to the south around the headwaters of the River Kennet, with the Vale of Pewsey cutting through these downs carrying the headwaters of the Hampshire River Avon. The downland is part of the Southern England Chalk Formation which runs from Dorset in the west to Kent in the east and also includes the Dorset Downs, Purbeck Hills, Cranborne Chase, Wiltshire Downs, Salisbury Plain, the Isle of Wight, Chiltern Hills and the North and South Downs. Geologically, its chalk downs, dry valleys and sarsen outcrops are of note, the last in the area around Marlborough providing material for many of the Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in the area such as Avebury Henge.

Horse racing forms a major industry in the area, largely because of the good quality turf that comes with the chalk underlay, and much of the upland area is made over to gallops and other training areas.

St. Matthew's, Midgham St Matthew's church was erected in 1869 in a tall 13th century style, on a new site. The old church was in the

grounds of the former Midgham House and was pulled down when the present church was built. The site of the old chapel is now marked by an overgrown walled graveyard. From the Bath Road (A4) in the valley St. Matthew's appears to lie on the hill on its own. It is made of flint with spires.

The Kennet and Avon Canal The Kennet and Avon Canal is 140 km (87 mi) long and is made of two lengths of navigable river (Avon and Kennet) linked by a canal (between Bath and Newbury). It links the Bristol Channel to the Thames. In the area covered by this walk therefore, the canal itself is not technically a canal, but an improved river navigation of the Kennet River. There are many sections that are in fact the natural River Kennet, which are interspersed with man-made locks and canal sections to make the river more navigable.

Midgham Park/House Midgham House is a building which is not listed but which has a double 15th century red-brick former stable block with later additions and is at the top of a landscaped private park.

Woolhampton To the Saxons it was 'Wulflafingatun', and while the ending is the common Saxon suffix '-ton', meaning simply 'settlement', from which the modern word 'town' derives, the rest of the name appears to be its proper Celtic title. It was possibly something like 'Alebhion' meaning 'Ridge Place', referring to the high ground in the parish which stretches alongside the Kennet Valley. The Roman road running from Calleva (Silchester), a major provincial capital, to Corinium (Cirencester), which crossed the Kennet at Thatcham, lies half a mile to the south. Later, that same corridor was to be used for the routes of the Great Bath Road, the Kennet & Avon Canal and the Great Western Railway. The village is served by Midgham railway station. The railway station was originally known as Woolhampton railway station but, according to local legend, was renamed (after the village of Midgham, a couple of kilometres west-northwest) in order to avoid possible confusion with the similarly named Wolverhampton railway station. Because of its location on the Bath road, Woolhampton was well known for its coaching inns. Only one of these survives on the main road, The Angel. Within the civil parish is the Benedictine Douai Abbey.