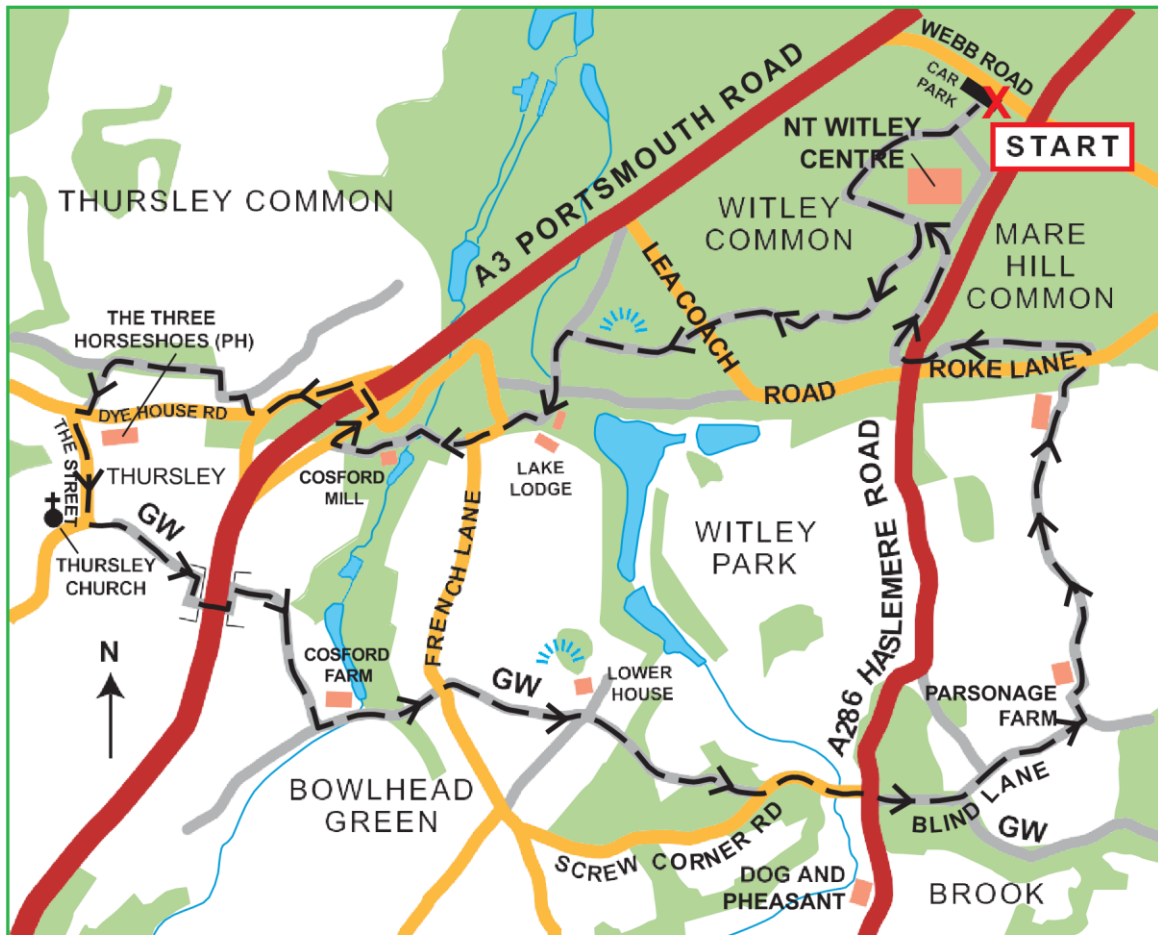





Walk 8

Prehistoric Remains and Protected Heathland

Witley Common, Thursley and The Greensand Way



-  ROADS
-  ROADS
-  FOOTPATHS & TRACKS
-  ROUTE OF WALK
-  WOODED AREAS
-  BUILDINGS
-  RAILWAY LINE
-  VIEWPOINTS

Some of this walk is in the Parish of Thursley, which in ancient times fell within the Saxon Manor of Witley.

Map: O.S. Explorer Maps 133 (Haslemere & Petersfield), 145 (Guildford & Farnham)

Start: National Trust Pay and Display car park, Webb Road, Witley. Parking free for NT members

Grid Ref: SU934408

Distance: 8 miles

Refreshments: The Three Horseshoes, Thursley, or the Dog and Pheasant, Brook

Take care at all times when crossing the busy A286

Directions

Much of Witley Common is being restored to heathland. Young pine and birch scrub has been removed to benefit heathland wildlife. Areas of heather and gorse are starting to return along with rare heathland birds such as Dartford warblers and nightjars. The silver-studded blue butterfly frequents areas of short heather in mid-summer.

From the car park walk back towards the road and turn right at the Witley Learning Centre sign. Follow this main path, passing several wooden posts with animal carvings and pink Heathland Hike (HH) arrows. At a crossroads keep left and continue following the pink HH arrows to a T junction with the NT centre to the left and a Nature Trail sign. Turn right here and continue to follow the pink HH arrows, going left when the path forks.

At a T junction turn left, once more following the pink HH arrows and again when the path bends right and another path forks left. (You will return to this point on the homeward journey). Pass another pink HH arrow and turn left as indicated at the second one. Keep ahead when the path crosses a NT Permissive Bridleway (PB), leaving the pink HH route which goes right here. Keep right when the path forks and reach an open view with a bench. Turn left here, onto the HH route once more, and continue with the view on your right.

From here there are glimpses of views west to Crooksbury Hill. The heath falls away to your right into a boggy area. Flint flakes dating from the Mesolithic period, about 10,000 years old, have been found along this ridge. Britain was still joined to the rest of Europe and this area would have been covered in dense woodland consisting of oak, alder, elm and lime.

Ignore the first path left which soon appears. The path goes downhill, past another pink HH arrow, and just before it bends to the right take a sharp left narrow path into the woods very shortly reaching Lea Coach Road.

This area would have been inhabited during prehistoric times. The forest clearance and farming activities from Neolithic to Bronze ages, (from about 5,000 years ago) impoverished the already poor sandy soil to create patches of peat bog down in the hollow.

Now cross the road, go round the metal gate and, ignoring the footpath to the left, take the track which winds round to a Bronze Age burial mound on the right at a fork in the path. The right fork leads to more burial grounds but take the left fork.

This nature reserve is managed by Amphibian & Reptile Conservation (ARC) Look for sand lizards and snakes especially in summer. The Bronze Age barrows indicate long periods of settlement in this area. The barrows have been excavated to reveal a Bronze Age land surface, bone is not preserved due to the acid soils.

About 250yds further on, opposite the track to the left which goes into the woods, take the very narrow path on the right through the heather up to another sandy track. Cross over onto another narrow path through the heather. This leads to a third sandy track parallel to but higher than the other two. Go left and follow this track to the top of the hill for far reaching views of the Hogs Back, Crooksbury Hill, Thursley Common and, to the south Gibbet Hill, which is just discernible through the trees.

There are earthworks here which have yielded Mesolithic flint implements. From Mesolithic times the hunter gatherers had rudimentary settlements, often along river valleys and in upland areas such as this, from where they would trek long distances on hunting expeditions. Near Frensham a campfire has been found from one of these expeditions with burnt hazelnuts. It is possible that this area was occupied for about 4,500 years, during which time the woodland was cleared, and, by the Bronze Age, the depletion of the poor soil caused the formation of the heathland.

Continue on this track as it winds gently downhill, turning back on itself at one point, until you reach the first narrow crossing path. Turn right to retrace your steps to the first sandy track and continue round the hill. The path goes downhill and as it bends to the right take a narrow path on the left down into a birch thicket. On reaching a T junction turn left on to the track, passing some fine trees (False acacia and Robina pseudoacacio) and a stone wall on your right.

This track runs south along the Witley Parish boundary.

At a junction of paths you will see the stone wall of Witley Park ahead. Continue ahead past the house called Eastlake and at the next house (Lake Lodge) take the bridleway to the right up through the woods.

Witley Park was known as Lea, home of Adam atte Lea, in 1332. In the 18th century John Leech owned the estate and planted many of the coppices seen in the area as well as introducing the partridge. In the 19th century Whittaker Wright made many improvements before Viscount Pirrie bought the estate in the early 20th century. By the time the estate was bought in 1926 by John Leigh it had been renamed Witley Park.

Emerge at the top by the entrance to Heath End. Turn left along the road and shortly take the bridleway off to the right going downhill. At the bottom there is a pond on the right. Continue on the surfaced drive round the mill house.

Cosford Mill, on the left, may date back to the 14th or 15th century when it was called Thursley Mill. In the 18th century the mill was extended and upgraded by the Stillwell family and an iron overshot wheel installed. The mill, like others, closed towards the end of the 19th century and in WW2 the wheel was taken for the war effort.

Follow the drive uphill and when it turns sharply right go straight ahead on the gravel track, past farm buildings on the left. At the footpath sign turn right leaving the track to arrive at the southbound slip road to the A3. Turn right along the slip road and left across the bridge over the A3. Turn left towards Thursley on Old Portsmouth Road and bear right at the junction into Dye House Road. Look for a footpath on the right by a notice board and enter Thursley National Nature Reserve. Turn left on the wide sandy track.

Thursley is one of the largest surviving tracts of a heathland that once covered this part of Surrey.

It contains wet & dry heath, bog, woodland and scrub. It is home to an abundance of wildlife so please keep dogs under control at all times and keep to the tracks to prevent the disturbance of wildlife.

There are views to the right of the Hogs Back. There was a serious fire on the common in July 2006 and it is worth noting the regeneration of the common that has taken place since then.

Ignore the paths to the left beside a house. Continue for some distance and then take a bridleway on the left by a faded blue marker post. Go between houses out to a road. Turn right and pass the pub 'The Three Horseshoes' on the left. At a crossroads, turn left down The Street leading to the Parish Church.

There are several attractive old houses on both sides of The Street. The church is of Saxon origin but was restored in 1860 & 1884. In the churchyard there is a tombstone to commemorate the sailor murdered in 1786 at Hindhead. If you wish to visit the church it is just a few steps past the end of The Street in Highfield Lane. Inside, note the massive 15th century oak framework which supports the central tower and spire.

Where the road bends sharply to the right and becomes Highfield Lane turn left on to a track marked the Greensand Way. For the next 3 miles, until Blind Lane is reached, you are following the Greensand Way (GW) which is well signposted.

The GW is a long distance footpath of 170 miles between Haslemere and Hamstreet in Kent. It runs roughly parallel to the North Downs Way and it follows the ridge of greensand rock which gets its colour from the mineral glauconite.

At the top of the track take the footpath on the left through the gate and go diagonally across the field to another gate. Continue to the road running beside the A3. Turn right and then left under the A3.

This underpass has been constructed as part of the new Hindhead tunnel works. Previously walkers on the GW were required to dodge the traffic of the A3.

Now turn left into Bedford Lane and follow it round to Cosford Farm. The farm road goes downhill and, when the road ceases, continue on the grass track in front of the house with a pond on your right. The track at the bottom can be very muddy at times (work was taking place here in Oct. 2024 which hopefully will improve the area). Where the path forks, go left uphill to a T junction, turn right and shortly left again uphill. On reaching another track cross, go up the two steps opposite and reach a kissing gate at the top, all the time following the GW signs.

Cross the stile and field opposite to a further kissing gate to emerge at a minor road. Take the path opposite and continue on the tree lined path with a further view of the Hogs Back to the left. Turn right into a field and keep to the left-hand side. Look for a gate on the left and go down the steps to a road. Go through the gate opposite, cross a small field to a kissing gate in the hedge opposite.

Continue through the middle of the next field, keeping within the avenue of trees as this is a private garden, to yet another kissing gate and reach the entrance to Lower House.

Pass through the tall kissing gate to a wide track with a gorse hedge on the left and a field to the right. The track goes downhill, then up, and eventually to a gate where it turns left; it continues between fences, past a field on the right and then into woodland and steeply downhill to another tall kissing gate by a house (Pine Lodge).

Turn left down the road by the wall, which is the southern edge of Witley Park, to reach the A286 at Brook. Cross the road with care and continue uphill on the bridleway opposite, which is a sunken track through a beech wood. This is known as Blind Lane.

Blind Lane was the main route from Witley to Brook until the 19th century.

At the top of the hill, leave the GW, which goes right above Heath Hills Wood, and continue straight on ignoring the path to the left. The path runs between hedgerows until a junction of paths is reached by Parsonage Farm Cottages and Bungalow. Turn left towards a gate across the path and, just short of the gate, turn right on a narrow path between bushes.

Keeping to the left along the fence line, follow the path downhill through the field to a kissing gate and a crossroad of paths. Continue straight on across the fields along the fenced path, through two kissing gates, to eventually arrive at a stile and a pair of cottages. Pass in front of the cottages and bear right up the unmade road to a road (Roke Lane). Take the footpath opposite and keep straight ahead to reach a wide sandy track. This is Mare Hill Common. (If you cross over the sandy track at this point and take the footpath almost opposite for a few yards there is a good view with a seat - ideal for a picnic.)

This is an area of special scientific interest along with Frensham, Thursley, Hankley and Witley Commons. Adders and common lizards are abundant. Birds include green and greater spotted woodpeckers, yellowhammers, stonechats, woodcocks, tree pipits and nightjars. Rare invertebrates include burrowing wasps, glow-worms and silver studded butterflies.

Turn left on a broad sandy footpath; ignore the first right turn but at the second, follow the narrower path straight ahead to reach the A286. Cross the road with care to re-enter Witley Common and after a few yards turn right onto a permissive bridleway (PB). It runs parallel to the road on the right.

Follow this footpath as it winds through the woods following the blue permissive bridleway signs. Ignore the first small fairly insignificant path on the left and take the second path (after some distance) and leave the PB. Another path comes in from the left (the one used on the outward journey) and soon after turn right opposite a wooden post. Head for the National Trust building which comes into view through the trees. Just before the NT Witley Centre turn left at the marker post, signposted Webb Rd carpark and follow this path back to the car park.

