

Wilstead Circular Walk

Introduction

This 5 mile walk starts in the centre of the village and soon makes its way along the footpaths towards the eastern edge of Wilstead Wood. It then goes up to the top of the line of hills overlooking the village. The route proceeds along the top of the escarpment, passing St Macute's Wood before reaching the edge of Haynes.

Here at Northwood End Farm it turns back down towards Wilstead along a bridleway. At the bottom of the escarpment the walk goes through Manor Farm before running along the footpath which runs parallel to Cotton End Rd. The route continues along the footpath, through Dragon's Wood to emerge near the car park.

Wilstead is accessible either from the A6 or the A600. There is good off road parking available in the village car park in Whitworth Way, behind the Methodist Church in Cotton End Road, (see map). If you are joining the walk other than at the start and are parking elsewhere please note some of the main roads in the village can be used for parking but some are narrow and unsuitable. The lanes are even narrower and should not be used for parking.

There is an hourly bus service from Bedford (Route 44).

Start/Finish Point

The walk starts from near the car park in Whitworth Way, behind the Methodist Church in Cotton End Road. Grid Ref TL066436. OS Explorer Map 208.

Access and General Information

Distance: 5 miles **Time:** 2.5 hours.

Surface Types: The walk goes across varied surfaces ranging from a hard, firm surface to grass or uncultivated earth.

Stile free

Refreshments: The Woolpack and Red Lion are Public Houses in Wilstead. There is also a shop, post office and take away restaurant in the village.

Route Description

1. Turn right out of Car Park, right at Cotton End Rd and continue along to a public footpath finger post on the right, just past Chapel Lane on the other side of the road.
2. Go through the kissing gate by the thatched cottage garden and along the edge of three fields, keeping the hedge on your left until you meet another footpath at a T junction.
3. Turn left at the junction and proceed across a field to another footpath junction at the top of a metalled lane (Ivy Lane).
4. At this junction turn right (do not go over the bridge) and proceed towards the woods keeping the hedge on your left.
5. Go straight on through the corner of the wood, through a kissing gate and continue with the wood on your right. By the gate there is an entrance into Wilstead Wood. After a short distance continue straight

on across the field to a gap in the hedge at the bottom of the hill.

6. Bear slightly left and continue up the hill across a field to a kissing gate and lone tree.

7. Go past the tree to the brow of the hill and bearing slightly right aim for a gate in the far (southern) corner of the field. At the brow of the hill pause to look back at the panoramic view behind you stretching from Cranfield in the west to Cople and beyond in the east. Central are the imposing buildings of the airship hangars at Cardington.

8. Cross the next field diagonally to a kissing gate keeping the pond on your right.

9. Proceed through the kissing gate keeping the trees / hedge on your right. Across the field on your left is St Macute's Wood. Keep going straight on into the next field, past a stand of trees on your left, to Northwood End Farm, (keep to the left of the farm buildings), to a fingerpost at a junction with a bridleway.

10. At this point you can turn right down the farm road/bridleway to Haynes. A few yards down this road on the right is an old grain store perched on capped piers to keep the rats out - well worth a little detour.

11. Go back to the fingerpost and walk away from the farm down a bridleway along the edge of a field keeping the hedge to your right. Keep going downhill, through farm gates always keeping the hedge on your right down to Manor Farm. As you descend, the view to the left expands to reveal St Macute's and Wilstead Woods and the village buildings partially hidden in the trees. The square outline of the tower of All Saints Church can just be made out.

12. Go straight on through a small gate keeping the farm buildings on your left and just before the farmhouse on your right turn left through a gate into a field. Keeping the farm buildings on your left go on along the field edge which bends to the right.

13. At the footpath sign turn left through a gate along the edge of the field with the hedge on your right.

14. Just before the end of the field turn right through the hedge, through a kissing gate and into a paddock. Cut across the corner of this paddock to another kissing gate and go through the hedge into another field. Turn right then almost immediately left along the edge of the field.

15. Halfway down the field switch to the other side of the hedge by turning right then left and continue with the hedge on your left.

16. At the end of the field cross two culverts to appear in another field. Go along the edge of the field with the hedge / ditch on your right, to a kissing gate..

17. Go through the kissing gate and over a bridge to find yourself at 4. Go straight on retracing your steps (3-4) to where you joined this path at 3 earlier. At the junction don't turn right but carry straight on with the hedge on your right until you meet the 'Carriage Drive' This was the rear drive to Haynes Park, a fine 18th century Georgian country house. The Carriage Drive is a Permissive Path and walkers are also allowed to walk through the woods on either side of the path as it goes up the hillside.

18. At the Carriage Drive go almost straight ahead and continue down the side of a field with the hedge on your right to a small culvert.

19. Turn right and once through the gap bear left across the field to a footpath sign by a gap in the hedge.

20. Walk down between the hedges. In spring and summer this forms a green tunnel and is known locally as Dragon's Wood.

21. Just past the last building on the right, turn right over a small bridge and after a short distance you will emerge into Whitworth Way with the car park almost in front of you.

The following notes describe some of the main features of this circular walk.

A. Firtree Hill & Farm.

The remains of the farm which fell down in 1962 are hidden in the spinney ahead of you as you climb the hill. The ridge and furrow and building platforms of this area suggest it is the site of a medieval settlement and possibly the site of the home farm of the Manor of St Macute which existed from around 1600 to sometime before 1767. The 'holloway' between the spinney and St Macute's Wood was a track between Manor Farm and Haynes Park on the 1767 map.

B. Airship Hangars

The first hangar was constructed in 1917 as part of Short Bros. Naval Aircraft Works to build airships for the Royal Navy and the first one (R31) was built in 1918. The second hangar was moved from Pulham (Norfolk) in the mid 1920s. The hangars are over 800 ft long, 250ft wide and 180ft high and each provide 4.75 acres of floor space. The R100 undertook a return trip to Canada from here just before the R101 's ill-fated trip to India in 1930 which ended in a crash at Beauvais, north east of Paris, leaving 48 dead and just 6 survivors. The dead are buried in a large grave in Cardington. This crash effectively ended airship construction in the UK until the 1970s. Since then there has been periodic airship construction though on a much smaller scale. The hangars were used for barrage balloon construction in the Second World War and are currently used by the Building Research Establishment and the Meteorological Office. One of the hangars is now used as a film studio.

C. St Macute's Wood & Chapel

The small wood today is all that is left of an earlier much larger wood. The wood and a chapel, thought to be at the eastern end of the wood, were part of the ancient manor of St Macute. The chapel is mentioned in the 12th Century when it was given to Beaulieu Priory by Robert de Albini who was based in Cainhoe Castle, Clophill. St Albans Abbey took over the manor and chapel in 1435 and ran it until the dissolution of the monasteries. It returned to private ownership in 1554 and then had various owners before becoming part of the Haynes Park Estate.

D. Northwood End Farm

The farm was originally part of Haynes Park Estate until it was sold off in 1914. The small building in front of the farmhouse was a granary and was placed on capped piers to prevent rodents getting in and to keep the contents dry. The building had steps up to the doorway and a central passageway with bins for oats, beans, etc, on either side. Under its roughcast exterior the farmhouse is of a similar brick and timber construction. The farm is mentioned in the 1676 Estate map. The fields to the north of the farm formed part of the ancient manor of St Macute.

E. Manor Farm

The farm and nearby old stables were built in 1649 with farm buildings in the paddock to the south of the farm. These were later burned down and were rebuilt across the lane. The farm became part of the Whitbread Estate in 1795. The farmhouse was restored in 1911 and so rendering now covers up a fine timber framed house. The farm is mainly arable with a large sheep flock and some geese which are used in sheepdog displays.

F. Wilstead Woods

Though not mentioned in the Domesday Book there has been a wood here for many hundreds of years. The perimeter bank & ditch means it has probably been this shape and size since medieval times. In the middle of the last century 'coniferisation' was attempted but fortunately failed due to the wet ground. This has left an ancient woodland which has many beautiful avenues and paths, well worth a detour if you have the time.

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