

Hillfarrance, Heathfield and Oake

10 Kilometres

A walk from Hillfarrance church through the gentle Vale of Taunton and the Parish of Oake.

(A) Go through the gate into the churchyard and walk ahead to another gate to exit the churchyard. Turn right and follow the path round to the left. Go through the kissing gate and walk ahead to the gate in the far left-hand corner of the field. Continue ahead to the track. Turn left and after 40 metres sharp right towards the house and garages. After 30 metres turn left over a stile and walk ahead across the field to a stile in the far hedge. Continue ahead across the next field towards the house. Walk alongside the house, up the track and out through the gates. Walk half-right and cross the railway with care.

(B) Walk ahead across the next field to meet the hedgerow under the power lines. Veer half-left across the field towards more power lines to cross two stiles by Hillfarrance Brook. Turn left and follow the hedge. When the hedge turns left, continue ahead across the field to the stile by the River Tone. Continue to follow the river for a further 200 metres before turning sharp left to cross the field to a stile. Walk ahead over the course of the Grand Western Canal and then over to the railway crossing. Do not cross, but turn right to follow the railway to the road, crossing a small stream.

(C) Turn left along the road and over the level-crossing to the junction. Turn left and continue past the turning to Hillfarrance and round a left-hand bend. Just beyond School Cottage, turn sharp-right, walk past the remains of the old railway bridge and then turn left and up the slope to walk along the old track bed. (The right of way actually runs through the field at the bottom of the railway embankment, but the land owner has given permission for the track bed to be used instead at this point.) After about half a kilometre turn right to walk along the track towards Harnham Farm. Go over the stile and continue past the buildings on the left to meet another track. Turn left and shortly after veer right to follow the diverted footpath around Harnham Farm and cottages. Exit through a gate and follow the edge of the field ahead to another gate. Continue ahead with the hedge on your left, and down the hill to the wooden bridge.

(D) Do not cross, but turn right to join the permissive footpath across the field to go through the gap in the hedge. Turn right and follow the edge of the field round to the left and up the hill towards the pylon. Continue to follow the edge of the field to the gate in the left-hand corner.

(E) Carefully cross the road and walk ahead up the lane towards Heathfield Church. Go left through the churchyard and out through the old kissing gate. Follow the hedge ahead. Where it turns left, veer left to walk diagonally across the field, through a kissing gate and over a stile to the road. Cross over and go over the stile opposite. Veer right across the field to the small bridge and stile in the hedge. Continue this line across the corner of the next field, through a gate and down across the next field to the stile in the hedge. Turn left, go through the metal gate and ahead to a further gate. Veer right across the line of the old railway and through another gate. Veer slightly left across the field to cross two stiles into the adjacent field. Turn right and follow the hedge to another stile. Continue ahead between two hedges to the gate and road.

(F) Cross over and walk ahead down the road opposite as far as Oake church. Opposite the track to the church there is a gate. Go through this, and then left to follow the edge of the golf course, down past a cottage on the left and round to the right, past the drinking fountain, to the lane. Cross over and walk ahead with hedge on your right and golf course to the left. Cross the bridge over a ditch. At the second bridge, do not cross but turn left to follow Hillfarrance Brook. Shortly before reaching the road, go right over the brook and then left to a gate.

(G) Cross the road and go through the gate opposite. Turn right and follow the edge of the golf course round to the left and along to a five bar gate in the corner. Do not go through, but turn right and walk between the hedge and the post and wire fence to the corner, where there is a stile on the left. Cross and walk ahead with the hedge on your left to a stile and bridge. Cross turn left, go over another stile, cross the brook and turn right and follow to the next stile. Cross, turn left and walk towards the road sign in the distance. Go over the stile, cross the road and walk ahead along the road opposite back to Hillfarrance.

1. Holy Cross Church, Hillfarrance:

The oldest parts of this church date from the 14th century. It is built from Red Sandstone random rubble, with Ham stone dressings. The west tower dates from the early 16th century and shares with St. Mary, West Buckland, the unusual characteristic of having the stair turret placed centrally on the tower

wall rather than at a corner. The 19th century stone pulpit replaced a wooden Jacobean one. The church was extensively restored in 1857. The 19th century bench ends are copies of 16th century originals. John Wesley preached in Hillfarrance, though probably in a chapel outside the gates of the present church.

2. Hillfarrance Brook: This brook flows east from the hills between Bathealton and Wiveliscombe and into the River Tone near Hele. It was the water source for a number of mills such as at Croford, Milverton and Ford. Look out for kingfishers.

3. Mainline Railway: Construction of the Bristol to Exeter railway, whose chief engineer was I K Brunel, was started in the late 1830's. The first section, from Bristol to Bridgwater, was opened in June 1841. In July 1842 it reached Taunton, and by May 1843 it had reached a temporary terminus at Beam Bridge, three kilometres beyond Wellington. A year later, once the Whiteball Tunnel had been completed, the last section to Exeter was opened. At first the line was worked by the Great Western Railway, but in 1849 the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company took over operations. Taunton became an important railway centre with nine different junctions in the district.

4. The River Tone: The river flows for 33 km down from Beverton Pond in the Brendon Hills, due south at first before turning east (where it forms the border between Devon and Somerset-) to flow into the River Parrett at Burrowbridge. It is an important wildlife corridor, and notable species to be seen are kingfisher, water vole and otter, as well as the more common grey heron, moor hen and (further downstream) mute swan. Look out also for birds of prey such as buzzard, kestrel and sparrowhawk.

5. The Grand Western Canal: Here you cross the line of the old Grand Western Canal. This short-lived canal was one of the few canals in the country to employ mechanised lifts and inclines to overcome steep hills. Born of a plan in the late 1700's to build a waterway to connect the English Channel with the Bristol Channel (thereby saving the small wooden freight ships from a treacherous journey round Land's End), the canal was not actually started until 1810 when work began on the 17.5 km section between the limestone quarries at Lowdewells (near the Devon and Somerset Border) and Tiverton. It was not until the 1830's, once the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal had been completed, that work continued to take the canal across the 22.5 hilly kilometres of Somerset to reach Taunton. Opened in 1838, the Grand Western Canal Company did not enjoy the commercial success it had anticipated, and the quickened the demise of the canal which was abandoned in 1867. Point 5b is the site of the Allerford Lift which took the canal up 19 feet (6 metres). The Victory Inn stands close to the line of the canal at a point where there was a private wharf.

6. Mistletoe: Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) is a semi-parasitic native evergreen plant that lives partly off a host tree into which it sinks its specialised roots, and partly off food produced with its own chlorophyll. It flowers from February to April and has sticky white berries from September to January. It is spread by birds (often Mistle Thrushes) which feed on the berries and then wipe the seeds off their beaks on to branches where they take root. The usual host trees are apple, lime, hawthorn, poplar, willow and robinia, as here. It has for many centuries been a sacred plant of the Druids, associated with fertility from which developed our custom of kissing under it.

7. Views: To your right here, in a north easterly direction, is a distant view of the Quantock Hills, a narrow ridge of Devonian slates rising to 386 metres. Just visible are the tall beech trees that stand out on top of Cothelstone Hill.

8. Course of the Taunton to Barnstaple Railway: The first section of the branch, from Norton Fitzwarren to Milverton and Wiveliscombe, was opened in 1871 after a troubled and lengthy construction period that included an outbreak of cholera amongst the navvies and accusations by the Bristol and Exeter Railway company, who were to work the line, that it was poorly constructed and unsafe. The rest of the branch to Barnstaple was opened in November 1873. With the increase in road transport after WW2 the line became uneconomic and closed on 1st October 1966.

9. St. John the Baptist Church, Heathfield: It is known that there was a church on this site in the early 1160's and almost certainly much earlier. Almost nothing is left of the 12th century church, but parts of two incised crosses high on the wall of the south chapel were once probably grave covers found at the time of rebuilding. The present church, built of Red Sandstone, has a 13th century tower, but the chancel was heavily restored in the 19th century. There is a 16th century painted wall tablet with kneeling figures on the north side of the sanctuary, thought to commemorate two members of the Hadley family, lords of the manor in the 16th century.

10. St. Bartholomew Church, Oake: The oldest parts of this church are the chancel, the north wall of the

nave and the base of the tower, all of which have been dated to the 13th century. Built of Red Sandstone random rubble, with Ham stone windows, its plan is unusual in the relative positions of the tower and porch. The windows are remarkable in that every one is different. The large six-light north window is of particular interest; obviously out of proportion with the rest of the building, it is said to have come from Taunton Priory after the priory church was dissolved in 1535. There it was probably a cloister window, but when brought to Oake it was installed the wrong way round, with the outer face of stone and bars on the inside. There are fragments of 15th century stained glass, and much of the plain glass is also of great age. The tower is unusual in that the belfry storey is wider than the base. Ancient maps show that the original village was once centred around the church. Most of those cottages and other buildings, including a chapel and a Poor House, have long since disappeared, the present village being mainly of post-war construction.