

The Thames and its meadows

This 9-mile walk explores the River Thames and its water meadows along almost the entire length of Oxford. We have divided the walk into three linked sections, for those who want a shorter route.

The walk is entirely accessible by bus. The start of the first section at Wolvercote can be reached by the no. 6 bus from Oxford City Centre. Folly Bridge, the joining point for the three sections, is about 10 minutes' walk from Carfax in the centre of Oxford, which is served by many buses. The third section ends on Abingdon Road (near Redbridge Park and Ride), from which many buses run to the city centre, and also southwards to Abingdon, Didcot etc. If you plan to travel by car, we suggest parking at Redbridge Park and Ride; take the 300 service to the city centre, then change onto the 6 for Wolvercote to do the entire walk.

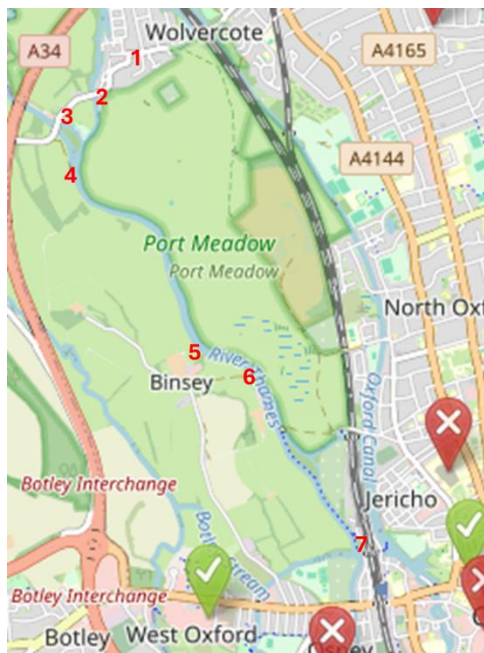
The terrain is flat and easy, although we advise good shoes or boots. Parts may be inaccessible after heavy rain. The middle section (with slight diversion) is accessible with a wheelchair or pushchair. The first section from Wolvercote is not suitable for wheelchair users because of the bridges involved. The third section, to Iffley Meadows, is potentially wheelchair accessible although almost all off-road. We would welcome comments from wheelchair users if we have misjudged this.

If viewing this on a phone, we advise using Adobe in [liquid mode](#)

Underlying maps are from [OpenStreetMap](#).

Section 1: Wolvercote to Folly Bridge along the Thames Path, 4.5 miles

The map shows the route as far as Botley Road



1 Whether travelling by bus or by other means, the walk can start at the Home Close number 6 bus stop in Lower Wolvercote. The small village green faces you to the west and across from it are two pubs, the community pub, the White Hart, and the Wolvercote, both dating from the mid-18th century.

Between the two pubs, and worth a look, is Mill Road, with its row of 18th century mill houses. At the end of Mill Road is the Mill House, where Thomas Combe, patron to the pre-Raphaelites, lived in the mid-19th century. The paper mill, which used to grind swords for the royalist army during the Civil War, was demolished recently and has been replaced by a housing estate. Follow the winding Godstow Road until you get to Nunnery Close, a distinctive thatched cottage with yellow shutters. Dating back to the 17th century, it is the oldest house in Wolvercote.

2 Walk past the car park where the mill stream makes a safe and pleasant setting for family bathing and picnics. The 'Toll Bridge' over the mill stream has a monument on its side to two airmen who

died in 1912 in an early flying accident. To the south, at the far end of the picnic area is a monument to the airmen who died while training to fly during the First World War, when Port Meadow had an airfield.

Just after the Toll Bridge you can see a green gate on the right. This leads to a now defunct lane that is rumoured to have been the route that Charles I took when he escaped with several thousand troops in 1644.

3 Further along the road, just before the bridge over the Thames, is the Trout Inn, which is a 17th century building, and popular for its setting on the banks of the Thames. Much of the bridge over the Thames is medieval in origin. Across from the bridge you meet the Thames Path. Take a left turn and you soon pass the ruins of Godstow Abbey, a 12th century Benedictine nunnery, where it is rumoured that Eleanor of Aquitaine imprisoned Rosamund Clifford ('Fair Rosamund') the mistress of her husband, Henry II.

4 Beyond the Abbey is Godstow Lock, where the Thames flows through Port Meadow. Just past the lock you can see a fine view of the meadow. Three hundred acres in area, it has never been put to the plough and by legend, was granted to the citizens of Oxford by Alfred the Great as a reward for its defence against the Danes. It is an SSSI and an Ancient Monument, with Bronze Age round barrows still visible. Residents of Wolvercote have ancient grazing rights on the meadow, although most of the cattle and horses are owned nowadays by people from outside the village.

Your walk now takes you along the banks of the Thames. After about half a mile you begin to pass a row of tall, distinctive black poplars on the bank of the river, the descendants of those poplars the felling of which the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins condemned in his well-known poem 'Binsey Poplars'. On the right, you can see distinctive 'ridge and furrow' markings on the fields; probably Victorian.

5 You will next come to the riverside entrance to the Perch, a thatched Inn in the village of Binsey, where you may want to take a break in its spacious and well-shaded garden.

Not on this walk but worth a detour, along a lane about half a mile northwest from Binsey village green is the charming, untouched early medieval church, St Margaret's, where you will find the famous Frideswide Well. Its waters were reputed to have healing powers and attracted many pilgrims in the Middle Ages. St Frideswide is the patron saint of Oxford and is buried in Christ Church cathedral. The well is believed to have inspired the 'treacle well' in Alice in Wonderland.

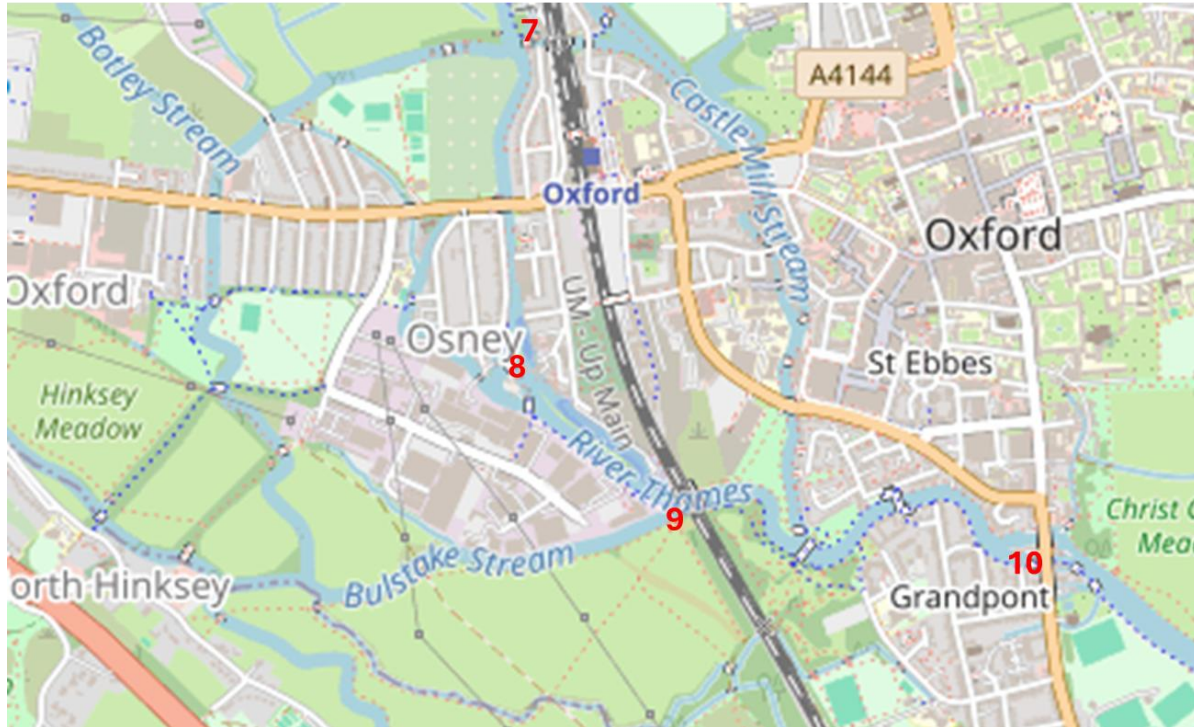
Back to the entrance to the Trout, it is on the banks of the Thames hereabouts that Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll) took the Liddell sisters on a boating trip that told them a story to while away the time, which became 'Alice in Wonderland'. You will notice many rabbit burrows on your walk and can easily imagine where the idea for the White Rabbit came from.

6 Walk past the Perch and you soon arrive at a track on your right which leads from Binsey to the Medley Sailing Club and Bossom's boatyard, which dates back to 1845. The MSC is the furthest upstream sailing club on the Thames. You then cross the Thames over a rainbow bridge. Just before the bridge, in the summer, is the popular Medley pop-up coffee and snack bar. Perfect for a break. At this point the Castle Mill Stream separates from the Thames. You now walk on a path between

the Thames and Castle Mill Stream with the Medley marina on your left, until you come to a Bailey bridge connecting the stream to Port Meadow.

[From here you can walk back to Wolvercote by way of the Burgess Field Nature reserve or along the Oxford Canal, to make a pleasant circular walk.]

The Bailey bridge was laid in 1947 after disastrous floods swept away the previous wooden bridge. Its survival is a triumph of the bridge, designed by British civil servant Donald Bailey and considered to be one of the most successful inventions of the Second World War.



7 Continue beyond the bridge where the path takes you past Fiddler's Island towards to the Botley Road, with the railway line on your left. At another smaller rainbow bridge you might wish to divert to the left to see the historic railway swing bridge, recently reinstated by the Oxford Preservation Trust. For the main walk, continue over the small rainbow bridge to a lane which takes you onto Botley Road. Cross the road with care. The Thames Path then takes you onto Osney Island at the far end of which, on the opposite bank, Osney Abbey was once one of the largest abbeys in the country. Its church was, briefly, Oxford's cathedral before the reformation led to its destruction. All that is now left of the Abbey are the remains of its mill.

8 As you walk across the stream that takes you off Osney Island past the Punter pub, you can see Osney Marina on your left. It is located on a stream created in the Middle Ages to provide water for the Osney Abbey mill. On your right is the very modern Osney Hydroelectric power station, a successful local project in renewable energy.



9 Carry on with the river on your left and over the Bulstake Stream, which enters the Thames on your right, where you will find a prominent monument to Edgar Wilson, a young man of 21 who drowned in the act of saving two boys from drowning in 1889, but who died himself in the process. You then pass under the bridges carrying the railway to Oxford station, and then two distinctive bridges built to service the Oxford gasworks, which operated on both sides of the river here until the 1950s. The first bridge, with elaborately decorated Victorian piers, was built in 1886 to carry trains; the second, known as the Pipe Bridge, was built in 1927 for workers to cross and to carry gas pipes.

Both the ‘Gasworks Bridges’ are now footbridges.

After the second of the two bridges you pass the northern end of Marlborough Road, along which the first railway line into Oxford, run by Brunel’s Great Western Railway, ran. It was opened in July 1844. It closed in 1872, after the opening of the existing railway station on the Botley Road.

10 You then arrive at Folly Bridge on the Abingdon Road, where you can see the impressive Head of the River pub across the road, where this stage of the walk ends.

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Section 2: Christ Church Meadow

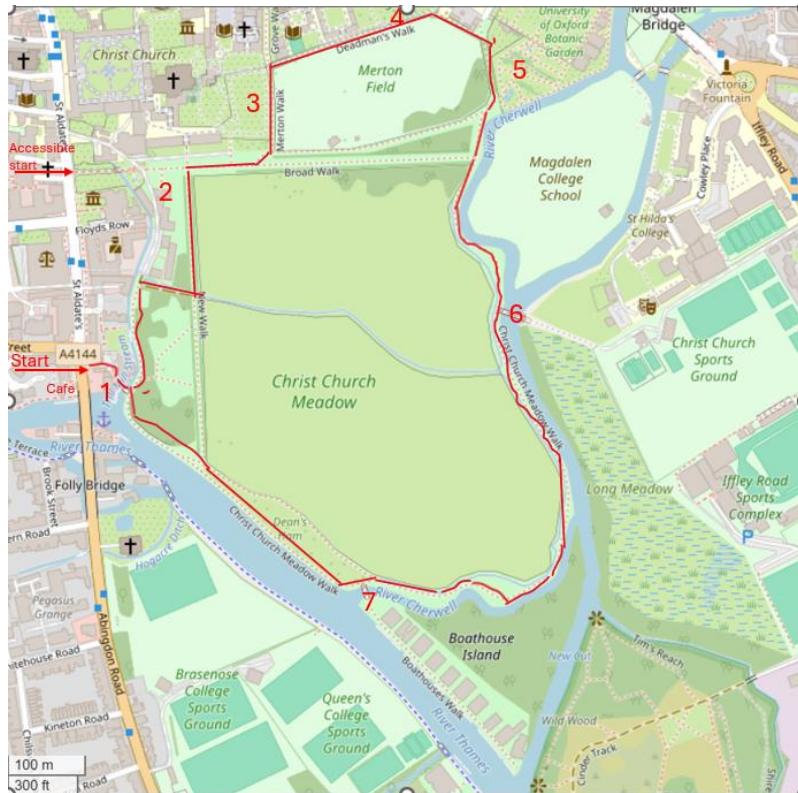
A round walk from Folly Bridge, 1.75 miles

Not accessible by wheelchair or buggy due to narrow gate at start/end. There is an alternative entrance/exit from St Aldate’s on to Broad Walk which is fully accessible just 250m north of Folly Bridge (see map below).

This walk follows the perimeter of Christ Church Meadow and Merton Field. It starts from the end point of the first three meadows walks (Wolvercote to Folly Bridge) and ends at the start of the third of the meadows walks (Folly Bridge to Iffley Meadows).

If you want some refreshments or need a WC before you start the walk there is a well-placed café on Folly Bridge (The Paperboat Café, open until 5pm, closed Mondays). Alternatively, pop into the The Head of River Pub.

The walk starts next to the Head of the River pub (marked **1** on map), at Folly Bridge. Walk round the northern side of the pub (this looks like a service road), turn right along the rear of the pub, then left and through a high and narrow metal gate over a stream.



After crossing the stream turn left almost immediately. Follow a stone wall on your left. After about 150 meters turn right just before some buildings (path ahead is blocked) and then turn left when you reach a well-defined avenue (called Poplar or New Walk).

On your right you will see the expanse of Christ Church Meadow. This is flood plain; the meadow floods periodically if the Thames is high. There may be cattle grazing in the field (a most unusual sight for the centre of a busy city). They are Christ Church's herd of pedigree Old English Longhorn cattle, a historic breed that was the first specifically dedicated to beef production.

Ahead of you, at the end of Poplar Walk, is Christ Church college. The imposing building is called Meadow Building, constructed in the 1860s. The college was founded in 1524 by Cardinal Wolsey, who was Lord Chancellor during the reign of King Henry VIII. At that time the college was called Cardinal College and was built on the site of St Frideswide's, a medieval priory. After Wolsey's fall from grace, Henry VIII took over the college, naming it Christ Church in 1546. Oxford's cathedral, also called Christ Church, is within the grounds of the college.

Just before you reach the college, on the left, is a visitor centre in a thatched barn (marked 2 on map). Tickets for visiting Christ Church College may be bought here. There is also a gift shop and toilets.

Turn right at the end of Poplar Walk, then take the first path to the left, following a wall alongside Christ Church's Masters garden. It is reputed that in this garden Charles Dodgson – who would later write under the name Lewis Carroll – first saw Alice, one of the daughters of Henry Liddell, who was Dean of Christ Church at the time. Subsequently, Dodgson wrote the Alice in Wonderland stories. The garden is marked 3 on the map.

At the end of the wall to Christ Church garden ignore the narrow gate ahead of you unless you wish to leave the meadow but turn right along a path known as Deadman's Walk. This is named for its historical use as the route for Jewish funeral processions from the medieval Jewish quarter to their burial ground on the site of what is now the Botanic Garden.

Follow a high wall, which is part of Oxford's old town wall, constructed in the 13th century in place of a previous 9th/10th century wall to protect against Danish invaders. Note the defensive bastion.

Towards the end of this path a plaque (marked 4 on map) commemorates James Sadler's balloon flight on 4 October 1784. Sadler ascended in his hot air balloon from Christ Church Meadow to a height of 3,600ft and landed safely about six miles away. He was the first Englishman to make such a trip.

At the end of Deadman's walk bear right, to follow the perimeter of the field. Oxford Botanic Garden can be seen on your left (marked 5 on map). It was established in 1621 and is the oldest botanic garden in Britain.



Very soon you meet the River Cherwell on your left. Follow the Cherwell until it meets the Thames. On the way you will pass two bridges over the Cherwell and you will see some fine views over the meadow, such as the one shown here.

The first bridge, Jubilee bridge (marked 6 on map), links Christ Church Meadow with the Christ Church sports ground. Unfortunately, the route across the bridge is only accessible to college students and staff, but the bridge itself provides extensive views of the river and surrounding areas.

Just before you meet the Thames, you will come to a second bridge (marked 7 on map). If the bridge is open, you are free to go across to Boathouse Island to see the college boathouses.

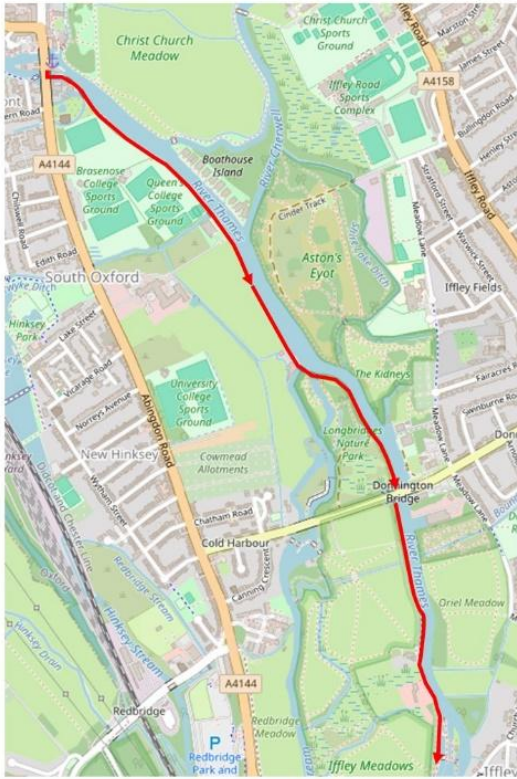
The wide Thames opens up before you. Follow the path alongside the Thames until you reach your starting point.

For more information see <https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/visit/meadow> where you may download a similar trail (but in reverse direction) with extensive notes. We acknowledge some of the information in that guide is reproduced here.

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Section 3: Thames path and Iffley Meadows

From Folly Bridge to Redbridge P & R, 2.75 miles



The map shows the route as far as Iffley Lock

Start on Folly Bridge beside the [Head of the River pub](#), built originally as a wharf and warehouse. Walk away from the city centre, past the [Salters Steamers](#) building (a family-run firm providing river cruises since 1858), then just before a modern accommodation building for Hertford College, with glass-panelled stairwells, turn left down a ramp at the light-controlled crossing, posted 'Thames Path'.

You almost immediately cross two bridges over side-streams of the Thames: look right at the second to see [Grandpont House](#), built in 1785 and sitting on stone arches over the stream.

After 600 metres pass the new (2007) University College boathouse, built after the previous one was destroyed in an arson attack. On the opposite side of the river are college boathouses built on a triangular island formed between branches of the River Cherwell, as it enters the Thames here.

After a further 400 metres pass the large Long Bridges boathouse, then cross two bridges over the Weirs Mill Stream; there is a finger post pointing to the [Longbridges Nature Reserve](#). (But keep on the Thames towpath).

In 150 metres pass a memorial post with faded inscription. This is the [Free Water Stone](#) of 1786, marking the then southernmost point of the city boundary.

The Donnington Bridge road bridge will come into sight; either side of it on the opposite bank are the Falcon Boat Club, the City of Oxford Rowing Club and other boathouses.

450 metres after the bridge, pass the [Isis Boathouse](#) (used by a number of University clubs) and the Isis Cottage; then, just after another memorial stone, the [Isis River Farmhouse](#) pub which provides meals and drinks (check opening times beforehand).

The tower of St Mary the Virgin, the Norman church at Iffley village, will come into sight on the left before you come to the historic [Iffley Lock](#). Pass one stone bridge over the stream to the left, a level crossing with rollers for punts, then a wooden bridge that gives a view to the Lock Keeper's house. Very soon after look right through trees for a kissing gate and notice board, and go through the gate.

This is the point at which you leave the Thames Path.



The notice board describes [Iffley Meadows](#), a flood-plain of the Thames, owned by the City of Oxford but managed by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). This is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and is known for its display of snake's-head fritillaries in the spring (a recent count found 89,000 of these), as well as abundant wildflowers and birds. The meadows are sometimes grazed by cattle so please keep dogs close to you.



Here is a map of the path to follow across the Meadow



Once through the gate, face into the field; take the mown path that runs half-right, diagonally across the field. A line of pylons and the traffic on Oxford's ring road can be seen well away to your left. This brings you to a broad hedgerow. Go through this, keeping as straight as you can (there is a slight bend to the right) and pass an overgrown metal gate, then pass a large gate allowing vehicular access to the Isis Farmhouse, followed by another overgrown metal gate, then coming to the edge of a big open field in front of you.



Go straight across, aiming for a single large tree in a hedgerow:

The path beside the tree takes you over a ditch with a half-covered large drainpipe, into another field.



Cross this field half-left aiming for a kissing gate:

Go through this gate and follow over two bridges, when the path bears left, then right over another two bridges over the Weirs Mill stream. Follow a short road to meet the busy Weirs Lane (Donnington Bridge itself is to the right).

Turn left along Weirs Lane to traffic lights where it meets Abingdon Road.

You can cross Abingdon Road and turn right to quickly reach a bus stop for frequent buses into Oxford city centre. Alternatively, turn left to walk 500 metres to [Redbridge Park and Ride](#) for buses to Oxford or southwards (Abingdon, Didcot and other places) (toilets open during normal working hours).

End of walk