WALKING HAMPSHIRE'S TEST WAY

About the Author

Malcolm Leatherdale has a particular interest in walking and exploring his native Hampshire. He has lived for the past 15 years a stone's throw away from the River Test and the Test Way. Malcolm is an active cyclist and also a former marathon runner having competed several times in the London Marathon. He has written several books and a number of articles.

Malcolm is also a member of the Ramblers and it is his passion for walking and being in the 'great outdoors' that has prompted this guide-book. His hope is that it will encourage others of all ages and abilities to experience the delights that come from walking generally and the Test Way and the wider Test Valley in particular.

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THE LONG-DISTANCE TRAIL AND 15 DAY WALKS

by Malcolm Leatherdale

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First edition 2018
ISBN: 978 1 85284 953 5

Printed by KHL Printing, Singapore
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
All photographs are by the author unless otherwise stated.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to my wife Patsie for her patience and support in getting me across the finishing line. I am also grateful to Anna Leatherdale, Laurence Martin and Tom Nixon.

Updates to this guide

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Front cover: Fisherman's Hut at Longstock (Walk 8)

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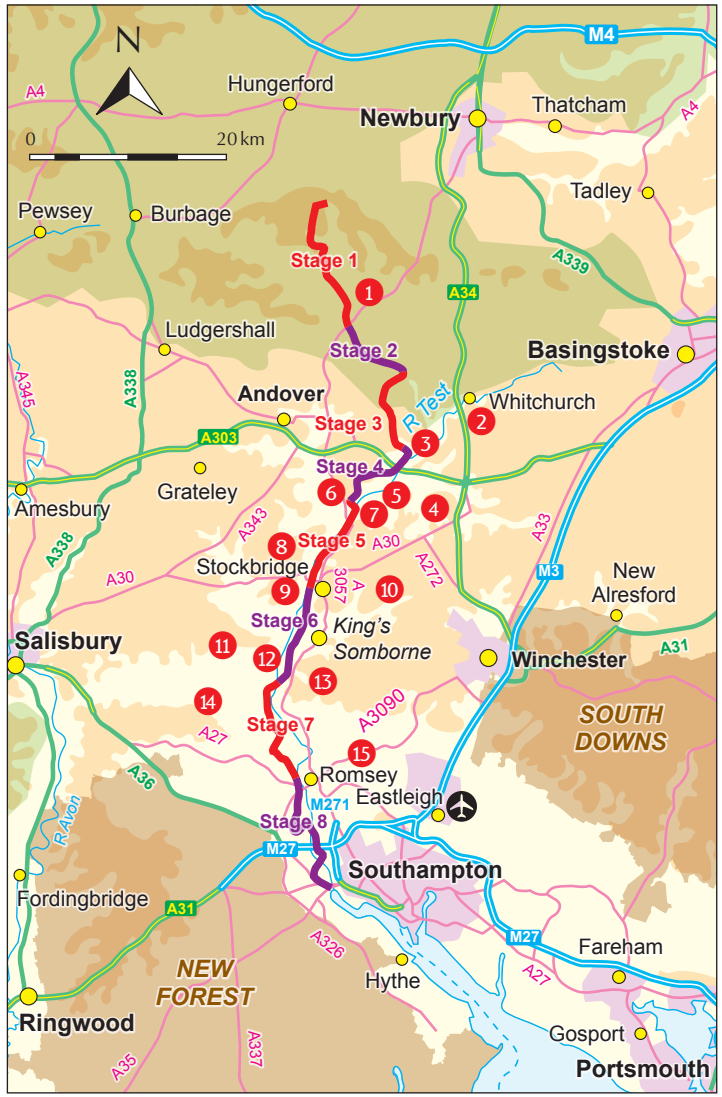
eg ***NEW FOREST***
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty/National Scenic Area
eg *North Wessex Downs*

800m
600m
400m
200m
75m
0m

GPX files
GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/953/GPX.



Test Way direction post at Mottisfont (Stage 6/Walks 13 & 14)

INTRODUCTION

From Houghton Bridge (Walk 12)

For some, the magic of the River Test is all about fresh water fly-fishing but for others it is simply the lure of a sparkling river famously described as 'gin clear'. The Test flows majestically the 40 miles (65km) from its source in the hamlet of Ashe near Overton in north Hampshire to the edge of Southampton Water. There is though, so much more to this land of vibrant green – its variety of landscape, gently sloping tree-clad hills, the occasional remnant of a former water meadow or chalk grassland – all set against a backdrop of a fascinating history and geology. Add to that the vast array of wildflowers, plants and wildlife inhabiting the various Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – including Stockbridge Down, a haven for many species of butterfly – and it is not difficult to understand the attraction of a place that so completely defines pastoral England.

Chalk streams are a very rare breed among the various types of river that can be found on our planet. Such streams naturally occur in those areas where chalk is the main geological feature. Water seeps through the porous chalk to feed the springs that in turn give rise to rivers such as the Test. The pure water, rich in nutrients, also helps to maintain a plentiful

supply of insects on which fish stocks rely (please refer to the section Geology and landscape). There are only about 200 chalk streams worldwide of which 160 are in England and the River Test – also an SSSI – is one of the finest examples.

Some of the area's history is quite intriguing, notably the murderous story of the Saxon Queen Elfrida and the founding of Wherwell Abbey in the 10th century. The monument known as Deadman's Plack in Harewood Forest is also a part of that story, albeit from the 19th century. There are an infinite variety of medieval churches with their own particular histories to share; St Mary's Church in Broughton has the distinction of hosting one of only four ecclesiastical dovecotes that remain in England.

Nor is there any shortage of individual buildings of outstanding architectural quality as the 12th century Romsey Abbey, the resplendent Mottisfont Abbey (now owned by the National Trust) and the unique Whitchurch Silk Mill bear witness. There is also the dramatic impact of our forebears – the imposing Danebury Iron Age hill fort being one example. You can also discover the delights of the many charming villages brimming with flint and thatch and individual 'hostelries' to match.

The spate of canal construction that took place in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and the railway

Romsey Abbey (Stage 7/Walk 15)

'mania' that followed have also left their distinctive mark. At the ivy covered remains of the former Fullerton Junction station you can imagine that in the heyday of the Andover and Redbridge railway (generally known as the 'Sprat and Winkle') the scene then would have been very different from the sense of tranquillity that can now be enjoyed. Some of the old track bed also forms part of the Test Way (TW).

The TW begins in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in West Berkshire and then runs in parallel with the Wiltshire county boundary for a short distance before crossing into Hampshire at Combe Wood. It then continues through rolling chalk downland traversing Harewood Forest either side of Longparish – which is also where the TW first meets the River Test. From the hamlet of Fullerton at the half-way point, the route joins the old track bed of the former 'Sprat and Winkle' railway, becoming flat and fairly straight as it makes its way to Mottisfont. The penultimate stage to Romsey includes Squabb Wood and the final stage to Eling Wharf at Totton crosses the unique tidal estuary Lower Test Nature Reserve.

Last but not least, there are the 15 circular walks, which vary in length from 3.75 miles (6km) to 8.5 miles (13.75km). A few have uphill challenges (usually with rewarding views) but none are overly difficult, so when taken together with the individual stages of the TW, there is something for everyone. Ten of the walks also interweave with parts of the TW so it is possible in the course of those walks for you to achieve the best of both worlds!

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEST VALLEY

Dating from the Neolithic period (4500–2200BC) there is evidence of farming activity in large parts of the Test Valley. There are relics from the Bronze Age (2200–750BC) including barrows or burial mounds, 14 of which are to be found at Stockbridge Down (Walk 10). During the Iron Age (750BC–AD43), a number of hill forts were constructed in and around the Test Valley including Danebury (Walk 8) and Woolbury Ring at the top of Stockbridge Down.

The Romans who invaded in AD43 and remained until the beginning of the fifth century have also left their imprint. There is a trace of a Roman road across Bransbury Common (Walk 4) and in Harewood Forest (Stage 4). The Anglo-Saxon period (AD450–1065) saw the development of a number of settlements, particularly Romsey (Stage 7 and Walk 15) as a prominent trading centre due to its location and ecclesiastical influence.

In medieval times the chalk downland areas were used intensively for rearing sheep – one of the most economically important activities


Wherwell thatch (Walk 5)

during that period. The power inherent in the River Test spawned numerous water mills particularly around Whitchurch (Walk 2) where they were used in the production of cloth and at Laverstoke, especially in the making of paper for bank notes.

THE ANDOVER AND REDBRIDGE CANAL AND THE 'SPRAT AND WINKLE' RAILWAY

The canal

A survey to plan the prospective route of a canal from Andover to Redbridge (on the western side of Southampton) was conducted by Robert Whitworth in 1788/9. The enabling Act of Parliament authorising construction was granted in 1789. The canal, which was 22 miles (35km) long and incorporated 24 locks, was completed in 1794.

However, the canal was never a financial success and proved to be a poor investment. There is now just a single vestige of the canal (Walk 15) – an overgrown and derelict section of about 2 miles (3km) between Greatbridge and Romsey.

The 'Sprat and Winkle' railway

In 1858, an Act of Parliament authorising the construction of a railway to replace the canal was granted. Before work could start, the railway promoters had to acquire the Andover to Redbridge canal itself as it was along the canal bed that much of the railway would be laid. The purchase was completed in 1859 by the Andover and Redbridge Railway Company. The initial attempts to build the railway were however blighted by the failings and manipulative behaviour of the contractor and the railway's own engineer, both of whom were eventually removed in 1861. Even when work recommenced, it was hesitant and sporadic. One particular stumbling block was the need to remove the congealed mud from the bed of the canal and then to fill it with chalk obtained locally to create a sound base on which the track bed could be laid – a monumental task.

In 1863, the Andover and Redbridge Railway Company was in financial difficulty and it was acquired by the London and South Western Railway. Construction of the line took until 1864 to complete but permission was not given to start operating immediately because the government inspector who undertook the commissioning survey made it a condition that the rails had to be replaced with ones more substantial. The railway finally opened in 1865 after the remedial work had been carried out.

One of the practical problems experienced during the first 20 or so years of operation was derailment. This inconvenient and no doubt expensive distraction was mainly due to the line having several sharp bends – in part as a result of the track being laid directly over the former canal bed. This unsatisfactory

Restored signal box from the former 'Sprat and Winkle' railway in Romsey (Walk 15)

situation needed to be resolved and the catalyst for bringing that about was the opening in 1882 of the line between Andover and Swindon via Marlborough, which created a direct route to Southampton.

The fortunes of the Andover and Redbridge railway improved significantly due to the increase in its traffic and, as a consequence, it was decided that the line should be straightened and converted from a single to a double track. This work was completed in 1885.

The railway at some point became known as the' Sprat and Winkle' and there are several theories why it was blessed with such a name. One possible reason is the suggestion that the line went through areas where sprats and winkles might be harvested nearer the sea at Southampton; another refers to the single engine and carriage formation that operated over part of the line – the engine being the 'sprat' and the carriage the 'winkle'!

The railway was strategically very significant in World War 1, providing transport for both personnel and munitions. During World War 2 it was also used extensively and particularly in the latter stages to transfer wounded service personnel from Chilbolton airfield (Walk 7) via Fullerton Junction (Walk 6) to the American hospital at Stockbridge.

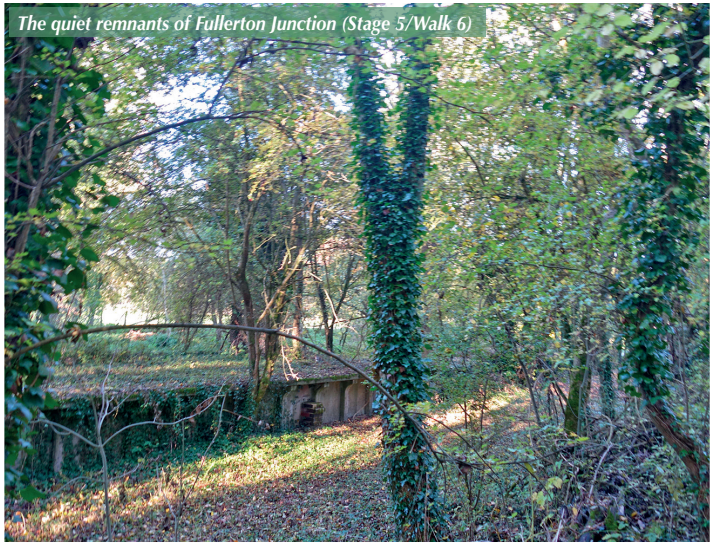
From the 1950s the use of the railway for both freight and passenger traffic gradually declined. The line between Andover and Kimbridge (Stage 7 and Walk 13) had become financially unviable and was closed in 1964 as one of a series of closures of parts of the rail network made in the wake of Dr Richard Beeching's report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, published in 1963.

The 'Longparish Loop' also known as the 'Nile Valley Railway'

There is another strand to the 'Sprat and Winkle' story. In 1882, an Act of Parliament was passed authorising the construction of a branch line of about 7 miles (11km) from Fullerton to Hurstbourne where it connected with the London and Salisbury mainline at the viaduct just south of St Mary Bourne (Stages 2 and 3). This branch line, which was completed in 1885, became generally known as the 'Longparish Loop' (the Loop), and Fullerton became Fullerton Junction.

It was an expensive project as it turned out. The hope and expectation was that the existence of this connecting line would encourage more traffic from Manchester and the midlands to Southampton rather than let a rival railway company construct a more direct line to Southampton through Didcot, Newbury, Whitchurch and Winchester. It was put to the promoters of the alternative line that they should 'join forces' to save the expense that would be incurred and instead make use of the Loop.

In the event the proposal was rejected and the more direct line was



The quiet remnants of Fullerton Junction (Stage 5/Walk 6)

constructed which meant the Loop never fully realised its potential. It was mainly used to transport freight as the passenger business was limited due to the lack of demand. Together with the 'Sprat and Winkle' railway, it was particularly useful during World War 1.

Passenger traffic ceased in 1931 and the track between Longparish and Hurstbourne was removed in 1934. The remaining part of the track between Fullerton Junction and Longparish came in to its own again during World War 2 when Harewood Forest (Stages 3 and 4 and Walks 3 and 5) was used for the storage of munitions by the RAF. It was closed for good in 1956 and the track removed in 1960.

GEOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE

The TW begins at the escarpment of Inkpen Beacon at a height of 280m. It is astonishing to think that at one time this area was at the bottom of the sea. The geology of the North Wessex Downs, is mainly upper chalk formed during the Upper Cretaceous period (99–65 million years ago). Upper chalk is soft white limestone and is the product of the fossilised skeletal remains of countless microscopic marine algae and other creatures.

The chalk deposits also contain flint nodules in large quantity. There are some parts of the downland that are covered by shallow deposits of clay; these also contain flints but to a lesser extent and are known as clay

STAGE 1

Inkpen Beacon to Hurstbourne Tarrant

Start	Informal car park at road T-junction adjacent to the Wayfarer's Walk (SU 369 621)
Finish	The community centre and recreation ground car park, Hurstbourne Tarrant (SU 385 528)
Distance	13km (8 miles)
Time	3hr 15min
Maps	OS Explorer 131 and 158
Refreshments	Hurstbourne Tarrant: George & Dragon (01264 736277) (125 metres off route) and The Tea Cosy (01264 736644) (700 metres off route)
Public transport	Trains to Andover, Hungerford, Kintbury and Newbury; bus services to Inkpen village from Hungerford, Kintbury and Newbury; bus services to Hurstbourne Tarrant from Andover and Newbury
Accommodation	Inkpen village and Hurstbourne Tarrant

The first stage of the TW starts very close to its highest point of 280m with panoramic views. The route wends its way initially over rolling downland and then through Combe Wood, past Hart Hill Down and on to Linkenholt before arriving at Ibthorpe and, shortly afterwards, Hurstbourne Tarrant where it ends at the car park which is also the start and finish of Walk 1.

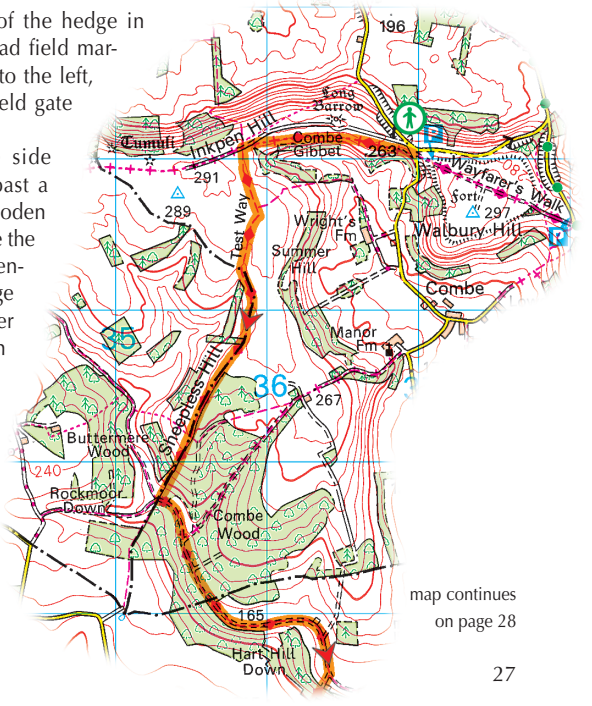
Exit the car park and cross the road to the 'ribbon of chalk and flint' streaming across the escarpment towards Combe Gibbet on Gallows Down. Go past the gibbet keeping to the rutted track for another 500 metres to reach a three-way track junction and several towering beech trees.

Bear left and continue slightly uphill to the end of the hedge where there is a public bridleway sign. Cross the dividing grassy area between two open fields to


Alongside Combe Wood

the right-hand side of the hedge in front and, as the broad field margin curves gradually to the left, descend towards a field gate and side gate.

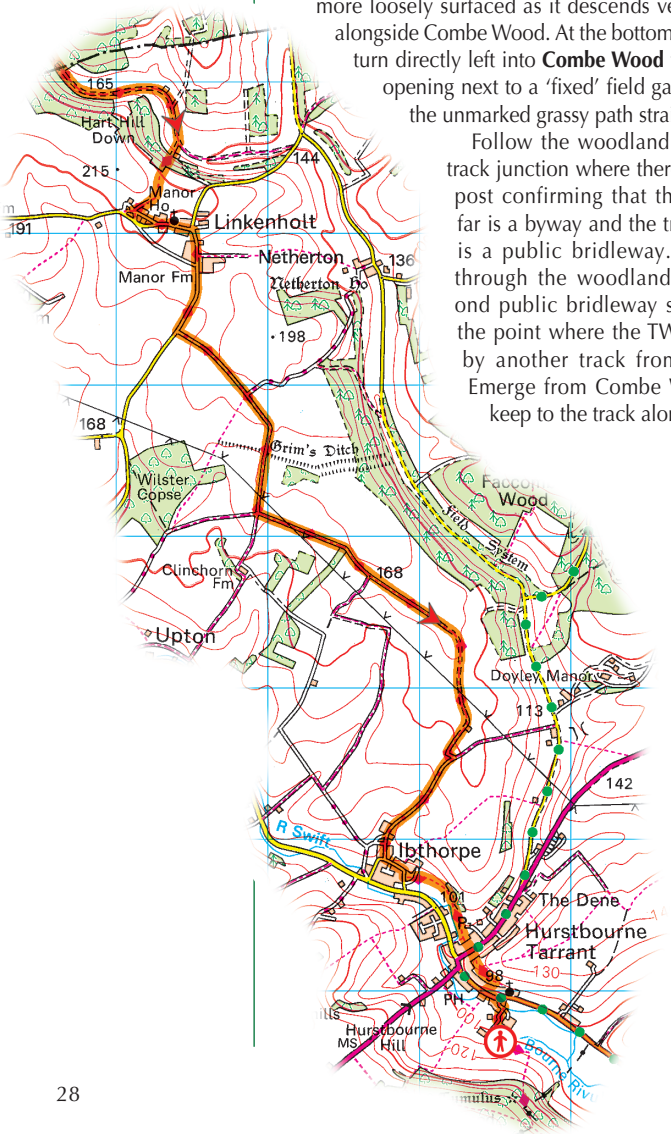
Go through the side gate and bear left (past a Buttermere Estate wooden sign) staying alongside the boundary as it arcs gently around the top edge of the field to another field gate that opens on to an enclosed rutted farm track with distant views to the right. Continue along the track to a junction with a bridleway (left) and a stile (right) – where there is also another Buttermere



map continues on page 28

Estate sign the other side of the fence. The track becomes more loosely surfaced as it descends very sharply alongside Combe Wood. At the bottom of the dip, turn directly left into **Combe Wood** through an opening next to a 'fixed' field gate ignoring the unmarked grassy path straight ahead.

Follow the woodland track to a track junction where there is a signpost confirming that the track so far is a byway and the track ahead is a public bridleway. Continue through the woodland to a second public bridleway signpost at the point where the TW is joined by another track from the left. Emerge from Combe Wood and keep to the track along the field



boundary at the base of **Hart Hill Down** to a single storey old farm building (left).

In a further 300 metres, the track forks by a second more contemporary single storey building – an 'outdoor activities' facility. Take the right-hand fork for 75 metres uphill towards a modest flint cottage. Opposite the cottage is the TW waymarked path that goes directly into the woodland. The incline through the woodland of 150 metres is quite steep and the path is full of tree roots.

At the top, climb the stile on to the field margin that leads to a dark tunnel of laurel hedging and evergreen trees. At the end is a residential access drive where you should turn left to a narrow road and then left again towards **Linkenholt** and the unassuming – but nonetheless very attractive – Grade II-listed Church of St Peter. ▸

Continue through the village to a road T-junction and a small triangular grassy area on which there is a brick built plinth. Raised on the plinth is metal seating that surrounds a horse chestnut tree. Bear right at the junction passing a waymarked path by several large barns (left) and

The Church of St Peter was largely rebuilt using flint in 1871 but retains several features of its original Norman construction.

St Peter's at Linkenholt

go straight on for another 500 metres to a hedge and tree-lined grass and stony track that is TW waymarked (left).

Follow the track for 600 metres to a track junction and then continue for a further 800 metres to reach a track crossover where you should bear left. The track is mainly hedge and tree-lined – although at times open on both sides – as it crosses cultivated downland in a broad arc sweeping around to the right for 3km towards Ibthorpe.

Jane Austen was a regular visitor to the now Grade II-listed Georgian country house – **Ibthorpe House** – which it is thought she used as the model for Longbourn – the home of the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Half way along the path is a small enclosure of trees called 'John's Copse 1969' where the names of several animals are recorded on slate memorial plaques.

Shortly after passing Upper Ibthorpe Farm at the eastern edge of Ibthorpe, you will come to a junction at the unmarked Horseshoe Lane. Bear left for 200 metres to reach the gate at the entrance to a farm access track. Go through the TW waymarked side gate – which is where this stage meets Walk 1 coming from Hurstbourne Tarrant – and follow the track for 90 metres to another gate (right), which opens on to a grassy path enclosed by wooden post and rail fencing. ◂

Continue along the path to a gate fronting a patch of scrubland and the bed of the River Swift, which is immediately to the right. Cross the few metres to a kissing gate and a grassy path enclosed by electric fencing.

The bed of the intermittent **River Swift** continues in parallel – a 'winterbourne', which from time to time feeds into the Bourne Rivulet – a tributary of the River Test. The flow of the Swift has been interrupted for very long periods in the past when there has been insufficient rain during the winter.

At the end of the path is a wide field gate that opens on to a very small area of meadow. Continue to the gate opposite and follow the enclosed grassy path to an old

Between Linkenholt and Hurstbourne Tarrant

kissing gate that leads to a stony path and the busy A343 running through **Hurstbourne Tarrant**.

Cross the road to the residential access track that gives way to another enclosed path alongside a rendered wall. After a few metres ignore the waymarked footpath and stile (left) and continue to a second old kissing gate that opens into a rising field; descend diagonally right for 125 metres to a third old kissing gate and the **B3048**. Cross the road and bear left for 90 metres, passing the school, before turning right to join the rough tarmac track for the few metres to the recreation ground car park.