

## A walk around Little Wittenham Nature Reserve



If one was to pick a site from which to survey the landscape of Oxfordshire, Wittenham Clumps makes for an ideal spot. Rising to some 400 feet above the relatively flat lands of the county and in a strategically commanding position, overlooking the River Thames, these two almost conical features have long been important to the inhabitants of this historical landscape.

For the best part of 300 years the two hilltops have been most recognisable by their beech crowns, this coronation giving them the honour of being the oldest known stands of planted hilltop Beeches in England.

Prior to this, Castle Hill (the most easterly of the two) was an Iron Age hill fort of considerable significance – the remaining evidence obscuring previous Bronze Age and Neolithic activity.

On the western slopes of Round Hill, a short distance west from Castle Hill, the Romans have bequeathed us traces of a villa.

There is a great deal more history to note here and we will pick up on some of it as we take our walk around the site, while exploring its natural history.

## A walk around Little Wittenham Nature Reserve

Follow the description to enjoy this walk around Little Wittenham Nature Reserve. Map numbers indicate features of interest.



### 1.

From the car park, Castle Hill presents itself to you and beckons you uphill. As you trek up the slope listen out for Skylark and Yellowhammer, both relatively common hereabouts, and check for the resident kestrels hunting the rougher pasture.

### 2.

The path carries you over the very impressive defensive ditches that ring Castle Hill and cause you to wonder at the effort that must have gone in to constructing them. For wildlife, these hollows provide some shelter from wind and grazing and a few patches of thorn might offer up an interesting passerine or two. Taking the route to your right, around the tree clad remains of the fort; it is worth turning around to view the lowlands to the south and across to the Berkshire Downs. If the climb has got the better of you a bench is generously provided for your rest.

From this spot and to the southeast, another smaller tree-hatted hilltop dominates, this but a short distance off and surely historically linked to its neighbours. To the southwest, the sheer scale of Didcot Power Station obliterates a great swathe of countryside but, nevertheless, offers a different kind of drama.

Continuing on, and hugging the trees, we turn to the north and, just a few paces on, discover another of the area's treasure.

### 3.

In 1844, one Joseph Tubb elected to carve one of his compositions into the bark of one of the perimeter beeches. The tree is now known as the Poem Tree and, whilst now dead, it still bears the faint outlines of Tubb's curious work. It is perhaps a perfect example of vandalism maturing into heritage. A nearby bronze plate, mounted on a large rock, translates the remaining shapes and letters into the original poem.

This rock marks the point where we head eastwards, downhill, and towards the edge of Little Wittenham Wood. On the way down another panorama deserves being taken in.

The historic riverside town of Dorchester nestles in a fold of the Thames, pleasantly fringed by water meadows. Beyond this one can see onward to Oxford itself and recognise, by one's height above the surrounding vista, just how strategically vital this place must have been down through the ages.

### 4.

This is a good spot to look skywards for Buzzard and Red Kite as they sail on the updraft from the river valley below. Both of these species are thankfully doing well in the area and are indicative of a reasonably healthy mammal population, given their diet of carrion.

One might also scan the grassland here, whilst not being particularly rich in wild flower species is now being actively managed to help promote their recovery. Cowslips might be most evident, along with a more restricted spread of Horseshoe Vetch, to be followed later in the season by Clustered Bellflower and Harebell. Butterflies should be sought here too, with the marbled white perhaps being most note-able and on the wing in July and August. Two recent Oxfordshire colonizers, the Long-winged Conehead and Roesel's Bush-cricket have also made home here amongst a number of other interesting invertebrates.

### 5.

As we reach the woodland edge, being largely scrub at this point and offering good cover for Tit and Finch species, we climb down the short but steep slope that is another defensive ditch.

At the bottom of this feature, the gate on your left takes you onto the scrub and then alongside the woodland edge, arable land being immediately on your right. The boundary line to the woodland is predominantly beech, with plenty of dead wood lying around. Though perceived by many to be unsightly, dead wood on the reserve provides an important refuge for many uncommon fungi and insects. Grey Partridge, and the occasional Corn Bunting, may also be encountered along the field edges here.

#### Joseph Tubb's poem inscribed on the Poem Tree

As up the hill with labr'ing steps we tread  
Where the twin Clumps their sheltering branches  
spread  
The summit's gain'd at ease reclining lay  
and all around the wide spread scene survey  
Point out each object and instructive tell  
The various changes that the land befel.  
Where the low bank the country wide surrounds  
That ancient earthwork form'd old Murcias bounds.  
In misty distance see the barrow heave  
there lies forgotten lonely Culchelms grave.  
Around this hill the ruthless Danes intrenched  
and these fair plains with gory slaughter drench'd  
While at our feet where stands that stately tower  
In days gone by uprose the Roman power  
And vonder, there where Thames smooth waters glide  
In later days appeared monastic pride.  
Within that field where lies the grazing herd  
Huge wall were found, some coffins disinter'd  
Such is the course of time, the wreck which fate  
And awful doom award the earthly great.

**6.**

About half way down the slope a pathway leads off to the left and into the heart of Little Wittenham Wood. It is down here, in the lower part of the reserve woodlands, that a series of largish ponds hold one of the most important colonies of Great Crested Newts in the entire country. It is estimated that around 3000 of these protected animals breed in these waters and hunt in the surrounding woodland. Smooth newts also occur throughout the area.



Great Crested Newt

**7.**

Pass this gateway by, pausing only to take in a good arboreal view and listen out for woodpecker – the greater spotted and the scarce lesser spotted both being resident. If you happen by here at dusk, there is a chance too of a roding Woodcock.

From this point there is now a greater variety of tree species to view, with Elder, Sycamore, Ash and Oak rubbing shoulders with Beech. This mix is further added to as we turn right, at the bottom of the hillside, and find another gateway, on the left, taking us into the woods proper. Here we also find plantation conifers and coppiced Hazel.

You will also notice bat boxes fastened to some of the more substantial trunks and intended to provide additional roosting sites for the five species that are recorded in the woodland – Brown long-eared, two species of Pipistrelle, Daubenton's and Noctule (the latter four having roosts within the reserve).

Another other obvious feature here is deer fencing, which has been erected to allow natural regeneration of the woodland to take place. The tiny Muntjac and the occasional Roe are present and, whilst delightful to watch, they cause great damage to young trees and wild flowers and hence butterfly and other insect populations.

In order to let sunlight reach the woodland floor and also help in re-establishing wild flower colonies, many of the conifers are being thinned-out. However, whilst these cone bearing species remain, you maybe surprised by the odd Crossbill performing aerobatics in their branches - these curious birds being reported here from time to time. More likely the key inhabitant to be happened upon will be the tiny Goldcrest.

**8.**

A short distance on another opportunity for a rest comes in the form of a bench-seat and to the rear of it a sliver of woodland has been cut out to allow a limited view of the River Thames. Should you wish to spend a few moments searching the overhanging branches above the water, then a perching Kingfisher may be your reward. Do take care here though as the banks are steep and the river deep.

The bridleway that cuts across in front of the bench offers a left turn or a right. We will take the former and head off further into the wood, listening out for woodland birds or checking the muddy track for signs of badger, deer or fox.

**9.**

A small stream, leading from the newt ponds, flows under the path, at around the halfway point on this stretch, and creates another little habitat of boggy ground. Here, there is also Honeysuckle festooning some of the trees. Eventually we clear the subdued light of the woodland and, through another gate, exit into open ground and are offered three routes. To the right one can tramp across Church Meadow, where Cuckoo Flower and Cowslips flourish and where Devil's-bit Scabious might be found (from July) along with the charming Harvest Mouse. Alternatively, choose to walk ahead down a very attractive green lane, or, as we will do, left and up towards Round Hill.



**10.**

Before doing so though, check the small pond on your left. This holds breeding newts and perhaps breeding Common Toads (which, although once numerous, have shown a population crash in the last decade) and Common Frogs, the latter perhaps attracting the attentions of a hunting Grass Snake. Dragonflies too will be in evidence in suitable weather, perhaps resting on the handsome spikes of Great Reedmace.

Moving uphill one can choose to head straight up the steepest part of the slope to the imposing hilltop ahead or skirt the wood edge, with a more gentle tread and where the Blackthorn, Hawthorn and Bramble skirt might throw up a Bullfinch or a Little Owl might be chanced upon.



## 11.

On reaching the summit, a gateway takes the walker through the small wood that marks this high point. In addition to the elderly Beech, there is recent and ongoing coppicing of younger trees and the introduction of Spindle and other shrubby species around the edge of the stand. This, together with a deer fence is intended to protect and encourage regeneration of this landmark for generations to come.

Exiting on the southerly side, we track due south and towards the car park where we started our walk. If luck reveals itself, your last bird of the day may be an early evening Barn Owl quartering the less grazed grasslands below.

### **Wittenham Clumps**

The woodland and the open grassland that make up Little Wittenham Nature Reserve is owned and managed by the Northmoor Trust.

In addition, the Trust also manages a conservation farm, hosts various forestry research work, has planted the nearby Trafalgar Wood and operates the Wild Waste Show.

The organisation not only seeks to improve the wildlife, landscape and archaeological value of the immediate area but also hopes to provide real, beneficial example of how farming and environmental care can go hand in hand.

A visit to the trust's website ([www.NorthmoorTrust.co.uk](http://www.NorthmoorTrust.co.uk)) will not only give detail of other walks within the reserve but also many interesting facts about the Trust's work and progress. The 250 acre reserve, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, has recently won international recognition as a Special Area of Conservation under the European Habitats and Species Directive.

To join the Northmoor Trust for as little as £2 per month call Ben Earl on 01865 407792 or e-mail: [ben.earl@northmoortrust.co.uk](mailto:ben.earl@northmoortrust.co.uk).

### **Directions**

From the A4130, Didcot to Wallingford road turn off left, just before Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, along the minor road at Highlands Farm. A short distance on, turn right towards Little Wittenham. The car park is on your right at the top of the hill. Please avoid approaching or exiting through Little Wittenham as the village roads are unsuitable for large volumes of traffic.

**Map** OS Landranger 164, Ref SU 567 924 (main car park)



### **Parking/Facilities**

Car parking is free of charge but there are no toilets on the reserve.

### **Opening Times**

The reserve is open for informal recreation at all times and can be busy at peak times, although the expanse of grassland can soak up a lot of visitors – the woodland walks are far more quiet and secluded.

### **Conditions**

The grassland can be steep-ish, in parts, but provides particularly suitable walking for families with young children. Some of the woodlands walks can be very muddy and there are some steep inclines to negotiate. There are a number of self-closing gates and these are thoughtfully engineered for easy use by all.

The walk detailed should take around an hour to an hour and a half but many alternative routes can make the day shorter or longer as suits the individual.

**Please keep dogs on leads at all times due to the presence of grazing stock and ground nesting birds.**

**Contact The Reserve Manager,** Northmoor Trust, Little Wittenham, Oxfordshire, OX14 4RA. Telephone 01865 407792