



Basildon Park

Distance: 13 km=8 miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire

Date written: 14-nov-2016

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Refreshments: Upper Basildon

Map: Explorer 159 (Reading) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

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Long woodland trails, river tow path, parkland

In Brief

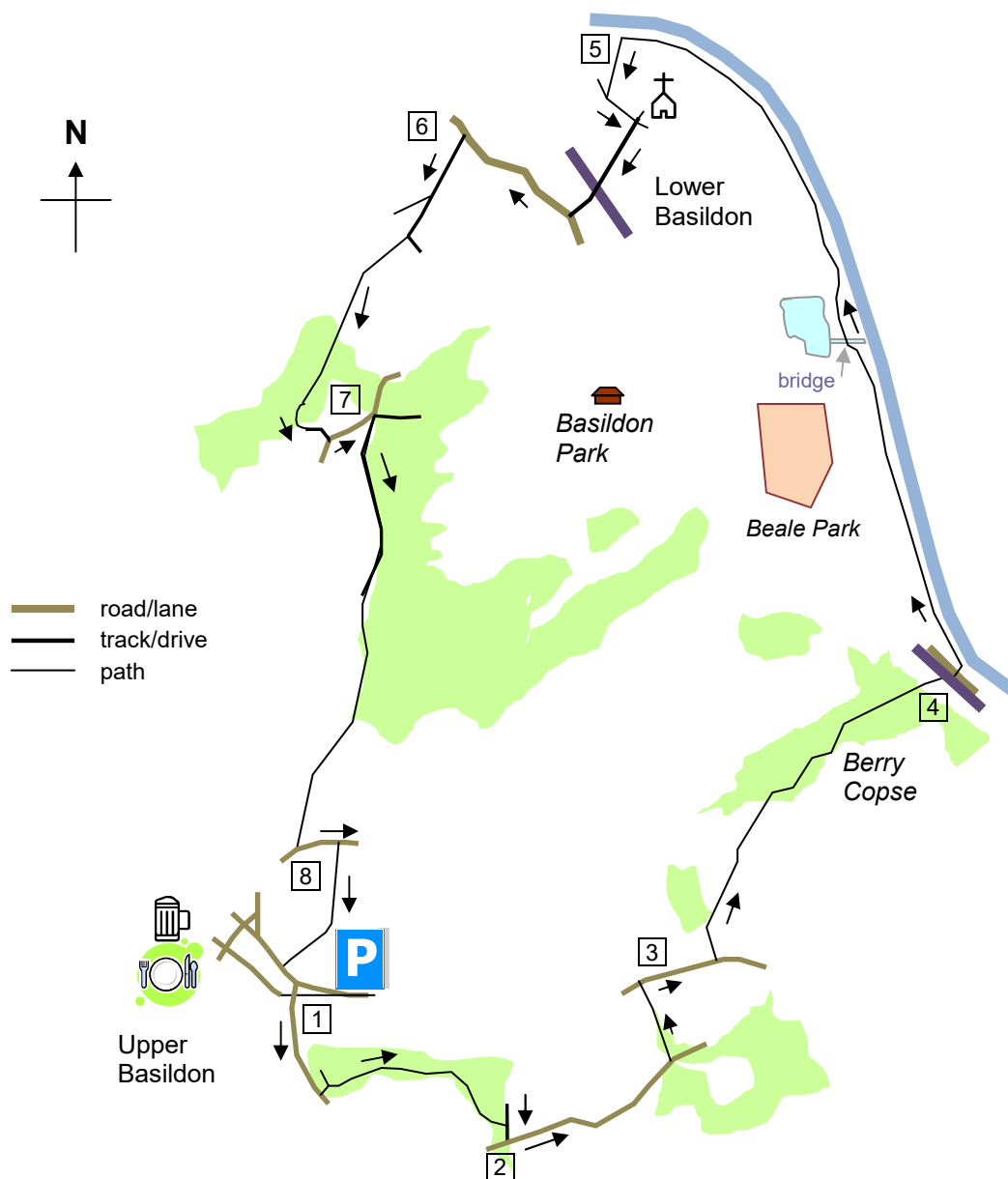
This is a most unusual walk with a long section on one of the most serene stretches of the Thames where you will see an abundance of wildlife. Your adventure begins in a country village from where you take some unusual routes through peaceful woodland to reach the river. The return trip also holds several points of interest, including a church and a country estate with good views. The walk takes a wide circuit around a wildlife park and one of Berkshire's great country houses, with an opportunity to visit them (with entry charge) after the walk.



? In summer, there are some nettles and other undergrowth on one or two of the paths, enough to rule out wearing shorts. The terrain is generally firm but in the winter months you will find some patches of mud, especially in the final section by Basildon Court, and this is sometimes made worse by horse riders. This makes boots *always* a good option. There is a total of 1½ km of road walking in sections along this route, although all except for a snaking 700m portion either has a tarmac footway or is wide and straight. For this reason, this walk is not ideal for your dog.

The walk begins in the village of **Upper Basildon**, near Reading, Berkshire. Park near the triangular green, postcode **RG8 8LS**. It's best to park near the *wider* end, within easy reach of Gardeners Lane, where the walk starts. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1 From the triangular green in Upper Basildon, at the wider end, near a seat, go to a crossroads, cross straight over Pangbourne Road / Aldworth Road and go down Gardeners Lane. After some houses the lane gets narrower. Ignore a footpath on the right here. In another 170m, opposite *Knapps Cottage*, ignore another footpath on the right. Go another 60m and turn **left** on a unmarked path into woods, passing on your right a small water pumping station. Keep to the winding obvious main path that leads you through Knapps Wood, a well-kept secret of the local newtowners. Apart from a good stand of pines and a generous sprinkling of oak, maples dominate in this wood and you will encounter them through much of this walk. After 800m the path ends at a T-junction. Turn **right** on a byway to meet a road.

- 2 Turn **left** on the road and follow it for 700m. *The author had hoped that this road was just a quiet winding country lane but it turned out to be rather busier than expected – and without a footway at that. The people of Upper Basildon, understandably, go everywhere by car. But it is well worth the effort for the long isolated woodland and river rambles that follow.* Follow the road with care. (At a blind corner soon, it is best to defy convention and keep the left-hand side.) You pass the entrances to Bowden Side Farm and Tysoe Farm and, on your left again, the historic Upper Bowden Farm. At the top of a rise, turn **left** on a signposted byway. The path runs along a woodland strip and finally joins a drive by some cottages, coming out to the Pangbourne Road. Turn **right** on the road.
- 3 As the field on your left ends, just before the road curves right, go **left** at a signpost (*small and easily missed!*) and along the right-hand edge of the field. In the corner, turn **right** through a large metal gate and take a diagonal path across the meadow. In the far corner, go through another large metal gate, ignoring the small black metal gate to your right. Turn immediately **right** and keep to the right-hand side of a large meadow. At the end, keep ahead through an old kissing gate onto a woodland path. You are in Berry Copse, a long intriguing forested area of constantly changing leaf trees and conifers. Keep to the main path through the wood. As you catch sight of a field on your right, suddenly your path plunges into an area of swarthy cypresses. You come out into light forest and finally come down, through an arch under the railway and out beside a large metal gate to a main road by the River Thames.
- 4 Cross the road, turn **right** and, in 10m, turn **left** at a signpost to the river side. Go down to the water's edge and turn **left** on the tow path. *This is one of the most peaceful stretches of the Thames path and weeping willows abound. You will see a variety of waterfowl, plus herons and cormorants. The number of cormorants has hugely increased recently and they are cursed by fishermen for decimating the fish stocks.* You soon pass a moored barge or two and on your left is a sign for Beale Park Wildlife Park and Gardens. An entrance to the park is a further 100m on your left but, as this requires a trek over a bridge and along a muddy path, it's usually best to return by car. *Beale Park is a huge family adventure park with a wildlife centre, gardens, deer park, model boats, play areas, train, children's village and of course those noisy peacocks, audible from the river.* In nearly 200m further, the towpath bends left towards a lagoon. Go **right** here across a steel bridge. *Don't miss this vital crossing!* Bear **left** and continue beside the river. *On the other side of the river is a wooded path used in the "Goring" walk in this series.* After an open stretch, you come through an (open) metal gate onto a grassy stretch that leads you to the river's edge. Stay beside the river for $\frac{2}{3}$ km, passing through two wooden gates. The second wooden gate leads you into another open space. Head to the far right hand corner where the towpath comes to an end by a marker post. (In earlier times there was a ferry here.) Turn **sharp left** here, leaving the river side.
- 5 You come through an (open) metal gate in the hedgerow leading straight across a meadow, with Lower Basildon and its splendid cedar on your left. Go through a small metal gate and turn **left** on a drive. You come out through an anglers' car park to a tarmac lane. Your route is **right** on the lane but first you will want to turn left to visit the church.

St Bartholomew's Church was built in the late 1200s when Basildon was a flourishing country village. It is a protected building but no longer used for

services. Inside you can see a memorial to Jethro Tull (1674-1741), the brains behind the Agricultural Revolution. The touching memorial outside shows the young Deverell brothers from Church Farm. In 1886 they went paddling as usual, not realising that the river had been deepened in that spot as a sheep wash. The elder brother drowned in a vain attempt to save the other. (One blogger "Catherine", a descendant, writes that there were other children in the family or she "would not exist".)

Having turned right on the lane (or going straight on after the church), follow it over a railway bridge and onwards to the main road. Turn **right** on the road using the footway. You pass a line of mock Tudor houses on your left, and a solitary one. After ½ km in total, at exactly the point where the footway ends, cross the road carefully to turn **left** between pillars on a driveway marked as a bridleway.

- 6 This pleasant lamp-lit drive leads gently uphill. At the start of a small meadow, at a marker post, ignore a footpath on your right and stay on the tarmac drive. At a fingerpost, leave the driveway as it bends left through the ornate gates of *Hillfields* and keep straight on on a much narrower path through trees. Follow this excellent level path, passing the buildings and grounds of the Hillfields Estate, well fenced-off on your left. After a short muddy patch, the fence on your left ends and the path seems to fork at a marker post. Take the **right** fork, a wide downhill path, under maples. After about 250m, the path rises and curves left with a field visible on your right. You pass an antique filling pump and the garden of *Harley House* with its fine topiary, leading out to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane for nearly 200m, reaching an interesting flint house, *Godwins Lodge*, near the wall of Basildon Park.

In the 1700s, the way for a mere farmer's son to make a fortune was to move to India. Francis Sykes (1732-1804) brought back to England vast wealth and huge delusions of grandeur. He commissioned the building of Basildon Park in 1776 on a site which had seen several earlier country piles, employing Capability Brown for part of the garden and John Carr as architect. So many ex-India grandees lived in this part of the county that it was nicknamed "British Hindustan". Bad luck followed when Francis lost a fortune in the East India Bubble and the house was not finished. The Sykes family descended into financial turmoil and scandal and Charles Dickens used the name "Bill Sykes" for his villain in Oliver Twist. Basildon Park was purchased and restored by the wealthy Morrison family until 1910. In 1929 Basildon Park was nearly shipped stone-by-stone to America but World War II intervened. We owe it to Baron and Lady Iliffe for the wonderful house that now stands here, complete with exquisite furnishings. The house and grounds are now National Trust and are open most days in the summer and weekends in the winter.

- 7 Straight ahead is the *exit* for cars from Basildon Park. For members of the National Trust presumably there's no reason not to enter, although there is no way through the grounds back to the village. Leave the lane here by turning **very sharp right** on a tarmac drive, marked with an antique sign as a bridleway, signed *Basildon Court*. Continue to follow the wall of the Park on your left, passing *Basildon Court* and a lodge house. Where the drive bends right into a stud farm, leave it by carrying straight on on a dirt track, still with the (now crumbling) wall on your left. Your path runs beside quiet pastures under a fine beech glade. Mud here can be minimalised by treading on the *nettle fringe*. You emerge on a drive and out to a tarmac lane.
- 8 Turn **left** on the lane. In 150m, opposite *Wood Green Farm House*, go **right** beside a wooden gate and take a path diagonally across a field which may be fallow or cropped, depending on the season. At the other side,

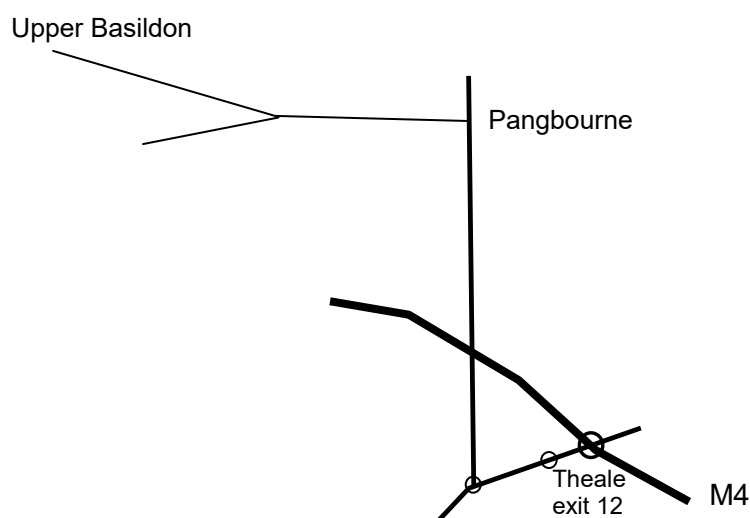
your path enters a patch of scrub and a band of woodland, coming out to a road in Upper Basildon. Turn **left** to reach the triangular green where the walk began.



*For final refreshments, the Red Lion, a friendly pub, is only 350m away.
Turn **right** instead of left, fork **left** in 150m and turn **left** at a road junction.
There is a good car park.*

Getting there

By car: Upper Basildon is easily reached from the M4. Come off at junction 12 (Theale). Follow the A4 west to the **second** roundabout and turn **right**, all the time following signs for Pangbourne. In Pangbourne, opposite the *Cross Keys* pub, turn **left**, passing the church. In 1 mile, fork **right** as for *Upper Basildon, Aldworth*. In another mile or so, there is a fork by the village's triangular green. It's best to fork right to find a roadside spot near the green.



By bus/train: bus 143 from Reading or Goring & Streatley station, not Sunday .
Check the timetables.

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