



Sandhurst to Horseshoe Lake and Blackwater Four Nature Reserves

Distance: 8 km=5 miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire

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Refreshments: Sandhurst after the walk

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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Heath, woodland, water, river, nature reserves

In Brief

This is a “there-and-back” walk, taking you round the Horseshoe Lake, beside the Blackwater River, and with a variation on the return leg. Along the way there are **four** nature reserves to explore “ad lib” so you can come back another day to follow the nature trails or diverge from this walk by adding a loop or two. They are all well mapped on notice boards provided by the council or the wildlife trust.



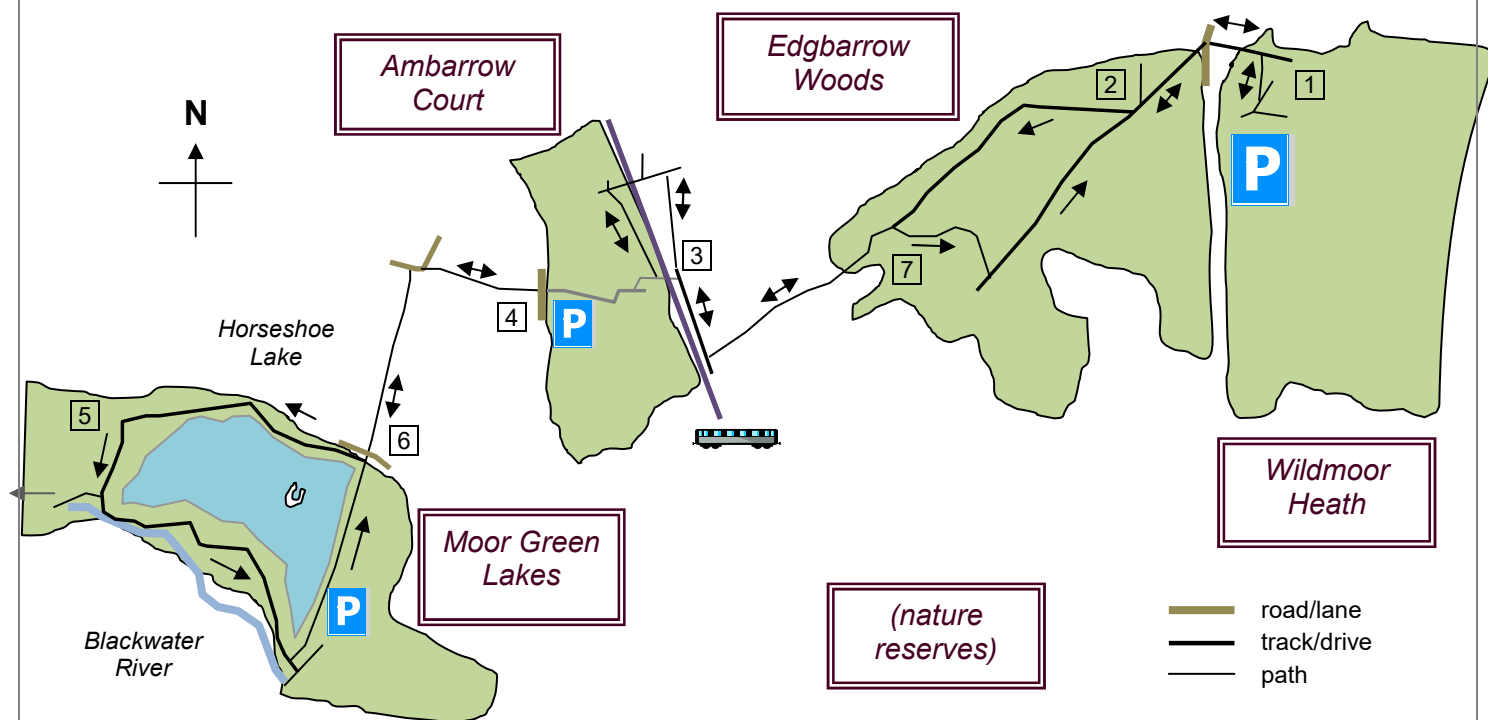
There are no nettles or brambles to worry bare legs. Except in a very wet winter, the ground underfoot is *fairly dry* all round with a muddy section before the railway and some puddles near the Horseshoe Lake which the many families who come here seem to skip around unperturbed. So boots are good for the dedicated walker but usually strictly optional. Your dog is welcome but a short lead is required to cross two main roads and a railway line. There are no stiles and no road walking.

Although the terrain is surprisingly open and wild, this is not a walk for lovers of solitude because it is hugely popular with families and their children. In fact it is one of the friendliest regions in the southeast with all the Berkshire people greeting you with a chipper “hello”.

The walk begins at the **Wildmoor Heath** car park in Crowthorne, just north of **Sandhurst, Berkshire**, postcode **RG45 7PP**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Wildmoor Heath is a precious survival of rare heathland which hosts a number of fragile species of mosses, fungi, reptiles and birds including the tree pipit and the nightjar. The Heath extends to the east, to the vast Swinley Forest (see that walk in this series) but this walk merely touches one corner, giving you a motive to explore further. (There is a 1½ mile waymarked *Wildlife Walk*.)



- 1 From the back left-hand side of the Wildmoor Heath car park, go through a wooden barrier. Instead of taking the path on your right that runs uphill parallel to the power lines, cross straight over and take a path into the woods. At a fork, keep **left**, thus avoiding the waymarked *Wildlife Walk*. Keep ahead through the woods till you reach a T-junction with a major path, an official bridleway. Turn **left** on it and continue through a barrier to a main road. Cross carefully straight over to a signposted bridleway on the other side.
- 2 As you pass under power lines, your path is joined by a gravel track coming from the right (from that famous school Wellington College). Shortly after, the path forks (your return point). Take the **right** fork, staying under the power lines. Soon, your path curves left uphill, still following the power lines. At a junction on your left, keep straight on to arrive at a steep bank. Take the narrow path to the right of an information board, leading down, aided by a cascade of logs built by helpful ramblers. Ahead of you is the corner of a metal fence: continue with the fence on your left, soon going over a 2-plank bridge. The ground becomes a little muddy but later dries out to a nice sandy walk. Finally you reach a T-junction by a fingerpost. Turn **right** on a wide path, going over a stream, with a railway on your left.
- 3 The following is a temporary diversion which you need to *memorise*. (Previously this walk used a railway crossing after 150m, but the crossing was closed for works in 2019 and there is no sign of a re-opening in 2021.) Continue following the railway on your left, as far as an old brick bridge over the railway. This

bridge is at the end of the sports field of Wellington College and the walkers' route is very clearly signed. Once over the bridge, take footpath sign on the **left** down the footpath incline and follow the footpath signs thorough the wood. Turn immediately **left** to follow the railway on your left. At the *closed* railway "crossing", turn **right** and go straight ahead through the woods. But, in only 50m, turn **left** down a shallow bank to find a surfaced path and (hopefully) a bench seat. Turn **right** on this path which bends left and right, gets wider and finally reaches a car park. You are in *Ambarrow Court*, another nature reserve worthy of exploration.

Ambarrow Court was once a Victorian country seat, although the original house was demolished. It retains some original Victorian features, including bamboo, yew hedges and large specimen trees such as douglas fir and cedar. There is a waymarked nature trail through the grounds on a good surfaced path.

- 4 Go through the car park and carefully cross the main road to a footpath opposite. This path runs between fences and, in 200m or so, joins a tarmac road. In just 20m, turn **left** through a wooden swing-gate. Go down the right-hand side of the meadow, through a modern kissing-gate, down another pasture, another kissing-gate, another pasture and a gate to a tarmac lane. Cross the lane, go straight ahead, over a crossing path, through a wooden swing-gate to the lake side. Turn **right** on a shingle path with the lake on your left.

Horseshoe Lake is only one of a vast series of lakes that flank the Blackwater River. The Yately Lakes are to the southeast and the Moor Green lakes to the west. Some are protected as wildlife centres whilst others, like this one, have footpaths along their banks. This walk makes a circuit of the Horseshoe Lake but this is only a "taster" offering further exploration. Horseshoe Lake covers 9 ha=22 acres and is named after the shape of the little island in the middle.

- 5 After 500m on this good path, the route turns abruptly left at the corner between two lakes. On your right, the big Moor Green Lake is a nature reserve. In another 150m you come through a wooden swing-gate to a junction of paths. On your right, the Blackwater Valley path would take you further between the lakes. However, this walk takes the wide path **straight on**. The path bends left with the Blackwater River on your right.

The Blackwater River runs for 32 km=20 miles, rising near Aldershot and meeting the Whitewater, and hence the River Loddon, near Swallowfield, Berks. It forms the border of Hants and Berks for much of its length. The Blackwater Valley Path can be walked from near Badshot Lea all the way to Swallowfield and follows it fairly closely, apart from a few diversions. The book *Explore the Blackwater Valley* which can be ordered from <http://www.blackwater-valley.org.uk/> describes the walk and the wildlife as well as several circular walks.

Continue following the river, with the lake visible on your left. Just before a road, turn **left** by a post with a waymarker for the *Blackwater Valley Path*. This path joins a footpath, goes over a bridge, passes the car park on your right and goes under power lines. You now have an uninterrupted view of the lake on your left. Your path takes you through a swing-gate and onwards to a bend in the path, familiar from your outward journey. Go straight ahead through a wooden swing-gate to cross a lane to another gate into a meadow to begin your return journey.

- 6 Your way back is along a similar route but with a variation through Edg-barrow Woods. Follow the meadows along the left-hand side, turn **right** on the lane and then immediately take the path to your right signposted

Ambarrow Court. Keep straight on between fences to cross the main road into Ambarrow Court car park. Follow the main path, at first straight ahead, then bending left and right. In only another 10m or so, turn **left** up a shallow bank and **right** to cross the railway line. Or, if the bridge is still under repair, retrace your outward diversion: turn **left** alongside the railway crossing it by the old brick bridge; in 100m turn **right**, soon reaching the railway and the intended bridge: keep straight ahead. Turn **right** and, after crossing a stream, by a fingerpost, turn **left** on an unmarked path. Follow the narrow path, finally going up a steep bank to meet a junction with a wide sandy path on your right.

- 7 As a change from the outward route, turn **right** at the junction. This path takes you through a pleasant area of heather, birch and gorse of Edgbarrow Woods, another nature reserve.

Edgbarrow Woods are an area, 31½ ha in size, of mixed, semi-natural high forest, wet and dry heathland and acidic, unimproved, lowland grassland, under the stewardship of Bracknell Forest. An active biodiversity plan ensures that certain rare species thrive, including devil's bit scabious, round-leaved sundew, glow-worm (actually a beetle), bullfinch, hobby, dartford warbler (an all-year resident), the large noctule bat and the silver-studded blue butterfly.

Your path curves right into rhododendrons (an invasive species and now (2019) cut down leaving only the stumps visible), Follow two white arrows painted on trees to meet a wide path at a T-junction. Turn **left**. In 100m, the main path forks left by a (very faint) white arrow on a tree. When you pass under power lines, keep straight on to meet the path you took on the outward leg, and the main road. Cross carefully and continue on the other side through a wooden barrier. Turn **right** in 100m or so on the first decent path to arrive back at the Wildmoor Heath car park where the walks began.



For final refreshments, the *Village Inn* in Sandhurst (which you may have passed 1 mile back) has a car park. The *Wellington Arms*, 1 km=¾ mile further east along the road, is a Brakspear pub.

Getting there

By car: Wildmoor Heath car park is just off the Sandhurst Road between Sandhurst and Crowthorne. If coming from the M3: come off at **Exit 4** (*Guildford, Farnham, Aldershot*); at the first roundabout, keep **left** for **A331 Camberley**, going under the M3; at the next roundabout, bear **right** on **A331 Reading, Wokingham Camberley**. At the next complex roundabout, keep ahead on **A321 Sandhurst**; (on your right is the biggest M&S you have ever seen, part of the huge *Meadows* shopping centre); go straight over the next small roundabout; at the next traffic lights, turn **left** on **A321 Sandhurst**; the road twists through the town and soon runs parallel to the railway on your left; immediately, by the *Village Inn*, turn **right**, signposted *Crowthorne*; the car park is 1 mile=1.6 km on your right.

By bus/train: Bus routes 94 and 194 go from Bracknell Station or Sandhurst Station to the starting point, including Sundays. Check the timetables.

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