

Wychwood Walks

The Windrush, Willows and Meadows

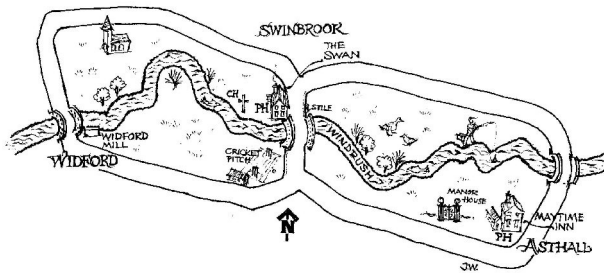
A figure of eight

Imagine a skinny figure of eight lying on its side; two circular walks, bounded at

each end and middle by bridges over the Windrush and joined as all good walks should be, by a pub, the Swan in Swinbrook. The left hand circle takes us from the three limes in Swinbrook, past Swinbrook Church, on to St Oswald's at Widford, round by Widford Mill, and back along the road, past the Cricket ground and arriving gratefully at the Swan Inn. After due refreshment; the right hand circle of the figure of eight takes us over the stile opposite the pub, across the fields, over the bridge into Asthall, outside (or in!) the Maytime Inn, past Asthall church and the Mitford's Manor House and down the road back to Swinbrook. The round trip is about three miles long.

Starting in Swinbrook

Walking over the tiny stream we turn right into the street and up a few steps on the left into the picturesque church grounds of St Mary's. The church dates from around 1200 AD. Swinbrook was the seat of the Fettiplace family and they left us some amazing full sized effigies of Tudor and Stuart gentlemen reclining elegantly on shelves. The church also includes a memorial to Thomas Mitford, tragically killed in the Burma campaign



on 30th of March 1945. Outside is the gravestone of his sister, Nancy Mitford,

one of the six famous Mitford girls and author of the wonderful; "Love in a Cold Climate".

Through a little white gate, along an enclosed wall, saying "hello" to the one black and one white sheep on the left and through another gate takes us into a magical valley. The Windrush winds along on the left, buzzards wheel lazily overhead, and sometimes one can spy herons or a kingfisher. On the hillside to the right lie traces of the Fettiplace family mansion. This was demolished in the early C19th, along with its Italian terraced gardens. A wonderfully romantic image, but sadly not one that the ordinary eye can now discern!

Widford; The ford by the willows

Ahead is the tiny Widford church, St Oswald. The church dates back to around 660 AD. The body of Oswald, King of Northumbria rested here on its way to Lindisfarne. Inside there are faded murals painted after the Black Death decimated the surrounding village, leaving only undulations in the field where buildings had once been. The sense of peace inside is remarkable, the Victorian wooden pews remain, the Ten Commandments

are prominently displayed, and an Evensong is sung here once a month; a moving experience. Past Widford Mill, look out for some prime brown and rainbow trout, avoiding the attentions of the Cotswold fly fishing club. Back along the road, there is a lovely view of the enchanting valley to the left, and growing in the hedge row, wild blue geraniums, yellow toadflax and old man's beard. Ahead are the trembling silver poplars lining Swinbrook Cricket Ground, and shimmering in the breeze, like a child's polished milk bottle tops. The ground is persistently flooded in winter, but in summer, the drowsy sound of bat on ball makes this difficult to believe!

Asthall and Inns!

To do the whole figure of eight, turn left towards the Swan Inn. There are usually several swans around, as well as a troupe of about thirty elegant greylag geese, who if they should migrate, don't seem to want to! The delightful Mill Cottage, now completely renovated, was once damp and dreary. During World War 2, when the men were in war service, and the great houses requisitioned, Lady Redesdale lived here with one servant, nursing her terribly sick daughter. Unity Mitford had shot herself in the head, when England declared war on Germany. Thankfully in 2003 we can enjoy a pint, or more, at the Swan, hanging over the old mill race and admiring the ancient water courses.

Turning right, over a stile by another pretty cottage, with a quaint little thatched summer house, we continue across fields. The meandering Windrush is lined with pollarded willows; their wood still coppiced. On the right, Asthall Manor seems to float above the river. It

is the original home of the Mitford family. The right hand side of our figure of eight takes us over a stile, across the Windrush and into Asthall. In the centre of the bridge on our right, there is a fascinating stone engraving of a first world - war rifle. What is the story behind it? Strange to think of this soldier, in our century, walking over the ground where we might imagine the misty figures of Roman soldiers and settlers. Akeman Street, the Roman road from St Albans to Cirencester, runs through the nearby Asthall Farm.

Asthall is a tranquil hamlet, only just 1 mile from the main A40, and so well hidden, that after the Reformation it became a sanctuary for Catholic recidivists, fearing persecution. Passing old cottages, well sand bagged against the risk of flooding, we arrive at the door of the Maytime Inn, named not for the Maypole sign it displays, but because the hosts are May and Tim! Minutes, or perhaps hours later, we continue towards the church, just under the grounds of Asthall Manor.

Full Circle

Down the hill, with the Windrush on the right, we return past the Swan, and complete our walk. Everything here is quintessentially English. There are willows, history, churches, old stone buildings, streams and ancient flood plains, inns, swans, wild flowers and soft landscape. What better recipe for restoring one's spirits?

Liz Clarke-Watson

Do you have a favourite local walk?