Fancy Free Walks *point your feet on a new path*

# Little and Great Bedwyn
## Shalbourne, Kennet and Avon Canal

Distance: 15 km=9 miles — easy walking

Region: Wiltshire — Date written: 24-sep-2017

Author: MacMeadow — Last update: 24-mar-2024

Refreshments: Great Bedwyn, Shalbourne

Map: Explorer 158 (Hungerford) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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*Villages, thatched cottages, woodland, parkland, canal, surprises, variety*

## In Brief

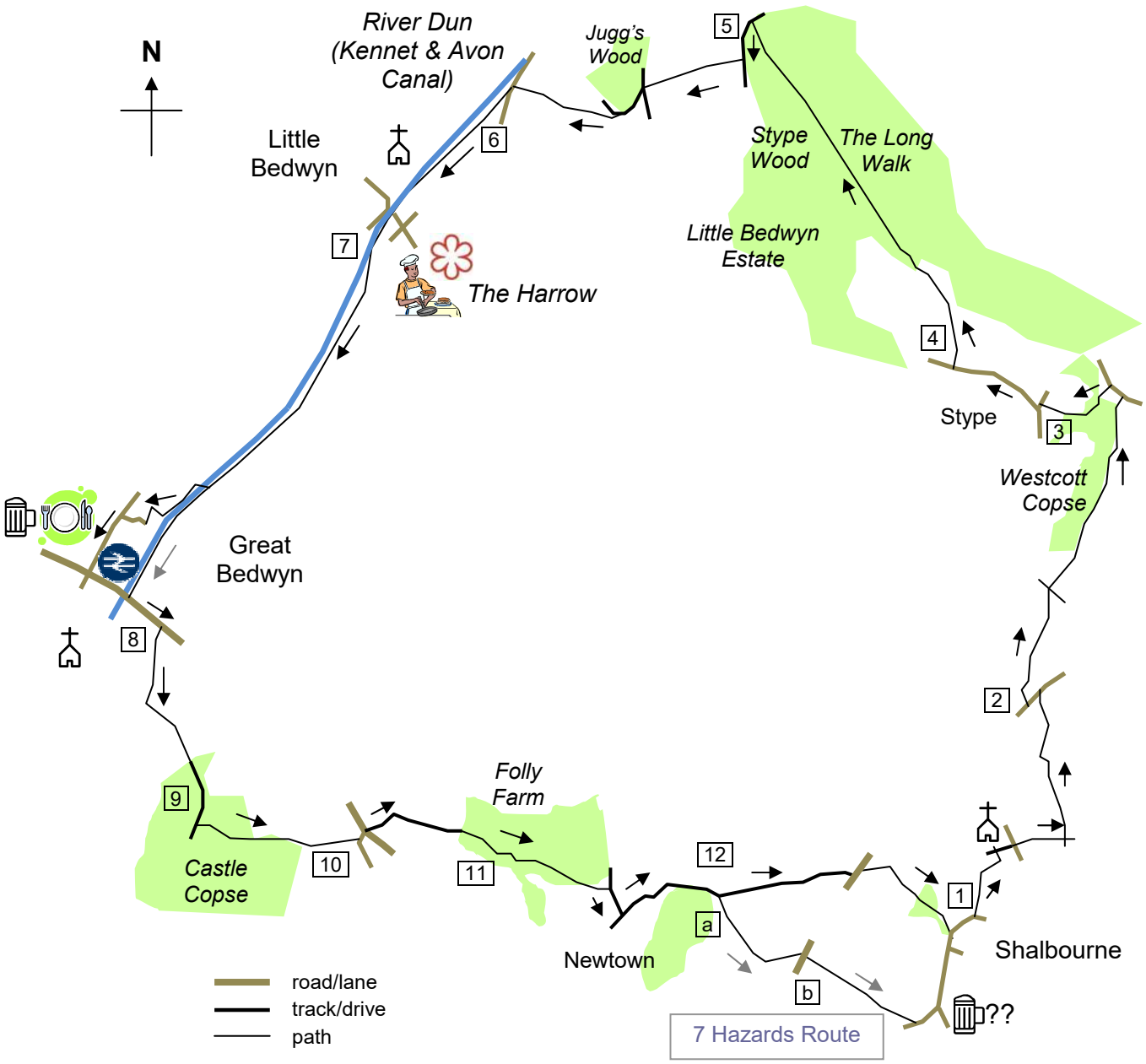
This is an unforgettable walk of great variety in a lesser known area of Wiltshire close to the border with Berkshire, with easy access from the M4 motorway. Highlights of this walk include the Little Bedwyn Estate, a large space of parkland and woodland, featuring the *Long Walk*. Another grand section is the walk along the Kennet-and-Avon Canal where colourful canal boats ply the various locks. The villages of Little and Great Bedwyn are a delight, as is Shalbourne. The rest of the route consists of little-known, but well marked, woodland paths, with views of the countryside and several surprises along the way.

For refreshment, there is a good pub with food. To enquire at the *Three Tuns*, ring 01672-870-280. (The *Plough*, in Shalbourne is currently (2024) closed and for lease: to ring on the off-chance try 01672-870-295.) There is also a Michelin-starred restaurant on the route (see under Little Bedwyn).

There are some nettles on the paths, so shorts are not advisable, and you may find long sleeves preferable. In September, the ground was dry and boots were an option only, but the woodland trails might be squishier in winter. With only one easy pair of stiles, this walk is undemanding on the knees and fine for your dog.

The walk begins at **Bedwyn Railway Station** or in the village of **Shalbourne, East Wiltshire**, w3w:agreeable.hides.mashing, postcode **SN8 3QH**. If coming by car, if a non-school day, park at a bend in the road in front of the **Junior School** in Shalbourne, otherwise further along or on the roadside. Take care not to block the access route to the homes further along the gravel lane. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

## The Walk




*The Norman Domesday Book mentions the village as "Scaldeburne". Almost as ancient, Shalbourne Cottage (once known as "Johnings") and Westcourt Farm both date from the 1400s. There are three houses here from the 1500s and twelve from the 1600s. Jethro Tull (1674-1741), pioneer of modern agriculture, owned nearby Prosperous Farm where he ran trials of his "seed drill". Other notable people were the Carpenter family who founded the town of Rehoboth in Massachusetts and produced a huge number of descendants, numbering several presidents, plus William Carpenter Jr the astronaut. Shalbourne is a wide country parish as well as a village. It includes Botley Down, an important biological site.*

1 Take a shingle path next to Shalbourne Primary School, marked as a public footpath. Follow the straight level path under trees. After a few bends, the path delivers you to the church of St Michael and All Angels, which is usually open and certainly worth visiting.

*Shalbourne church was built in the 1200s. The 3-light Tudor arched windows were added in 1873. There are a number of inscriptions and wall monuments*

*inside, including one to Jethro Tull. The chancel houses an Elizabethan armoured effigy from 1562 of Sir Francis Choke.*

Turn **right** in front of the church on a tarmac drive. Cross over a road to another tarmac drive, leading to a grass path and out beside a redundant stile to a crop field. Take a clear path straight across the field. At the end of the first field, go over a ditch into the second field and immediately turn **left** at a fingerpost [2017-21: now missing – **don't miss this turn!**] along the left-hand grassy edge. In 300m, at the far end of the field, follow the corner round for just 5m. Now look to your **left** for a narrow hidden path through the undergrowth, leading to a small bridge with a rail [**care!** short boggy section - it may be slippery]. This path leads over a stream into the adjoining field. Keep straight ahead along the generous grass verge on the left-hand side, under a bank of willows. [Feb 2024: at least 6 willows are lying flat so you have to skirt them, and this area has a lot of standing water after rain (around 12cm deep).] At the far side, bear right to find a small signpost and go through a gap to the main road.

2 Turn **left** on the road, over the Shalbourne Stream and immediately sharp **right** at a signpost. Go through a gap in the fence into a field and proceed along the grass verge on the right-hand side, ignoring a footpath on your left, following the stream on your right. *Ahead of you there is the pleasant prospect of Eastcourt Farmhouse under the tree-crowned hill.* At the other side, go over a one-plank stile, across a lane and over another stile onto a grassy slope beside a field. Aim slightly uphill to pass just to the right of the wood ahead, Westcott Copse. In 700m, at the far end, go through a gap in bushes. A narrow path turns right and comes out to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane, passing the swish *Upper Westcott*. In only 70m, immediately after the house, turn **left** again on a footpath. The path leads round the fence and turns **right** by a marker post with a yellow arrow [Feb 2024: lying flat underneath brambles] uphill into woods. It rises onto an open space and continues beside a crop field on your right. Keep ahead on a short farm track leading to a tarmac lane in the hamlet of Stype, with the little green and its abandoned church on your left.

3 Cross the lane, go ahead 30m and bear **right** on another lane, beside the little church on your left. You will be following this quiet lane for nearly 400m. You pass two thatched houses and an irrelevant kissing-gate on your right. There are soon more houses on your left, including the thatched *Hunters Moon* and, opposite them, an irrelevant small wooden gate. Soon, on your right, you pass *Lime Tree Cottage*. Shortly after this cottage, go **right** up a bank, through a black metal kissing-gate on a signed footpath. This is the Little Bedwyn Estate. You are asked to follow the white posts at the start of this long straight easy stroll.

4 Keep straight ahead, walking beside a hedge on your left. *The large house on your left is the historic Stype Grange.* Your path rises next to a copper beech and takes you through a large metal gate onto a grassy path. It now zigzags left-right to join the gravel path coming from the Grange. You pass a pair of brick cottages and come through a black metal kissing-gate. This is the start of the Long Walk, in former times an impressive driveway up to the house. This long straight path leads you between lines of conifers (young giant redwoods) in Stype Wood for an easy-on-the-feet 600m or so. Finally the path enters woods under tall pines and ash and begins to descend. Keep straight on through a clearing and out through a small metal gate to a T-junction with a broad woodland highway. Looking to your

right you will notice that this path is tarmac up to this point. Your direction, however, is sharp **left** on this wide path through the woods.

5 In 150m you come to a side junction. Turn **right** here between upright posts onto another wide woodland path. In fact the "woodland" is really a narrow corridor of trees and ancient coppices with fields on each side, barely visible through the verdure. After 400m or so, you reach an oblique T-junction with a wide farm track. Turn **left** and immediately fork **right** on a wide track. This track shortly curves right uphill. 20m after the start of the curve, fork **left** on a well-trodden path. *Don't miss this path and find yourself confronting a locked gate!* As the path runs under shrubs of ash and lime it widens, soon winding through deeper woods. Finally it graduates to a track running past a kitchen garden and a chalet house, *Juggs Cottage*, leading down to a road. Suddenly, in front of you is the Kennet And Avon canal with a bridge (the Fore Bridge) and the River Dun flowing alongside on the other side of the bridge. From here you have a vantage point to enjoy the view upstream and downstream.

*The River Dun has its source near here and it flows into the River Kennet at Hungerford. But this main section of the river is an important link in the Kennet and Avon Canal, enabling boats to navigate between Bristol and London. The K&A Canal Trust now runs what is mainly a leisure industry – and you would need patience to navigate the 105 locks. The Trust also provides trips for the disabled, since wheelchairs fit nicely along the canal boats.*

6 Your route, however, is *not* over the bridge but **left** between bollards down a bank onto the towpath. (There *is* a path on the other side of the river but it is behind the railway and less appealing.) Follow the towpath with the river on your right and a possible sight of a canal longboat or two. After 150m or so, there is a bulge in the river: this is a *winding hole* where canal boats can make a U-turn. Follow this idyllic route beside horse pastures, passing several moorings for boats. The next bridge, after about 700m along the towpath, is at Little Bedwyn. Your route is straight ahead along the towpath but it would be unthinkable not to see the village. On your **left**, just over the road crossing, is one of the most celebrated restaurants in the region.

*The Michelin-starred "Harrow at Little Bedwyn" was created in 1998 by Roger and Sue Jones. The Harrow is a restaurant, not a gastro-pub, so you can't drop in, unless you booked several weeks in advance (but try 01672-870-871 in hope of a cancellation). The 5-course lunch menu is well worth the £40, but the 6- and 8-course gourmet menus are a treat. Food is so precisely sourced that you almost know the name of the diver who caught your Orkney Scallop. There are three separate cheese platters. But allow plenty of time for leafing through the 60 pages (and that's just the wine list). There's no dress code but your boots will cause some hushed whispers from the well-heeled clients.*

On your **right**, over the double bridge, is the best part of the village with St Michael's little steepled church at the other side of the grass which has picnic tables. *Gillian Anderson ("X-Files", "The Fall") lives in little Bedwyn.*

7 Continue on the towpath past the lock and a road bridge. In ½ km you pass Potter's Lock. In another 800m of peaceful walking, you reach Burnt Mill Lock on the outskirts of Great Bedwyn.

**Decision point.** If you are very tired or running late, you can stay on the tow-path as far as the road bridge and turn **left** on the road (or **right** for the station). But you would be missing the best part of this walk, through the delightful village of Great Bedwyn, to say nothing of the chance of refreshments at the *Three Tuns*.

Go **right** over a small bridge at the lock, over a second bridge, through a metal kissing gate and **left** in a grassy meadow. About half way along, your path veers **right**, through a modern kissing gate to the railway. Cross with great care, go through a kissing gate, on a narrow path, then **right-left-right** through modern housing and **left** on the road in the village, Farm Lane. *A small timbered cottage on your left was the home of Thomas Willis (1621-1675), the first medical pioneer to use the term "neurology" and identify the nature of diabetes.* This narrow lane has real charm with a series of thatched cottages: one reason for its appeal is that it is too narrow for parked cars. You reach the main crossroads in the town. Your route is **left**, passing the station and over the railway and canal bridges. But first, for refreshments, you will find the *Three Tuns* at the top of the High Street where there is also the village Stores (closed Sunday pm). *The "Three Tuns" is a comfortable freehouse, closed Mon, open all day Fri & Sat and till 6pm Sun.* Straight over at the crossroad, you will find the Post Office shop, with its collection of old eccentric plaques, and St Mary's church.

*Great Bedwyn existed in Roman times when a Roman road ran through it. After that time, it lay on the boundary of the Kingdoms of Mercia (roughly the Midlands) and of Wessex and it's possible that skirmishes were fought here. The place name "Bedanheafeford", where there was definitely a battle in the year 675, might be Bedwyn. Bedwyn formed part of the legacy of Alfred the Great in 899 and much of it still remains within the Crown Estate. The width of the High Street is testament to its importance as a market town. There were so many alehouses in Bedwyn (at least 16) in the 1600s that the town was regarded as a nuisance by the surrounding villages. By the mid 1700s, only three remained, one being the "Three Tuns". Great Bedwyn church was built in the 1100s on the site of a Saxon church. The chancel contains a memorial to Sir John Seymour, father of Henry VIII's wife Jane Seymour.*

8 After the railway bridge and the canal bridge, continue along the main road. *Note the perfect long thatched cottage on Frog Lane.* Just after one thatch and before another group of thatches, go **right** on a wide grassy path marked as a footpath to *Bedwyn Brail ½*. After passing some garden workshops, keep left on a narrow path gently uphill beside a mature hedge on your right. *On your left is a good view of the remaining houses of the upper village.* You come through a belt of trees into a large grassy meadow. Turn **left** along the edge of the meadow. As you come down into a dip, your path makes a half turn, veering **right** across the centre of the meadow, heading towards a grey metal kissing-gate visible in a gap in the wood ahead. On reaching the wood, Castle Copse, pass through this (redundant) kissing-gate onto a wide surfaced track with a new fingerpost on your left.

9 After 150m or so through the centre of this foresters' wood, stay on the track as it bends right. Only 50m after the bend, opposite a short path on the right used as a reversing space for forestry vehicles, turn sharp **left** on a wide grassy path by a new 3-way fingerpost. After 250m along this rather rough woodland highway, you are out into an open meadow. Follow a faint path straight down the meadow, staying near the right-hand edge, heading for the bottom right-hand corner. As you near the bottom, keep just to the right of some isolated trees. A narrow path leads you to a wooden barrier with a yellow arrow. The path now runs in a narrow band of enveloping shrubs and small trees, rather like a "hollow hedge". Don't worry if the route seems very overgrown, especially in early summer: it's really an excellent path, perfectly walkable. The path comes out after 150m to run beside a plantation on your left and brings you down to a road.

10 Turn **left** on the road to a junction with a major road and cross straight over onto a tarmac drive signed *Folly Farm*, also a bridleway. The drive bends right towards the buildings of the farm. As you approach the entrance, ignore a footpath on your left and go through the wooden gate to the **right**, then turn immediately **left** following bridleway signs, keeping the garage block on your left-hand side. Continue straight, between a lawn to your left and tennis court on your right. Go **left** round the corner of the lawn and **right** through a small wooden gate where a direction arrow verifies that you were on the correct route (specifically Wiltshire bridleway SHAL3, although it seems to be hardly ever used by riders).

11 Take a narrow path straight ahead between lines of bushes, staying not far from the left-hand side of this very ragged field. In 50m your path suddenly enters a pinewood, so dense that the darkness comes as a shock to the senses. (Soon after entering the wood, after months of rain, you may need to ford a shallow (12cm water) stream which can be 2m wide, although this may be dry in other seasons.) The path through this wood follows a distinct line without branch-offs, although you need to stay alert by looking down at the ground, because this path is so little used that much of it is covered by vegetation. The path zigzags left-right and winds its way gradually uphill. After 200m, you cross straight over a forestry track and your path seems as narrow as ever. After nearly another 200m, your path suddenly leads out into a crop field. At the time of writing, the crop was a belt of maize and a passage had been hacked through it. In case the crop is not easy to cross, simply turn **left** along the edge and, in 100m or so, **right** on the tarmac drive mentioned below. Cross the field and go over an area of grass with another crop field on your right, passing to the left of a solitary oak (useful for guiding your direction), to a marker post visible ahead. Turn **right** here on a tarmac drive. It leads in 100m to a T-junction with a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane, quickly reaching Newtown Farm. Go **right** and **left** round the farm and keep straight on, passing the farm buildings on your left, soon joining another track. Keep **right** here. In 150m or so, you pass on your left a track marked *private* and, 50m later, you reach a signpost indicating a footpath on your right.

**Decision point.** There are two routes from here into Shalbourne. One route requires a drop onto a main road, together with six other snags, and is therefore called the Seven Hazards Route. It is *not* recommended for the elderly or for children or for your dog. It has the advantage that it leads direct to the pub in Shalbourne. If you decide to use this route, you will find it at the end of this text. Otherwise …

12 Ignore the footpath on the right and continue on the track, staying off the wide grass conservation strip, as requested by the notice. Your track runs between the sheds of Newtown Grain Store, years ago a dairy farm, now eerily quiet. The track curves right to meet the main road. Go **left** on the road for 15m and **right** on a track. Veer **left** a fraction and take a narrow path between hawthorn bushes. The path soon breaks free and runs between fields. You pass a signpost indicating a crossing footpath: keep straight ahead into trees, over a brick bridge across a stream. *The Shalbourne Stream runs into the River Dun. On your left are a series of ponds created by the stream.* The narrow path leads through shrubs and trees and comes up to the road in Shalbourne. *The Plough Inn is 300m on your right,* *closed on Monday and every afternoon from 3pm. It re-opened in 2021 with good local ales and a small menu but closed in 2023?-4, unsure whether to re-open. Next to it are the Village Stores, closed Sat and Sun pm.* Turn **left** on the road to the Junior School where the walk began.

## Seven Hazards Route

This is an alternative to the last section of the walk. It takes you into Shalbourne closer to the centre and was therefore the author's choice. It is only for plucky souls.

a Turn **right** at the signpost on a footpath through a band of crops (hazard 1). Go straight up the centre of the next field for 200m and, near the top, continue along the left-hand side for 50m. Cross over a grassy farm track. After another 50m, the narrow field on your left ends and you reach a large crop field (hazard 2). There is no visible path (hazard 3) and you need to veer to the **left** to cross the field. As you look to the high hills in the distance, locate the bare hillside of Ashley Down which is the leftmost point on the ridge. Aim just to the left of it, where there is a solitary tree on the other side of the field. When you reach the tree, you will finally a marker post and a gap in the hedge. Go down the short slope ***extremely carefully*** onto the main road (hazard 4).

b Cross the road to a narrow path opposite. Weave your way through a tangle of thorny shrubs (hazard 5) and go straight down a grassy path between lines of bushes. Soon there is an open field on your left. At the bottom, go over a stile and straight ahead over another overgrown stile (hazard 6) and through a nettly patch (hazard 7). Your path goes over a long bridge across the Shalbourne Stream, along a grassy path beside paddocks to the road in Shalbourne. Turn **left** on the road to reach the *Plough Inn* (*but see above*) and the Village Stores and, a little further, the Junior School where the walk began.

## Getting there

By car: coming from the Reading/Newbury direction, one way to Shalbourne is on the A4 to Hungerford and then on the A338 signposted *Salisbury*. Shalbourne is signposted after 3 miles. **But** there is a totally beguiling scenic route from the A4 which bypasses Hungerford. Less than 1 mile before Hungerford, turn **left** signposted *Lower Denford*. Follow this charming lane past a mill, over streams and canals and the railway. Immediately bear **right** at a junction as for *Hungerford, Inkpen*. After ⅓ mile on this wonderful tree-lined road through Hungerford Park, turn **left** as for *Inkpen*. In ½ mile, turn **right** as for Sanham Green. This road leads to the A338: turn **left**. The turn-off for Shalbourne is in 1½ miles.

By train: begin at **Bedwyn Station** (regular service from Reading and Paddington); from the approach road, turn **left** on the main road and begin the walk at section 8.

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