

St Neots Club Site town, river & countryside walk

Camping and Caravanning



Route Summary

A circular walk that will take you through medieval and modern history, through nature reserves and along quiet country lanes and pathways.

Route Overview



Category: Walking
Rating: Unrated
Surface: Moderate
Date Published: 21st September 2018
Difficulty: Easy
Length: 16.790 km / 10.49 mi
Last Modified: 21st September 2018

Description

Despite the surrounding area generally being referred to by the name of St Neots, the areas of Eaton Socon and Eynesbury pre-date St Neots. Substantial manors and settlements are known to have existed in Anglo-Saxon times. The churches of both were also established before St Neots Priory was founded. Under the Normans the west bank of the river came under the barony of Bedford, and in 1965 a change in country boundaries saw it move into the town jurisdiction of St Neots. Since then the village has undergone major development to become what can be seen today.

It was during the Norman period that a castle was constructed at Eaton Socon, but 15 years later it was demolished on the orders of Henry II, possibly because permission was not given. The earth mounds are still visible, with the best views being from the east bank of the river.

Prior to crossing the river, take time to wander around the Barford Road Pocket Park, which was developed in 2001 and has rapidly become a haven for a range of wildlife. Within the park a willow plantation can be found, the wood from these trees is used in the production of cricket bats. There is an abundance of birdlife across the various habitats from wildfowl, to kingfishers darting along the banks, with the neighbouring reeds and grasses teeming with buntings and warblers. Due to the proximity to the site, it may be worthwhile to come back at dusk to look for pipistrelles and brown long-eared bats.

From Pocket Park cross the river via the lock gates,. Although the river was used as a means of communication and transport since Roman times, these were only constructed during the 1960s to allow controlled navigation of the river. At the far side of the lock and marina is the old mill, the current building was constructed in 1847 and operated by the Jordan and Addington families. They merged Ryvita with the Jordan name, continuing as part of Associated British Foods as producers of cereals, muesli and cereal bars. The mill eventually closed in the 1950s when all equipment was removed.

Leaving the river behind there is an unusual sight opposite St Mary's Church. Built in 1827 the 'Lock-up' was used to hold local felons before transferring them to the magistrates court in Bedford. On the opposite side of School Lane is St Mary's Church, which although looking as if it was built during medieval times, only dates to the 1930', the previous building having burnt down in a fire.

The older part of Eaton Socon stretches along the main road, which was the original London to Edinburgh road until the bypass was constructed. The Old Sun public house is 17th Century, while slightly further down the road is The Waggon and Horses; the buildings date to 1700 but only became licenced in 1799. An even older establishment can be found along The Great North Road – The White Horse (unfortunately boarded up when this route was walked in July 2018) apparently dates from the 13th Century and claims to have been visited by Charles Dickens, Samuel Pepys and Douglas Bader. Dickens even mentions it in his novel Nicholas Nickleby.

On the other side of the A1 the walk enters the county of Bedfordshire and a more rural and agricultural area than seen so far. The countryside is flat and open with large fields giving unbroken views of the isolated buildings and hamlets that make up this part of the countryside. Just off the route of this walk is the site of Bushmead Priory, only a small concern when compared with Priory of St Neots, but still influential in the area.

North of the Priory site is the disused RAF Little Staughton, used initially by USAAF Bomber Wing as a maintenance base for B-17s, or Flying Fortresses as most knew them. It was passed back to the RAF when Mosquito and Lancaster bombers were based at the airfield until it closed just after the end of WWII.

After passing underneath the A1 again you reach the relatively modern Eaton Ford. This village was originally called Sudbury with a history going back to Anglo-Saxon times. At the time of the Norman Conquest, there was a small settlement around the manor, now called Crosshall Manor. Since the 1960s there has been an extensive development of housing, but some old farmhouses can still be seen.

Although there are now few buildings of any antiquity there are still traces of the old field systems. The western edge of the settlement would have been bordered by reed beds and extensive water meadows close to the river. All that remains is a small remnant of the original meadows near to the river – this has been designated as a wildlife habitat site since 2001.

Waypoints

Start at Camping and Caravanning Club site Reception

(52.22006; -0.27463)



To Eaton Socon Weir and locks

Route a;

Walk to the river bank at the bottom of the site and turn left following it all the way to the locks. This will give good views of the castle mounds just after passing under the Willow Bridge (it is made of metal) and before the locks as well as pleasant riverside walking.

Route b;

The alternative is to follow the path comes off the driveway into the Camping and Caravanning Club Site. This will take you across open fields and meadows then through most of Barford Road Pocket Park.

Eaton Socon Locks

(52.21324; -0.28149)



After negotiating the locks and weir go along School Lane into the centre of Eaton Socon, remembering that until the mid-1960s this was a relatively small village. Walking along the Great North Road it is worth stopping to think what life would have been like up until 1971 when the village was bypassed with the current route of the A1. The walk along The Great North Road gives a contrast in building styles and ages from quaint old farmhouses to modern industrial units at the southern end.

3 Footpath to west of A1 underpass

(52.20934; -0.29564)



After passing under the A1 road there is a total change in environment from the urban hustle and bustle of Eaton Socon to the quieter rural Bedfordshire countryside, with Buzzards soaring and Skylarks singing away. Ignore the path that forks to the left and is marked on Ordnance Survey maps as it does not exist. Take the one almost directly in front. The route will alternate between quiet roads and footpaths as it meanders through small hamlets. Depending on conditions underfoot it is possible to take alternative routes via roads along this section. Although most of the footpaths along this section of the route are marked. When walked in July 2018 some were not maintained, so probably not suitable for wearing shorts!

Enjoy the view from the summit of Mount Pleasant just before arriving at Duloe, although not spectacularly high it does give good views across the fields in all directions.

4 Enter Eaton Ford at A1 Underpass

(52.22932; -0.29225)



Pass back under the busy A1 road and back into Eaton Ford, another post-1960 development. The route goes directly towards the ancient river crossing through what used to be a small settlement of Sudbury. It is not until almost at the river that there are any signs of older buildings. There are steps on the left-hand/north side of the bridge with which to access the riverside path back towards the Camping and Caravanning Club Site.

5 Town Bridge

(52.22725; -0.27347)



Take the steps just before the river, but prior to going under the bridge make you spend a few moments in Sudbury Meadows. Once under the bridge enjoy the Riverside Park – an oasis surrounded by the urbanisation that is modern St Neots. On reaching the car parks keep to the right and follow the riverside path back to the Camping and Caravanning Club Site.

