

Walk 3

Village Hall, Footpath to Hook End Lane, Footpath to Lower Basildon, Church Lane, Thames path and loop to Church Lane, Basildon Park, Park Wall Lane, Bethesda St

This is a 4 ½ mile walk which covers Lanes, fabulous old buildings and a number of prominent landmarks in the Parish of Basildon. You'll need boots in the winter but will be fine in something lighter during the summer months. There is picnic potential.....

There is a split in the walk at Basildon Park which is National Trust owned. If you aren't a member and don't wish to pay to visit the house and gardens you will need to walk up Park Wall Lane. This is included in the walk to hopefully make things easier.

The start:

1. The Village Hall

Built in 2004 following a number of sizeable donations by local benefactors, the village hall you see in front of you replaces an earlier structure. The land was gifted to a trustees body and is still an important meeting and social place.

Walk across the recreation ground to the far right corner, descend the steep hill on the footpath (footpath 4 if you have a local footpath map) and stop at the bottom by the road.

2. Hook End Lane

Hook End Lane is a delightful English lane, complete with high hedging, steep banks and native wild flowers. In the 1923 book 'A History of the County of Berkshire', Hook End Lane is described as being a Roman path linking the Thames area with (one would assume) any settlement at the top of the hill (now Upper Basildon) and beyond.

Turn right and walk down Hook End Lane.

3. Tomb Farm / Nobes Ghost

Now known as Royal Berks Shooting School, Tomb farm is most well known for one of its former occupants, Mr Nobes. Nobes had a tomb constructed in 1692 for himself due to his Quaker beliefs and was buried there after his death in 1699. Unfortunately the tomb did not receive the care it deserved and over time has fallen away to very little other than the odd stone to show the 2.5 metres square construction. Perhaps this explains why the Ghostly figure of Nobes, riding his white horse on moonlit nights is said to haunt the village.

Continue along the lane until you see a footpath sign on your right. This is footpath 14 on the Basildon leaflet and will take you over the fields across to Lower Basildon

4. The Grotto

As you walk up the valley side on the footpath look to the left. On a clear day you'll see the Thames and also the Grotto. The Grotto is a large white thameside building, best viewed when travelling by train between Goring and Pangbourne. Within the building was a room decorated completely of shells which sadly was dismantled at some point in the distant past. The building was at one point a sports institute before returning to a private residence. It is now in a state of considerable decline and there's real concern for its future. Local legend has it that Lady Fane's daughter haunts the building having either

been locked in a chest or fallen down a well. The contradictions don't stop there with the truth being that the lady in question died peacefully in old age.... We shall probably never know the hows/whys etc

At the end of the Path turn left and follow what looks like a private drive (it's part of the footpath) all the way to the road.

At the end of the drive turn right and walk towards Lower Basildon

5. The A329

You are now walking along a Roman Road which at one time linked Silchester to the South and Dorchester on Thames to the north. It's more than likely much older due to its proximity to the Thames. Today it is the busiest road in the Parish.

Cross the road at the first available opportunity.

Continue along the A329 for about a third of a mile until you reach Church Lane on the left. Along the way you will see.....

6. Iron Age Mortuary Enclosure

In the fields to your left are traces of an Iron Age Mortuary enclosure. This is an enclosed space (imagine an open roofed building) in which the Iron Age dead will laid out as part of some sort ceremony. It is not known whether the enclosure kept animals away from the bodies or allowed animals to use the bodies for food. There is also evidence of dwellings between the road and Thames dating to the Iron Age.

7. Roman Basildon

In the same field, Time Team conducted an excavation in 2001 in an attempt to discover the full story behind the Roman Villa which could be seen clearly in Aerial Photographs. What they found was that the main section probably ran through what is now the West Coast Main line. This is further collaborated by the finds of Navvies in 1839 whilst building the Great Western railway. They found two complete mosaics which were drawn by the Antiquarian Charles Roach Smith before being destroyed.

The Building itself was thought to be a farmstead which developed more of a Roman identity as the centuries of occupation passed. It was well placed just off the Roman Road and had the Thames at its back.

8. The Crown Inn (former)

Having moved onto the left hand side, the first building you will pass is the former Crown Inn. This is now a private dwelling having formerly been a restaurant and before that a public house. The pub itself dates back to the 19th century but this building is early 20th century with the original structure demolished around 1910.

Now look across the road at the row of houses.

9. Black and White Houses

These handsome black and white houses were built around 1865 and replaced existing older cottages on the same site. Similar houses can be seen at the entrance to Kiln Ride. At one time they were part of the Morrison estate – more on that later.

Turn Left into Church Lane and walk down it, passing over the modern bridge.

10. The Railway

The Great Western Railway passed through Lower Basildon in 1839 and probably made the land lady at the Crown Inn an awful lot of money. We have talked briefly of the Roman Villa it passes through, but also note the bridge over the Thames in the distance that it passes over (you'll struggle to see it on this walk), This is Basildon Bridge and was the basis for Turners 'Wind, Steam and Speed' picture.

Brunel designed almost every detail of the Great Western Railway including station buildings, signal boxes and benches. He also surveyed the route prior to its construction and opted to follow a smooth course which did not rise through sections of hill but circumnavigated them instead. The Great Western railway achieved critical acclaim for the standard of travel it offered and was known as 'Gods Wonderful Railway.' Today, the service is run by First Great Western and is yet to receive such an accolade.

Cross the railway bridge and walk down to the Church at the bottom of the hill. The gate is unlocked and you can do a circuit of the churchyard and also go inside the church as its unlocked during the day.

11. St Bartholomews Church

This church was formerly the Parish church prior to the building of St Stephens in Upper Basildon. It dates in places to the 13th century (nave and south door) with later additions (15th century ornate roof timbers) and is today managed by the Churches Conservation Trust. There is a timed lock on the door enabling visitors to access the building during daytime hours. The Churchyard has numerous dedications, including one to Jethro Tull who was born in the Parish and later became famous as the Father of the agricultural revolution. Tull introduced basic machines to ease the burden on farmers - a result which affected his popularity greatly depending on whether you were a farmer saving money or a labourer losing work. A stone to him can be seen in the churchyard but instead of giving its exact location I'll leave you to explore the churchyard and find it yourself as there is much more than just Jethro Tull to see. As a second task, inside the church, see if you can find the 15th century inscription.

Next to the Church is Church Farm which dates to the 15th Century. These location of these two buildings and the Celtic / Roman evidence nearby illustrate the location for the earliest Basildon settlers in this area.

Coming out of the church by the way you went in - look left - towards Beale Park is a collection of old farm buildings including.....

12. The (former) Boat Museum

The boat museum (now closed to the public) contained a comprehensive collection of vessels as used on the Thames over the last century or so. There are no plans to re-open it.

Now walk a short way back the way you came. Look for the footpath on your right and follow it around the old rectory, formerly the Manor House for the Manor of Crooks and Dunts which included this section of Lower Basildon and land either side of Hook End Lane. Follow the footpath to the Thames and bear right. As you walk along the path, keep looking left as in places you can just about see the railway viaduct over the Thames....

13. The Thames

One of the most famous rivers in the world, the Thames runs through the Parish of Basildon at its northern edge. Initially it must have been a draw for early settlers who built an Iron Age settlement of sorts and then a Roman farmstead on the site, probably because the river was fordable there. Years later,

the victorious Norman army crossed just up the river in 1066 and later on it was a prized asset in the Civil Wars of the medieval and 17th Century. Its use now is more leisurely and there are lots of wildlife to see if you have time on your hands and a good pair of binoculars.

14. Gatehampton and the Ferry

As you reach the Thames you'll see a small cottage across the river and to the left. This is part of the hamlet of Gatehampton and was once the ferry keepers cottage. Until the late 1960's it was possible to cross the river here for a small charge. Clive Williams book about Basildon has a picture of the ferryman and cottage on the cover.

You now have a choice – retrace your steps back to the top of Church Lane or follow the path to view the Pill Box on the opposite side of the Thames before turning around. A final option leaves this walk and see's you follow the path all the way to Pangbourne.

15. Pill Boxes

If you keep walking, look across the river you'll see a pill box which is looking a bit past its best but which nevertheless was an important defensive feature of the river. Constructed in the early years of WW2, this was positioned to slow any Thames based advances of a German offensive.

Return up Church Lane, over the Railway Bridge and turn left.

16. Old School House

This building dates back to the late 19th century and at one point was the only school in the Parish. Its closure and subsequent conversion to a house have left the primary school in Upper Basildon as our only school.

The archives in Reading have a number of day books relating to the activities in the school, the inspections and names of teachers, pupils etc. Inspections tended to be a little up and down, as did class numbers which fluctuated widely during times of illness.

Decisions Decisions.....

If you are a National Trust member or wish to pay and walk around the House and Gardens follow the road past the petrol station and along to the entrance of Basildon Park. Now cross the road and enter through the large gateway.

If you wish to skip this bit, cross the road at the petrol station and walk up Park Wall Lane

17. Basildon Park

Basildon Park is today owned by the National Trust. Prior to this, it was owned by the Morrison family who owned much of the parish. The present building is 18th century and is open to the public for tours and walks around the garden.

In its time it has been a US military headquarters as well as a country home. It was also asset stripped at one time before being sympathetically restored by Lord and Lady Ilife. As a result, the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York has a Basildon Room containing the panelling from one of the large rooms at the house.

Explore Basildon Park and leave it by the far entrance - watch out for cars who will also be leaving by the same way.

15. Lodges

As you arrive at the exit of Basildon Park you will see a lodge building almost straight ahead (or on your right if you've walked up the hill). Godwin Lodge is listed and was once part of the Basildon park estate. It is now split into two properties.

18. Harley House

This Queen Anne style house was actually built post 1912 and is believed to have been designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens who also styled the Cenotaph and a number of other buildings in the parish. It was used as the estate office of the Morrison family and is now listed.

19. Old Oaks

As you walk up the hill towards the recreation ground you'll see a number of handsome oak trees. In the Spring of 2015, the Parish Council kicked off a small project to measure the larger Oak trees within the Parish. The results were interesting and showed a concentration around the top of Aldworth Road and the surrounding lanes. The data has been shared with a number of local and council groups to help in their understanding of the area.

Follow the road until you reach Bethesda Street and enter the village hall car park area via the road entrance. We have completed our walk.

Further Reading / Research

Basildon Berkshire – Clive Williams

Newbury Museum – Iron Age Display

Basildon in Postcards – Clive Williams and David Thomas

Authors own notes

Parish Council retained records

Berkshire Heritage Gateway website

A History of the County of Berkshire (Volume 3, 1923) - Various