

Rickmansworth Waterways Trust

Strolls from the Lock Number 10 – To Cassiobury Park via Croxley Green and return

Time approximately 3 hr

Distance 7 miles

From the Lock Centre, turn right and go up the steps to the road. Turn right, past an old building, originally named 'The Railway Inn', and used mainly by canal workers. On the other side of this is the River Chess, and then builders' merchants, Travis Perkins. This was the site of the first Rickmansworth Railway Station. Continue into Church Street; take first R into Skidmore Way, L into Waters Drive and R into Norfolk Road. Walk along a passage between #75 and #77 into Talbot Road. Turn R here, and continue until the road joins the High Street opposite the 'Coach and Horses'. The road on the right is called Town Wharf/Wharf Lane, and refers to the days when there was canal access to gas works, near the present gas holders, for coal delivery. Turn R along High Street, passing a house called 'The Elms' on the R with a statue of Joan of Arc directly in front.. The author George Eliot spent her summers in the countryside here, away from London.

Cross the road at a mini roundabout on the other side of the railway bridge. Keep the church on your right and a small road on your left, to go onto footpath #29. The path passes the grounds of the Royal Masonic School on the left, and playing fields on the right, until it reaches the banks of the River Chess. This is a chalk stream, fed by ground water stored in the chalk sub strata. Like other chalk streams, it is shallow and narrow with a gravel base and clear warm water. Watercress grown in this river valley was sent to London via the railway next to the lock centre.

Turn left to walk along the river bank. Kingfishers and Little Egrets live on this stretch of the river. After about ¼ mile, cross over the river by the footbridge, and continue to a T-junction of paths. Go right (footpath #2). At the open field, a little further on, take the left hand path by the hedge (footpath #7, which becomes #5 then #7 again). After 15 minutes, there are some steps, and then the path exits onto Croxley Common. Barbara Woodhouse, of dog training fame, lived near here. This is where the Croxley Green Revels are held in June each year, immortalised by John Betjeman in the film 'Metroland' (1973).

Head left across the common and a couple of roads in a '10 to 12 o'clock' direction, towards a short white fence on the right of a large building (date 1770), until you get to a small pond. Turn left on the road here (Little Green Lane). There is another pond on the right, at Little Green, reached after about a 5 minutes walk. Walk straight on here, where the footpath sign is to 'Rousebarn Lane'. At the end of the track, the path continues past 'Coachman's Cottage' to a field. Turn right at the field edge (Footpath # 3 and 4). In the next field, turn left where indicated by discs on a post, cross a stile into a small wood, and then out into another field. Turn right (Footpath # 3). Dell Wood on the immediate right was bought by the Woodland Trust in 1986, and is now managed again. They have coppiced the hazel, cutting it back severely, with the re-growth having many uses, for example, hedge-laying. Coppicing results in sunny open areas, which encourages plants and attracts birds and butterflies. Dell Wood contains many dells or hollows, where flints and gravel were excavated in the past. These were often used in local buildings. The footpath passes through a hedge, where there is a fine view of Whippendell Woods ahead.

Cross straight over the next road – Rousebarn Lane- and up the hill in front (footpath #31). Half way up this, and to the l off the path, is another flint quarry. At the brow of the hill, the path enters West Herts golf course (established 1890). Be careful of any balls coming from the right. Just inside the next wood is a hollow tree of huge diameter, very decayed but still alive.

The path emerges at the Grand Union Canal, at Lock # 77, Ironbridge Lock. There are engraved dates on a stone by each set of gates, one of 1896, and the other of 1858. These are dates of repair or widening of the lock. One set of gate beams is metal, the other of oak. The River Gade runs alongside the canal on the opposite side to the tow path, with a weir to the left on the far side of the bridge. It runs in and out of the canal from here. This area, Cassiobury Park, was granted by Henry 8th after the dissolution of the monasteries, to a family who later became the Earls of Essex. The 4th Earl was paid £15000 for giving permission for the canal to be built through his land in 1796, and in addition the canal was widened and landscaped in this area. This can be seen along the canal to the left of the lock. The towpath was built on the west side to allay his fear of poachers. To pay for this, an additional penny per ton of cargo was charged for boats going through this section of canal. It probably helped that the Earl was on the board of the canal company at the time. A later Earl of Essex was responsible for the Metropolitan Line railway terminating a mile outside Watford, as he refused to allow a tunnel to be built under the park. There was even a station built in the town centre in the

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expectation of the line continuing further. Winston Churchill and the future King Edward 7th were both guests at Cassiobury House at the start of the 20th century. The parkland was sold in 1909, and the land is still subject to restrictive covenants made at that time. The house and the land occupied by the golf course were put up for sale in 1922. The house, unsold, was demolished in 1927, the grand Grinling Gibbons staircase ending up at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the turret clock at the British Museum. Sadly, the ornate castellated park gates were demolished as late as 1967.

Turn right onto the tow path, to follow it back to the lock centre. This will take about 75 minutes. Note the grooves in the iron posts on the corners of the bridges, where the tow ropes from horse drawn boats have cut into them. The next lock is Cassio Bridge (#78) which has a lovely old lock cottage. After this, a large railway viaduct carries the Metropolitan Line across the canal, on the other side of which is the Bridgewater Basin boat marina. The next bridge is new, built on top of the old one (dated 1921) when the road was widened. There are some old working boats on the far side of this. The 'Elizabeth' (converted 1936) has a mooring containing many old painted metal signs, and the 'Elstree', a converted GUCC Co. boat (Grand Union Canal Carrying Company, extant from 1934-1948), is also moored here. A short distance on is another, but derelict, railway bridge.

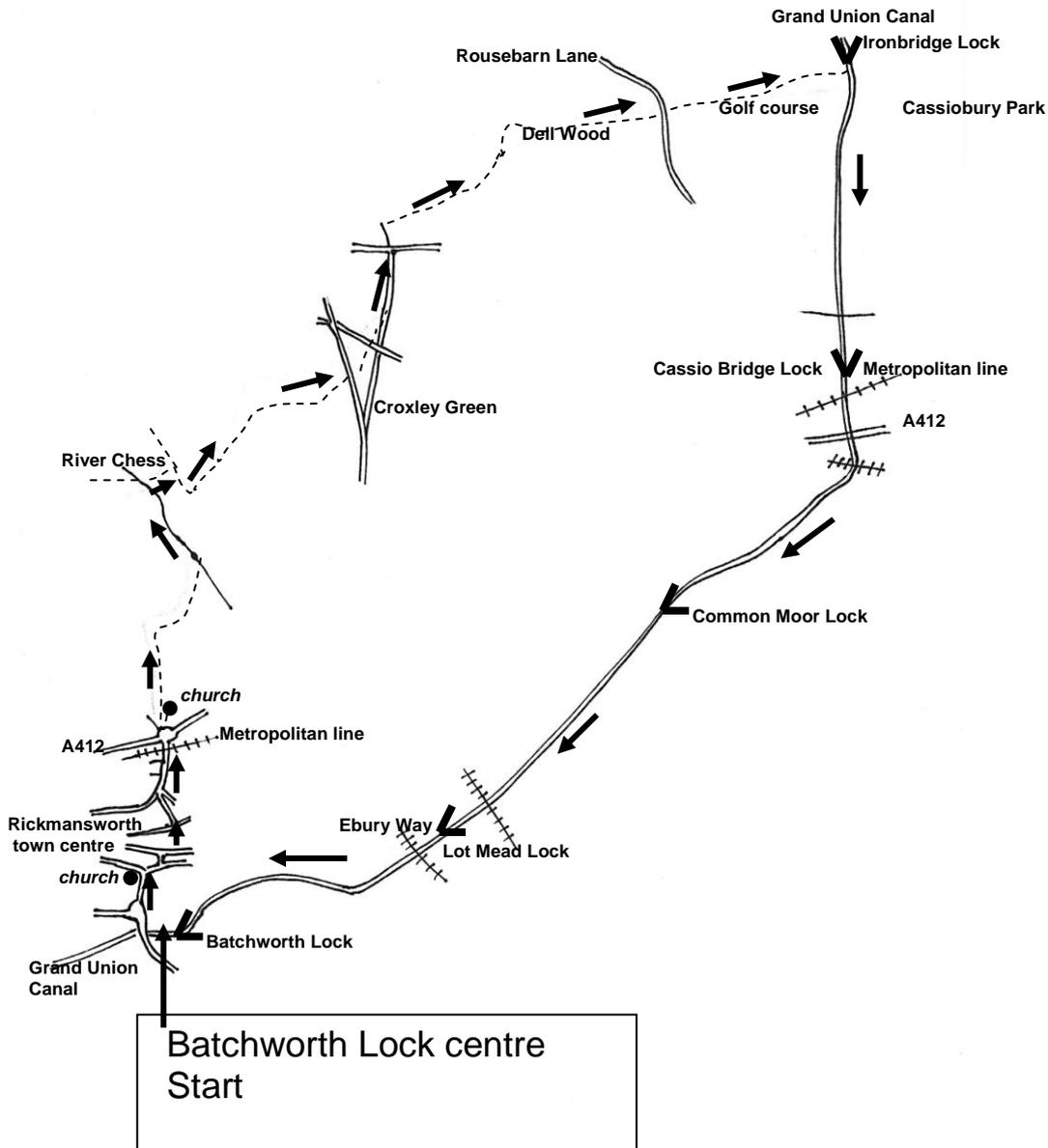
A little further on, the far side of the canal is the site of Croxley Paper Mill, built in 1830 by John Dickinson, who already had mills at Hemel (Apsley and Nash mills) and Batchworth. Dickinson had invented a new process of making paper in a continuous, instead of an individual, sheet. In 1887, Batchworth mill closed, and Croxley became the main factory. Wood pulp from Scandinavia was carried up the Thames and then onto the Grand Union Canal. Coal was also transported by canal from the Birmingham area until about 1970. After this, the railways were used, a branch of which ran directly onto the factory site. The mill closed in 1980, with the current industrial estate and housing put up in its place. The canal is very wide here, and its entrance to the mill site can still be seen, with a branch line running parallel to the main line for some distance.

The next lock is Common Moor (#79), repaired in 1867. The River Gade can be seen on the far side of the canal, and will enter the canal below the next lock, Lot Mead. A mile post 'Braunston 74 miles' is on the other side of the bridge below Lot Mead, which carries the Ebury Way, originally the Rickmansworth to Watford railway line, over the canal. Braunston, Northamptonshire, was, and is, one of the important places on the canal, as it is the junction between the Grand Union Canal and the Oxford Canal. The latter connects the Midlands with London via Oxford, but was built earlier than the Grand Union, which has a more direct route to Central London. There is also a lock distance marker - the first boat to reach this had the benefit of entering the lock first. As it can take up to 20 minutes to get through a lock, the time saved could be vital. From this point, the tow path passes numerous house boats on both sides of the canal. The lock centre is reached in about 20 minutes.

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