

Rickmansworth Waterways Trust

Strolls from the Lock Number 13 – Withey Beds Local Nature Reserve and return

Time approximately 1 hr
Distance 3 miles

Turn right from the Lock Centre, up the steps to the main road, go left to pass over the canal, continue to the roundabout and on to Moor Lane. Cross to the second small road on the right (the first one is for Moor Park Golf course). Walk to the end of this service road, and continue onto a footpath passing into the Moor Park estate. After about 100 yards, turn left through the entrance into Moor Park from the main road. Cross and turn right. The entrance to the Withey Beds Nature Reserve is on the right through a green gate.

The reserve comprises 7.7 hectares of mainly wetland, with drier areas and drainage ditches plus a stretch of the River Colne. Three Rivers District Council acquired the Withey Beds under a compulsory purchase order, which was only the second such order made for environmental purposes in England. It was designated as a Local Nature reserve in 2003. Wetland habitat used to be common around Rickmansworth, but has been declining for many years, as it has either been drained, or dug out for sand and gravel. At one time, willow was grown here for commercial use, and cattle grazed in the drier field area, but it had become neglected and used as a waste dump. Since 2003, there have been many improvements to try to restore the site. Several ponds and scrapes have been dug, but only the largest pond (to the left of the track) holds water all the year, as underlying gravel means that although it is wetland, there is good drainage. Some of the scrub has been removed, and willow coppiced to open up the area and allow further diversity of flora and fauna.

Walk along the track, and turn right to cross a bridge over a drainage ditch. Water generally remains in this throughout the year, so a dipping platform has been erected to the left of the bridge in order to allow close access to the water. Follow the wooden board walk, which passes through an area covered with phragmites reed. Look to the right when you reach an open area. The willow 'bush' about 50 feet from the walkway is actually a willow hide, with access to the inside. This has to be maintained by cutting or weaving in the long withies which grow each year. At one time, willow was coppiced each year to produce withies, used for baskets, firewood, fences and other similar items. Behind the notice board at the entrance to the reserve is a small area planted with three varieties of willow used for basket making. It is hoped that enough withies can be produced to make Withey Beds baskets! Most of the larger willows seen throughout the reserve are 'crack' willow (named because of its common habit of breaking branches). The re-emergence of the wetland has caused some of the oaks in this area to die.

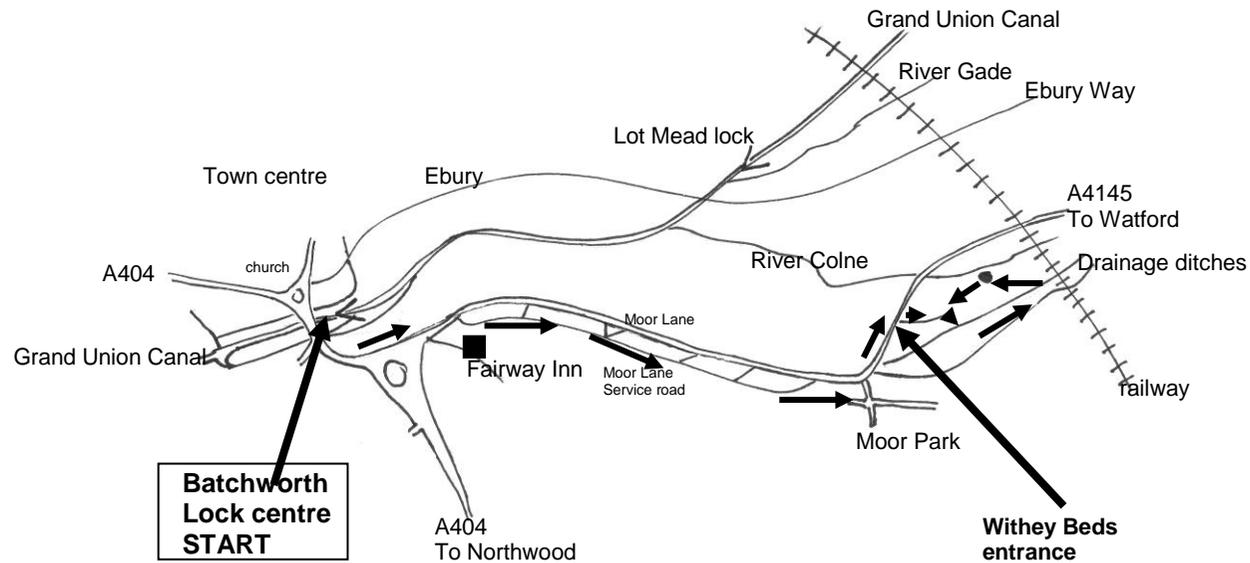
At the end of the board walk, cross over the ditch again (this end is usually drier) and go through the gate into the field. Walk left towards the gate at the far end. The WW2 pillbox in the field has been converted into a bat hibernaculum by sealing doorways and open parts of the roof, and restricting the size of gun holes. Brown long eared bats have roosted here. The field is a drier area, and needs to be cut (or grazed) to encourage the less rampant plants. A diversity of habitats within the Withey Beds will hopefully encourage a wide range of plant and animal species to flourish. Indeed, a survey carried out in 2002 indicated that there were several locally rare species here, one of the factors which led to its LNR designation.

The walk returns to the Lock Centre by the same route. It is worth looking into the field on the opposite side of the road to the Withey Beds entrance which often has a variety of water birds as it frequently floods. Mistletoe can be seen in some of the trees further on; the lime tree to the right of the barrier into Moor Park contains several plants. The Moor Lane service road was once lined by lime trees as it was an approach to Moor Park Mansion. There are still a few left on the right of the road, but age and the great storm of 1987 has taken its toll. The Lodge House at the end of the approach road still stands, now on the opposite side of the main road.

These walks are written by Jillian Christensen and are provided free by The Rickmansworth Waterways Trust but a minimum donation of 20p is suggested to help support our education programme. Thank you!

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