

Highlights of the walk from California Country Park

1 California Country Park

California Country Park is well worth a longer visit in its own right and takes its name from the 1930's Holiday Camp which was called California-in-England (the nearby Post Office was called "California" because of the large number of fruit kilns along the Nine Mile Ride). The lake was created from an existing pond by John Walter III after he purchased the land in 1873 and added it to his huge Bearwood Estate. The clay dug from the lake was used to make bricks which were used in the construction of Bearwood College (once the home of the Walter family) and the Times newspaper building in London (the Times was founded in 1785 by John Walter I and remained in family ownership until 1966). After a colourful history, including use as a speedway track in the 1930's the site became a Country Park in 1980 and is a haven for wildlife particularly the 8000 year old heathland bog (known as the Everglades) which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest containing horsetails and rare Marsh Orchids.

2 Nine Mile Ride - Greenacres Industrial Estate

The 100 yards through the Industrial Estate is not attractive but soon opens into farmland with views towards St James' Church on the hill ahead. There are usually Aberdeen Angus cattle in the fields on the left.

3 From White Horse Lane to "The Crossroads"

Midway across the second field is a bench with a charming inscription and fine views west to the Bramshill Plantation in the distance and towards Farley Hill further north.

4 Around Rectory Farm

There are good views over the village of Finchampstead and the Memorial Park towards the Blackwater Valley and Hampshire border. Wildlife is abundant here including Roe Deer, Green Woodpeckers, Buzzards and even the occasional Cuckoo.

5 FP9 Bluebell Wood

In the spring the woods to the right of the footpath are full of bluebells.

6 Churchyard

On the left is the new extension to the Churchyard opened in 2016. The main Churchyard contains several mature yew trees and many interesting graves including two Victoria Cross recipients General Sir John Watson and Colonel AS Jones. Also in the graveyard are several members of the Booth family, founders of the Salvation Army, and the Corfield family for many years Vicars of the Parish. In the early spring there are carpets of snowdrops around the front of the Church.

7 St James' Church

There has been a Church on this site since at least the 12th Century (the first recorded date is 1120) and it is possible that a religious sanctuary of some kind existed on the hill even before Roman and Saxon times. The Domesday book mentions the "Parish" but not the church itself, the font is dated to 1030 and the Norman apse is a later addition to an existing Saxon structure. The Church has been added to over the centuries and the present brick tower was added in 1720 – it is still used to light beacons for events of national importance such as the Queen's Golden Jubilee. The building was extensively restored and modernised in 2010.

8 The Green

The triangular green opposite the noticeboard is the site of two Oak trees planted to commemorate Queen's Jubilees. The original Oak was planted for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 and is marked by a plaque in the stone plinth on the far right of the plot. The tree itself was in poor condition and was cut down in 2003. The second tree was planted in 2002 to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II with a stone detailing the history of the "Queen's Oak"

9 Queens Oak

The Queens Oak is the only pub in England to bear the name. It was originally called the White Horse (and the adjacent road is still called White Horse Lane) but was renamed after the planting of the original Queens Oak in 1887.

10 Bridleway

This bridleway – known locally as the "gallops" re-crosses the farmland below St James' Church and offers views of the Church through the trees.

11 Giant Puff Ball Mushrooms

In Autumn if conditions are favourable you may see Giant Puff Ball mushrooms in these fields which can grow to the size of footballs but are so light once the spores are released that they blow around in the wind.

12 Warren Woods

Warren Wood is an 8 hectare area of secondary birch oak, pine woodland and a large meadow. The site also contains a scheduled ancient monument, a round burial mound, which is the largest example of a 'bell barrow' in Berkshire and dates back to between 2000 and 1300 BC