

A Stroll Around Town

Walking the London Loop

Mark Moxon





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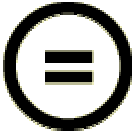
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A Stroll Around Town: Walking the London Loop
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Cover Photograph: The Church of All Saints in Foots Cray, Sidcup

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Foreword

I'm very fond of the London Loop¹. Sure, it's a recreational path rather than a proper long-distance walk and an awful lot of the trail plods through suburbia, but the Loop has a definite charm. I've lived in and around London since 1991 and I've spent ages wandering up and down the Thames and exploring the city, but the London Loop introduced me to the capital's suburban surroundings and the lush countryside on the edge of town.

Not only is the Loop a great walk that's full of variety and fascinating history, it's been designed to be really easy to reach. The Loop is split up into 15 day walks, ranging from 7.25 to 11.75 miles, and all except one of the start/end points lie within travelcard zone 6 (the exception being Banstead, the end point for day 5 and the starting point for day 6). For those living in London the Loop is therefore perfect for tackling in stages, and although it's obviously possible to do the whole Loop in one go, it's just as rewarding to spread it over the different seasons.

¹ Technically this walk is called the LOOP, which stands for the London Outer Orbital Path, but too many capital letters make my eyes swim, so I'm going to stick with the more readable 'Loop'.

It's surprising just how much greenery there is out there. London's Green Belt forms a ring around the capital, and the Loop traces the edge of the conurbation to take in some wonderful scenery. On most Loop walks you'll reach a point where you could be anywhere in the country and London seems a world away, but round the next corner you'll effortlessly slip back into the suburbs. The Loop takes in all sorts of different terrains, from rolling hills to royal parks and canals to concrete jungles, and while some parts are grotty and others palatial, as a whole the walk is a treat. If you want to discover more about London and have had enough of the tourist attractions in town, I thoroughly recommend the Loop. It's a delight.

The travelogue for this walk and many others can be found at my personal website at **www.longdistancewalks.com**, where you can also find walking tips, a photo library and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

I've released this book and its companions via a Creative Commons Licence, which means you are free to distribute it to everyone and anyone, as long as you distribute it on a non-commercial basis and make no changes to it. If you know someone who might like this book, please pass it on; I make no money from it, but I

do enjoy the thought of people reading it and recommending it to their friends.

Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I walked the London Loop, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, March 2005
www.longdistancewalks.com

Route

The excellent official route guide, *The London Loop* by David Sharp, makes walking the Loop considerably easier than it would otherwise be. As with all official route guides for long-distance paths in the UK, the guide contains sections of 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey Explorer maps, specially highlighted to show the route. All you need to walk the Loop is this book and a compass; the directions in the book are impeccable and most sections are well signed, though be warned that some boroughs have yet to put up any markers at all, and in others the local retards smash them up for fun.

Not only does the route guide contain all the information you need to walk the Loop, it's also chock-a-block with interesting historical information. There are plenty of photographs of the walk in the book, which are fun to compare with the walk as you do it, and there's a useful appendix that explains which trains, tubes and buses you need to catch to get to each section. Here's the route that the book describes, going clockwise from Erith in east London:

Day	Walk	Miles
1	Erith to Old Bexley	8.5
2	Old Bexley to Jubilee Park	7.25
3	Jubilee Park to West Wickham	9
4	West Wickham to Hamsey Green	8.5
5	Hamsey Green to Banstead	10
6	Banstead to Kingston	10.75
7	Kingston to Donkey Wood	9
8	Donkey Wood to Uxbridge	10.5
9	Uxbridge to Moor Park	9.25
10	Moor Park to Elstree	11.5
11	Elstree to Cockfosters	10.5
12	Cockfosters to Enfield Lock	8.5
13	Enfield Lock to Chigwell	8
14	Chigwell to Harold Wood	10.75
15	Harold Wood to Coldharbour	11.75
Total distance		143.75

It's worth pointing out that this is only a suggested itinerary. If you're really fit then you could easily polish off two sections in one day; conversely you could break it down into countless shorter walks, as each section can be broken in at least one place. The terrain is gentle throughout, though, so most people should be able to manage the above.

The London Loop

Day 1: Erith to Old Bexley

Written: 14 April 2003

The Loop doesn't start off on a particularly high note, though that's not to say that the first day's walking isn't interesting. Thankfully the last half of this short introduction to the Loop contains enough treasure to make it worthwhile; the only problem is the first half from Erith to Crayford, which is a little bit depressing. Luckily it's not that long; at 8.5 miles, day 1 is one of the shorter walks on the Loop, so it's not long before you can get stuck into happier places like Hall Place and Bexley.

Erith itself is pleasant enough, though it can be desolately windswept. There's obviously a market for newly-constructed blocks of flats overlooking the pasty green Thames, and the promenade along the river front has the markings of an up-and-coming area; but while Erith has a pretty little public garden and a lovely pier that sticks out into the river, it's marred by incredible amounts of industry just a stone's throw from the town itself. Wandering past the flats, an easterly wind brings familiar sounds from ahead; it's the sound of heavy industry, in this case the worthy but noisy metal

recycling plants that line the road out of Erith. It's just a taste of what's to come.

The Great Wrecker's Yard in the Sky

As the metal factories grind to a halt at the edge of town, you're plunged straight from suburbia into greenery, a familiar event on the Loop. The Crayford Marshes are at the very edge of London, and they feel like the ends of the earth; indeed, the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge that carries the M25 over the Thames at Dartford is clearly visible in the near distance. Huge ships chug up the river at this point, and littering the landscape are obvious signs of man's endeavour; the Dartford power station stands erect in the distance, and over the river the mounds of greenery aren't natural hills, but the results of landfill. However, the most obvious imprints from man's big-soled hobnail boots are the car wreckers' yards that line the last mile of the River Darent. They're fascinating, and oddly profound.

I took some time to sit there, hair blowing in the wind, looking at the stacks of cars lining the river. Every car wreck tells a story, and it's harrowing. Over there is a white car that has quite obviously driven straight into a lamp post, with the lamp post winning hands down; that green car looks like it's hit something, flipped over and landed on the roof, ripping the top off and crumpling the bodywork into a concertina of crushed metal; and the

red one over there has obviously been hit from the side, caving in the driver's side while the passenger seat is still pretty much intact. Every car in the Crayford Marshes tells a story, and a large number of them look like graves. Out there on the windy scrub of the outer Thames, the car yards are undeniably sad places, a monument to boy racers, drunk drivers and the genuinely unlucky.

The River Darent and the tributary of the River Cray are much the same; they flow through scrubby marsh that's speckled with factories that seem to be recycling everything from wood to earth, and by the time I reached Crayford, I realised what it was that was bugging me. At many places on the Loop you come across man's disregard for nature, mainly in the shape of rubbish lining the path, or litter choking an urban stream, but from Erith to Crayford the problem is subtly different; yes, there's a litter problem out here, but it feels like industrial litter. Every few steps there's a new eyesore, whether it's a burnt-out car rusting by the River Cray, a discarded half-empty bag of cement that's spilt into the grass verge and hardened into an ugly modern sculpture, or a path that looks as if the earth is desperately trying to regurgitate the rubbish that's been stuffed into the landfill sites over the river.

But then, quite suddenly, I crossed a bridge over the Cray and spotted a picturesque little scene on the river.

It's only for a moment, but there on the western outskirts of town are some houses that back onto the river, and for just a few yards the river looks loved; boats lap against the banks, tended gardens slope down to little patios, and only the nearby electricity pylon hints at the surrounding industry. I didn't know it at the time, but this signals the end of the desolate industrial graveyard of the marshes and the start of the kind of pleasant suburban walking that makes the Loop what it is.

Wonderful Hall Place

It doesn't take long to wander through Crayford, with its pleasant park breaking up what would otherwise be a fairly nondescript town centre. Luckily the Loop soon ducks off the road and back to the River Cray, where I bumped into a group of elderly walkers who nodded with the friendly recognition of fellow walkers; the full backpack I was heaving round the route in training for Land's End to John o'Groats was a bit of a giveaway. But I'd decided to check out nearby Hall Place as a good spot for lunch, so waving goodbye I plunged along the river, weaving through crowds of kids who'd been let off school early to enjoy the blossoming spring weather that was making this walk a real pleasure.

Hall Place requires a detour from the Loop, and it's a highly recommended diversion. Entry is free, and if

you ignore the fact that there's a Beefeater pub shoehorned into one of the outhouses, this council-run stately home is a great place to rest your aching feet. Hall Place is a bizarre combination of 16th Century stone and 17th Century red brick, the two types of architecture stuck together like a child's experiment with Lego. In the gardens an hilariously overblown collection of topiary hedges looks over a pretty garden, while the River Cray flows through the grounds and gives groups of boisterous children plenty of opportunity to ignore the signs asking them not to feed the ducks. It's discovering places like this that make the Loop so rewarding; it's almost a shame to have to hit the trail again.

The next stage takes you to Bexley and the end of this day's walk. The walk itself is fairly nondescript, with negotiations of roads and railways leading to the edge of Churchfield Wood, which lives up to its name by combining a field, a wood and eventually a church. This church, St Mary's, heralds your arrival in Bexley, a lovely little village that is full of ancient buildings, lots of traffic, and a huge collection of enticing pubs. It's a great way to finish the day; it's a world apart from the industrial nightmare east of Erith, and is much more conducive for the obligatory post-walk beer.

Day 2: Old Bexley to Jubilee Park

Written: 14 April 2003

The second day of the Loop is by far the shortest, coming in at a leisurely 7.25 miles, but it manages to pack in some wonderful sights. You start off in a lovely little village, wander along a delightful rural river, pass a church with a spectacular graveyard, skirt through boring suburbia, climb a hill to a delightful pub, negotiate a huge road junction, wander through pretty forest, discover some historical monuments, and finally you arrive at the end with plenty of time for a pint or three. That's not bad for such a short walk, and if you're a masochist like me you can easily combine day 1 and this day to create a full day's walk of 16 miles. Don't push it, though; day 2 of the Loop is best savoured slowly.

The start is promising enough, though Bexley's many pubs won't be much of a draw at the start of the walk (well, not if you want to finish it, anyway). As with most days on the Loop, leaving suburbia is a sudden event, and so starts a slightly boring patch of scrubland, which, if you're lucky, might be peppered with rusting cars and landfill activity, as it was for me. Don't worry; today's walk is nothing like the industrial quagmire of day 1, and this is about as grotty as the landscape gets.

As I'd decided to combine days 1 and 2 into one

long walk, I was rather pleased to end up back on the old River Cray, which forms the backbone to a lot of day 1. I was pleased mainly because the stretch of the river on day 2 is utterly delightful; whereas day 1 follows a choked Cray, surrounded by litter and industrial waste, day 2 sees a lovely stretch of clear-watered rural river, populated by swans, spanned by picturesque brick bridges. It's a perfect place for a wander, and if you're doing this walk on its own, then you'll have plenty of time to bring along a picnic; the River Cray at this point is a great spot to drop the cloth, crack open the hamper and start on the sandwiches. Enjoy yourself; discovering this sort of place is what the Loop is all about.

This stretch of the river also sees the first London Loop markers (at least, the first that I spotted). The first day isn't way-marked as the London Loop – instead you follow the obvious signs for local walks such as the Cray River Walk – and here, for the first time, you can see the kestrel logo of the Loop on the distinctive round markers.

Through Foots Cray

Foots Cray itself doesn't take too long to cut through, though there is a rather long walk along the back of the houses and past the football pitch where the local football team, the Cray Wanderers, struts its stuff. It's

not too long, though, and suddenly you come out into an open grassy area that can only be described as bizarre. To your left is a factory that looks like something out of a science laboratory; it's quite possibly the back end of St Mary's Hospital, but there's something distinctly chemical about its make-up. Just up from that you can make out the telltale flags of a golf course, the first of many golf courses that the Loop cuts through. And up ahead, under a couple of monstrous redwood trees, is a distant red brick building that turns out to be a pub, and a lovely little pub it is too. This is Sidcup Place, which apparently used to be council offices; this is the kind of office that most people would only dream of, and happily the council has left, leaving the building to give people pleasure instead of endless bureaucratic grief.

Unfortunately the next stage of the walk is a good example of the kind of work that would have filled the drawers at Sidcup Place before the beer barrels rolled in; it's a hideously complex interchange between the A20 and the A222, and while you wouldn't even give it a second thought in a car, I found it a bit of a shock to be walking through a cacophony of busy concrete after such lovely countryside. Luckily it doesn't last long, but if anything it rubs in the need for green spaces and walks such as the Loop; without the Green Belt, all of London would be like this. It doesn't bear thinking about.

I got a little lost in the next stage, Scadbury Park, but only temporarily; the good thing about the Loop is that it's very hard to get genuinely lost, and soon enough I stumbled on the kissing gate that the guidebook had been going on about. The markers on the way into the wood had been prised off, broken and sprayed by the lobotomised twats who make up a small but irritating percentage of city dwellers, but I can't blame them for getting lost; I simply stumbled onto a fork in the path that I couldn't find mentioned in the text, an unusual event as the Loop guidebook is one of the clearest walking guides I've ever had the pleasure to use. Still, it wasn't long before I found the hill up to the strange moated manor house in Scadbury Park, and there I met a scraggly collection of kids, out enjoying the heady air of the start of the school holidays. They marvelled at my pack, and they marvelled at the fact that I'd walked all the way from Erith; they couldn't even believe that I was planning to walk to Petts Wood station, which to them might as well have been on the other side of the planet, rather than just a couple of miles away. As they waved goodbye and wished me good luck, I found myself warming to this area of London. Not every section of the Loop is pleasant, but this section most definitely is.

As for the moated manor house, it's weird. There's a moat, loads of tumbledown brickwork, and a bloody

great chimney standing up in the middle of it all, making it look like a strange industrial homage to the oracle at Delphi. It's just off the track and it's a worthy detour, as is the short back track to visit the memorial to William Willett in the next wood. Apparently Willett was a staunch supporter of daylight saving, and according to the memorial this wood was purchased as a tribute to his defiant insistence on the introduction of British Summer Time. It's a strange thing to be remembered for, but I suppose someone had to do it; as I hobbled towards the end of my long day's walk from Erith, I was certainly glad for the extra hour that Willett's campaigning had given me. It enabled me to take my time on what is one of the easiest and most pleasant Loop sections in south London.

Day 3: Jubilee Park to West Wickham

Written: 25 September 2002

This walk was the first Loop section I did, and what an introduction it is; this is a lovely walk, with plenty of variety in the scenery, a healthy dose of ancient and recent historical stories, and a good pub *en route*. It sums up all that is good about the Loop.

Even the link walk to the Loop itself is intriguing (well, it is for a link walk). The main drag in Petts Wood

is lined with shops, and these shops are neatly tucked away under a long, triangular roof that's broken every few buildings by black-and-white striped gables. This would be unremarkable as a one-off, but when this repeated pattern stretches along the high street as far as the eye can see, it's a strange but not unpleasant effect. Soon enough, though, the path breaks through the suburban houses, winds through a small wood, and reaches the Loop at Jubilee Park, one of those sudden arrivals of wilderness that has you looking around in surprise, searching for the buildings, industry or roads that you normally associate with London. The Loop has a habit of doing this, of plunging straight from suburbia into wilderness, and it's one of its most endearing features.

Unfortunately the wilderness doesn't last, and there follows a fairly lengthy wander through houses. This may sound boring but I love wandering through the suburbs like this; it's a chance to see how other people live. Houses are as individual as their inhabitants, and when I walk through a place like Southborough on a weekday, I rather enjoy being nosy. Have a peek through people's windows as you walk past; snatch a glance through the hedges into the gardens; wonder at the immaculate house that's stuck next door to the one with three-foot-high grass and peeling paint, and imagine what kind of neighbourly arguments must take

place over that. Suburbia's fun, if you know how to look at it.

Village Life

After a pleasant little woodland walk and yet more suburbia in the shape of Crofton, the Loop shakes off its fairly standard start and rolls up its sleeves, leaving suburbia well behind; it's not until the end of the walk that houses make a significant impact on the route. After a hill with a bench that's well placed for a quick stop, it's down into the village of Farnborough, home to a picturesque village centre that soon leads to an atmospheric churchyard with a bench under an old yew tree; it's a good place for a rest.

From St Giles the Abbott the Loop winds downhill to a great example of what the Loop does so well – exploring the ancient seats of long-departed aristocracy. There's something deeply satisfying about wandering through estates that were obviously quite opulent in their day, but which have now dissolved into ruins and ivy-clad reminders of ancient riches. Perhaps it's the affirmation that it doesn't matter how rich you are or how self-important you think you've become, because time will always win in the end, eroding your follies and burying your memory. High Elms is fun because about the only thing that remains of the Lubbock family's estate is one of the first Eton Fives courts to be built;

dating from 1840, it's managed to survive along with the stable block and lots of strange trees, but that's about it for the Lubbocks.

From the erstwhile grandeur of High Elms the Loop takes you through farms and fields towards the next delight of this part of the Loop, the Holwood estate. It's a delight because you never get a completely up-close and clear view of Holwood House, instead glimpsing it from the bottom of the hill on which the imposing house stands. It's this mystery that creates the atmosphere, an atmosphere that feels a long way from London; this is aristocratic countryside, and even when the Loop starts to climb the hill, it's not towards Holwood, but instead on a leftward tack that seems to avert its gaze from the stately pomposity uphill.

This feeling of being kept at arm's length from the rich and famous continues at the top of the hill, where the Loop passes the Wilberforce Oak. This is the site where William Wilberforce and William Pitt met to sort out the parliamentary bill that would abolish the British slave trade, and it's commemorated by a large stone bench that was built in 1862. Unfortunately for us commoners, it's all cordoned off behind a fence, and a fence that makes no bones about what it's there for. We're only allowed to peer in at the place where those more privileged than us made those momentous decisions. Ah well, that's life.

Caesar's Well

The Loop still has some lovely surprises left, even though it's not far to the end of this section. Wandering down the hill takes you to Caesar's Well, a spring that bubbles clear water even today, filling the pleasantly shaded Keston Ponds with water that once provided Holwood with its supply. If all these reminders of high society are making your head swim, don't panic; just down the road is the Fox Pub, a good spot for a pint of non-aristocratic real ale and a pleasant place to sit outside on a sunny day.

It's soon back into the rules and regulations, though, as the Loop enters West Wickham Common, complete with the first Corporation of London board on the Loop (but by no means the last). These boards contain all the byelaws that apply to the various commons dotted around London, and they're worth a read, especially for all the stuff about not cursing on the common, a sign of times that have most definitely gone by.

After a wander along the edge of the common, the Loop comes out onto the road, where some nondescript old oaks sit on a grassy corner by the A232. They might not look like much, but these trunks are possibly 700 years old (and maybe more), which is no mean age, even for an oak. It's a good way to end this walk, a lovely day that's full of life... some old, some new and some satisfyingly transient.

Day 4: West Wickham to Hamsey Green

Written: 4 October 2003

The southern half of the Loop is full of surprises, and one of the biggest is that there's an awful lot of pretty countryside just south of Croydon. This isn't meant to belittle Croydon, but even its biggest fans don't associate the place with sweeping vistas and the rural idyll, but within a stone's throw of the urban business centre of Croydon are some of the prettiest sections of the Loop. This section makes a lovely walk, and the only drawback is the challenge in getting home from the end point at Hamsey Green.

From Hayes station the Loop Link along the back alleys of Hayes is pretty easy going, and it doesn't take much effort to reach the Loop as it heads through suburbia to a recreation ground, where a small stone marks the spot where the Greenwich Meridian slices through London. Walking between the pitches takes you from the eastern hemisphere into the western hemisphere, and it's not until Chingford on day 13 that the Loop crosses back into the east, though there's no marker on that section.

Soon enough the path leads you to the pretty church of St John the Baptist, where the local school kids can sometimes be seen skulking around in the woods, smoking and generally avoiding their teachers. It's not a

bad place for a stop, with its old yew trees and convenient seats, and the walk downhill to the A2022 is easy. If you're carrying the official guidebook for the Loop, then here's a good opportunity to play the Photo Game; try lining up the book's photo of the church with reality, and see if you can spot what's changed. It's a lot more fun than it sounds...

Good Views

The next mile through Spring Park, Halfpenny Wood and Foxes Wood is pleasant and there is a reward at Addington Hill, where the view over Croydon towards Crystal Palace is great. This is a popular place for school trips; when I was there one poor girl got terrible vertigo on the viewing platform, even though it's only a few feet off the ground and is built to withstand the worst treatment.

Back on the Loop, there's a chance to see Croydon's trams in action – the Loop crosses a tram track, which is quite a novelty for those who don't live near the TramLink line – but soon the path leads to Heathfield, a stately home with pretty gardens that are worth exploring. There's another viewpoint a little further on, this time looking over Addington, and even though the Loop at this point passes through some fairly populated areas, it plunges into more woodland and out into an area of grassland where you can play the Photo

Game once more. When I walked this section the pretty little heath in the guidebook was dotted with the wrecks of three rusting cars; no, I can't work out how they got there either, but it was quite an achievement, if an unwelcome one.

I then lost the path on the way to Selsdon Park Road and had to fish out the compass to guide me to the pylon mentioned in the book, but from there to Hamsey Green the Loop is easy to follow, passing through Selsdon Wood and through a bunch of farmers' fields. And there, at the end of this short day's walk, is the Good Companions pub on Hamsey Green, a welcome resting spot where you'd be well advised to take a break, in preparation for the inevitably long journey home to East Croydon and then home.

Day 5: Hamsey Green to Banstead

Written: 15 March 2003

The biggest challenge with this section of the Loop is getting there. Hamsey Green is in the middle of absolutely nowhere, and if you're coming from west, east or north London, you're in for a hell of a journey. Getting to East Croydon is the easy part; then you've got to find the bus stop for the 403 bus (you'll have to ask where it is, but it's a fair walk from the train

station), and even then it's a good 30 to 40 minutes to Hamsey Green. I ended up with a bus driver who didn't know the route, but a kind old woman on the bus told me where to get off, at the stop just after the Good Companions pub as you enter Hamsey Green.

Luckily this walk is moist definitely worth the effort of getting there; it's a lovely route that takes you through some beautiful chalk downs, past some interesting industrial scars and along the outside of an intriguing prison. The worst part is that it starts at the perfect end point – a pleasant pub on a village green – but you can't have everything, I suppose.

Into the Chalk

From the Good Companions pub the Loop takes you past some unattractive suburban houses, but at least they're interesting. When I walked past, there were a number of drives being used as makeshift car garages, with locals hacking away under oil-blackened bonnets while other drives were stacked with cars in dire need of attention. The road ends pretty quickly, though, and the countryside kicks in with a vengeance, opening up in front of you in the way that will be familiar to anyone who's done more than a day or two of the Loop.

The path bends round to the right, crossing fields and eventually passing the only trig point on the Loop. It's not a lot to look at – it's just a concrete pillar, not

unlike a modern version of the coal tax markers you come across on the canal sections of day 8 – but it’s interesting that the Loop doesn’t come across more of these markers. It’s an indication that the Loop isn’t the sort of walk that goes over the top of mountains, but instead weaves its way pleasantly through a suburban green belt. The Loop ain’t the Pennine Way, and that’s part of its charm.

After turning down the hill from the trig point a large valley opens up in front of you. It’s a beautiful sight, though I’d taken such a long time to get to the walk that the sun was way past the midday point and it shone straight into my eyes as I looked along the valley; this would be a great spot in the morning, though. The Loop dips straight down into the valley and through a surprisingly industrial part of Whyteleafe, and as it goes up the other side there’s a great view back over town to a huge scar in the chalk cliffs that you’ve just walked along the top of; it’s an old quarry, and at the top of the road I sat down and took in the views, while a wind chime blew pleasant tunes from the house at the end. It was a very pleasant and tranquil suburban scene, despite the sign on the house opposite that asked owners to stop their dogs from leaving unwanted deposits in their drive...

From Whyteleafe the Loop winds through a small forest towards a diversion that’s well worth taking.

When I did this walk the build up to war in Iraq was well underway, and Kenley Aerodrome was a particularly meaningful place to visit, with its long runways and its history as one of the places from where the planes took off to fight the Battle of Britain. Later on in the Loop, on day 10, the Loop passes Bentley Priory, the headquarters of Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain, and it's interesting to tie the two places together by foot: the commanders and the commanded.

Along the Ridge

After the aerodrome the Loop zigzags through some fields and past an incredibly ugly block of rooms that looks like it's been transported from an urban hell-hole and dumped unceremoniously in the middle of a perfectly pleasant village and right opposite a thatched cottage (I doubt the owners were terribly happy with this addition to their village). Quickly escaping this eyesore, the path crosses a field and arrives at an observatory, home to the Croydon Astronomy Society. As I wandered past, I spotted a bloke taking pictures of the observatory with a digital camera, and it turned out that he was taking pictures for the observatory's website. He invited me in and showed me round the telescope, firing up his computer to show me the results; it was a lovely little break in the walk, and a great setting for stargazing.

Through some woodland and across a road, the Loop passes the Fox, one of those pubs that you wish you lived round the corner from. It's not a bad idea to pop in for a quick pint, especially if the wind is picking up; although the walk gets really stunning from here, it also gets a little exposed, and if there's a cold wind, you'll wish you had some artificial help from a pint or two of ale to get you through. From the Fox you pass a bizarre collection of obstacles on a fitness course, and then it's into the chalk downs proper; there are great views along Happy Valley and a lovely picnic spot overlooking Farthing Downs, and then its on to the downs themselves. The climax of the whole day's walk is without a doubt this section, which provides stunning views over Coulsdon while following the road along Farthing Downs to what's known as the Folly. This collection of beech trees that provides a vista that you don't often get around London. It's wonderful.

Unfortunately the section through Coulsdon itself is boring, with a seemingly never-ending uphill suburban road that eventually passes a grotty pub before finally reaching the countryside again. This is horse territory, especially at the weekends, when lucky little girls get to ride their horsies through the countryside, chewing up the paths so walkers end up with mud-caked boots and heavy feet. Luckily there's plenty to look at, from the Little Woodcote Estate with its strange black wooden

farmsteads and good views of London in the distance, to the lovely gardens of Oaks Park, a throwback to the days of aristocrats and horse racing that provides the Loop with a pleasant diversion for a summer afternoon. If you don't have time to explore Oaks Park, the path winds through some confusing turns that are thankfully well signposted, and eventually you find yourself walking past the walls of HM Prison Highdown. Check out the walls; they've quite obviously been designed to keep people out as well as in, and the combination of fencing, clever wall design and cameras everywhere makes it pretty obvious that this isn't the sort of place you want to live. But right there, next to the prison at the end of the path, is a house that's overlooked by the cameras, and what an odd place it is; it's built like a strange continental kind of villa, a bizarre house in a bizarre location.

Finally, the Loop ends with some winding greenery and a short stint crossing a golf course, until the turn off to Banstead Station. The station hides itself well; the only giveaway is the timetable outside, but it's a welcome sight after the ups and downs of the downs. What a lovely day's walk.

Day 6: Banstead to Kingston

Written: 2 October 2002

After the stunning ridge walking of day 5, this section comes as a bit of a disappointment. Sure, there are some pleasant bits, but there's an awful lot of walking through town, and although a large part of the walk is along the River Hogsmill, there's little charm left in this choked-up old stream as it struggles through a thin green strip, hemmed in on both sides by pretty uninspiring suburbia. Luckily the destination is one of the best ways to end a day's walking; this is only day on the Loop where you can end your walk with a pint by the Thames (the final day doesn't end anywhere near a pub) and that's got to be worth the effort.

But there's a long walk between Banstead Downs and the welcome beer of Kingston, and it starts off in pretty uninspiring style, with a short stint across a golf course and a longer one through the backstreets of East Ewell. Thankfully things take a turn for the better once you step out of town and into Warren Farm, when the countryside finally kicks in. The next bit of greenery, Nonsuch Park, is well worth exploring, and although Nonsuch Mansion requires a short detour from the Loop, it's highly recommended; as with so many days on the Loop, the stately homes *en route* are serene, well-maintained and happy reminders of Greater London's more rural past.

Nonsuch Mansion may still be standing, but Nonsuch Palace has all but disappeared. Dating from the reign of Henry VIII, all that remains of this grand palace is a wall that the Loop follows soon after leaving Nonsuch Park, but if your imagination is keen then make sure you turn right just before leaving the park, where three stone markers along the side of the pavement mark out parts of the old palace. The furthest stone has a map of where the palace stood, and although it's no work of art, it's worth the short detour.

The River Hogsmill

From Nonsuch Park the path winds through a thin wood and past the wall of the old banqueting hall of Nonsuch Palace, and a few minutes later you reach the little town of Ewell. I liked Ewell; it's got plenty of interesting buildings along the side of the road, and you get the feeling that you're walking into an area of London that not only has history, but rather a lot of old money invested in it. Perhaps this is no surprise, as today's destination, Kingston, is one of the more exclusive addresses in London, but before then you have to brave the River Hogsmill, which the Loop now follows all the way to the Thames.

Perhaps I'm being a little harsh, but I found the Hogsmill profoundly disappointing. I really fancied the idea of following an urban stream all the way from its

source to where it meets the Thames, but where some urban rivers are pretty, some aren't, and the Hogsmill isn't. It starts off promisingly enough, draining from its source in the pleasant Upper Mill pond in Ewell's Bourne Hall Park, and the walking is easy and not unpleasant for some time. But it soon palls, and the real problem with this part of the walk kicks in: it's monotonous. The green belt through which the river winds is, for the most part, bland inner-city parkland, and although the buildings on either side aren't that intrusive, this is a long, long way from the sweeping countryside of previous days; it's the sort of environment that's suitable for a quick walk to get the dogs settled down for the night, but it's not that good for a day's excursion. Basically the walk along the Hogsmill is boring.

The river was also pretty grotty when I walked along it, and if there's one thing that's depressing it's seeing a river choked with rubbish. I have to say I was surprised; in some areas of London I wouldn't raise an eyebrow at the piles of litter and rusting shopping trolleys you so often see in the muddy banks of the city's streams, but I really didn't expect to see such a mess this close to upmarket Kingston.

The final kick in the teeth comes a mile from the Thames, when the Loop passes the lovely-sounding Berrylands station and turns west to head for the centre

of Kingston. This cycle path, which follows Lower Marsh Lane, would be pleasant if it wasn't for the fact it runs right past a sewage works; unfortunately, though, it stinks, and once you've managed to get the unpleasant smell out of your head, you're plunged into the suburbs of Kingston. There are a couple of interesting things on the way – the Coronation Stone and the late 12th Century Clattern Bridge – but if, like me, you've already had enough of the Hogsmill, put your foot down and get to the Thames, where the Bishop Out of Residence serves a fine pint of Young's bitter.

This is by far the best part of the whole day. It's not a great part of the Loop, this.

Day 7: Kingston to Donkey Wood

Written: 27 March 2003

This is a fascinating walk, not because it's full of amazing scenery – it's not – but because it's a lesson in how varied London really is. This section of the Loop starts out in Kingston, one of the poshest parts of suburban London, and ends in Hatton Cross, right under the screeching flight-path of Heathrow's jets. It's a walk from rich to poor, a journey from a place where people complain about an imaginary litter problem, to a place where people do nothing about a genuine one. At the start of this walk you're surrounded by people who

drink tea at four o'clock; at the end you bump into the poor lost souls who tuck into their first cans of Stella at 9am. This is a nine-mile journey from tweed jackets to tracksuit bottoms, and it's a walk every Londoner should do at least once.

There are no London Loop signs for this entire section, which is odd after the well-signed day 6, and this can make navigating through Kingston high street tricky if you don't know where you're going; if you can find your way past the likes of John Lewis, Waitrose, and Marks and Spencer to the bridge over the Thames, then cross to the other side and turn left into Bushy Park. This would be an idyllic piece of countryside if it wasn't for the constant drone of the aeroplanes above; no doubt the planes of Heathrow annoy the wealthy inhabitants of Kingston, but things get an awful lot louder as the day wears on.

Ignore the planes and enjoy the weeping willows along Heron Pond before crossing the tree-lined Chestnut Avenue that leads to Hampton Court Palace. You can't really see Hampton Court from the Loop and it's too far away for a convenient detour, but luckily the Loop has some wonderful spots of its own. For example, just over the Avenue is the entrance to Woodland Gardens, which is a gorgeous place. I walked this section in spring, and blossom drifted on the ground like snow while ducks quacked around on the grass. It's an

utterly delightful garden, as is the neighbouring Waterhouse Plantation, with its lovely keeper's cottage on the outskirts.

Into the Middle Class

If Kingston is where the rich people live, the Loop soon drifts into the realm of the middle classes. Along Cobblers Walk the Loop takes us through Teddington; this is *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* territory, as you can see from the contents of the green recycling boxes outside the expensive houses by the golf course. The Loop is still very much in the money here, though when I walked across the golf course there was a massive amount of construction going on; it looked like a large, modern block of offices rising from the ashes of the old clubhouse – or maybe it was a new clubhouse, I couldn't tell – but soon enough the Loop ducks back into suburbia, through twee names like Bye Ways and Willow Way, and finally into Crane Park.

Crane Park signals a change of vibe. Until this point the entire trip is very respectable, a showcase of places where everywhere is a desirable residence. Crane Park itself is lovely, following the River Crane through a thin but pretty strip of parkland, but it's the graffiti that strikes you as soon as you enter the park; this is the first piece of urban culture on this section, and it's an indication that things are changing.

It's worth taking a break under the Shot Tower in the middle of Crane Park to savour the halfway point. There's a bridge over to an island, which provides paths through a nature reserve, and there are large earth banks all around that were used to contain the explosions that were all too common in the gunpowder mills that sat here on the Crane back in the 16th Century. These days the biggest noise is from Heathrow; it's a sign that the planes are getting closer.

Under the Jets

From Crane Park the Loop crosses a railway line and enters Hounslow. Compared to Kingston this is a different world, and Hounslow Heath manages to retain its rough edge. The heath has a chequered past and a chequered future; it's a rough place, both botanically and sociologically, and when I was there it was amazing how many people on the heath had long hair, multiple piercings and Staffordshire bull terriers. It's easy to get lost, and a sign on the way in mentions that the adder, England's only poisonous snake, has recently been spotted here. It doesn't help you feel at ease.

But because it's so wild, it's a great place to walk, and if it wasn't for the planes it would be wonderful; unfortunately the traffic over Heathrow is extremely low by this stage, and it's impossible to get away from the roar of engines. Some of them are low enough for you to

see through the windows, and as the path enters Brazil Mill Woods, where you can admire the rubbish and smile at the locals out walking with their Stellas and their Superkings, it's difficult to understand how Kingston can be so close, and yet so very far away.

The Loop continues along the River Crane, squeezed between industrial units and the river, and the jets get louder and louder, until in Donkey Wood it's time to duck off the Loop and along a long stretch of the A30, past some huge British Airways hangers and directly into the flight path. And there, on the left just before you get to the tube, is a little farm complete with horses, right under the jets; frankly, it's a bizarre sight.

To be honest, it's a relief to get on the tube, if only to get away from the noise. You're unlikely to want a relaxing pint after this section of the Loop; if you're not bothered about walking the Loop backwards, I'd recommend you do this section the other way round. It's much more uplifting that way, but then again, doing it the right way round certainly makes you think...

Day 8: Donkey Wood to Uxbridge

Written: 4 April 2003

I love walking along canals, and this walk is a delight for anyone who loves the gentle chug-chug of narrow boats. Not only that, it winds through a fascinating

business park – fascinating if you don't work there, that is – and towards the end passes some very pretty lakes. I wasn't expecting it to be this interesting, but I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

Right from the word go things start to improve. After the downward spiral of day 7, where the Loop goes from the posh corner of London into the flight-path of Heathrow, today starts by heading directly away from the invasive pounding of the jets and through some fairly forgettable suburban walking along the River Crane. Soon enough, though, the Loop arrives at Cranford Park, where things open out into pleasant grassland and the River Crane starts wandering through some wonderfully isolated countryside... and this time the constant drone in the background is the M4 motorway, which isn't very far away.

Try to blank out the white noise of the cars, though, because there's a great example of a pretty church and an old aristocratic estate right by the motorway. If St Dunstan's Church was in the middle of the countryside it would be a delight, especially with the stables of the Earl of Berkley's old estate still standing nearby, but urbanisation hasn't been kind to this corner of the country; even if you can ignore the incessant droning from ahead, the sign at the entrance sums things up nicely:

Anyone caught taking drugs in the park will

be reported to the police

It's a brave new world...

The Union Canal

The noise from the M4 doesn't last long, but there's still a short suburban hop before the Loop starts enjoying itself again. When I wandered past the Crane pub after a strange roundabout loop along the edge of a field, the local wags were slumped along the fence, sucking on pints of Stella and cracking wise ones about whether I was lost; one can only assume they don't see many long-distance walkers round these parts, but that's a shame, because on the other side of a large roundabout is the Union Canal, and it's great for walking.

When you first get to the canal, don't be put off by the monstrous Nestlé building looming in the near distance; sure, this part of the canal is industrial, and it becomes industrial again as the Loop reaches Uxbridge, but make sure you take the short diversion to Bull's Bridge, just along the canal where it branches off to Paddington Basin. If you're lucky enough to catch the bridge in the sunshine, beware; it's a bright sight in the sunshine, but it's a beautiful little bridge.

When I did this walk back in April 2003 the towpath was closed off for emergency repairs, and I was lucky enough to be directed through the diversion by two charmingly drunk fans of Tennent's Super. Not

surprisingly they ended up sending me down a blocked alley around the back of Barclays Bank, but hopefully the work has finished by now and you can stomp along the towpath of the canal, enjoying the easy walking and relative peace.

There's a chance to celebrate, too, because at the turn-off to Hayes and Harlington station the Loop signs return, the first since day 6. They make the right-hand turn into Stockley Park unmissable, and although a quick look at the map shows that you can cut out a serious amount of walking by sticking to the towpath, the official Loop route through the business park is well worth doing, especially if you aren't one of the lucky people who spend their entire working life in a sculptured environment like Stockley Park.

Business Suits

To someone like me who's more used to the grit and pollution of central London, walking through Stockley Park is a revelation. I daresay that the novelty soon wears off, but I found the whole experience quite bizarre. There's a golf course beyond the manicured lawns, and spotless and completely empty roads lead to mirrored office blocks that occasionally spit out an office worker wearing the standard uniform of white shirt, black trousers and short hair. Three men were hacking the first tee to bits as I walked past, no doubt

heading off to make or break a deal in the sci-fi landscape of future business, and I found the whole thing quite amazing. Perhaps I'm out of touch with modern office culture; whatever, Stockley Park really is something.

Best of all, the Loop takes you through the park and up to some very pleasant viewpoints, before reaching an industrial park where the biggest surprise of all awaits. This whole area is dedicated to business and industry, but clinging onto their existence in the middle of all this commerce is a row of old houses, which would be pretty pleasant in the countryside but which are mind-boggling in the middle of all this industrial hell. It's amazing.

Never mind, the Loop soon heads back to the canal, and for a mile or so it's a pretty little part of the world, a long way away from the cut-throat world of golfing deals. Along the Slough Arm of the canal is an aqueduct over the Frays River, a strange sight if you've never walked along one waterway and over another, and soon enough the Loop leaves the canal and joins the River Colne at Little Britain, a very relaxing series of lakes that are a delight in good weather.

But it's not long before the Loop has to get stuck into the suburbs of Uxbridge, and the last section of the River Colne is pretty miserable. Rusting cars and rubbish are the order of the day as the river winds along the back of industrial unit after industrial unit, but

eventually the Loop gets back to the canal again, just in time for a pint in the handy Swan and Bottle pub that marks the end of this pleasant and easy section.

Day 9: Uxbridge to Moor Park

Written: 27 September 2002

If you like walking alongside water, then this is the section of the Loop for you. While day 8 is a good walk and sticks to the Union Canal for most of the day, this part of the Loop combines the canal with a number of large lakes that make it hard to imagine you're in Greater London. When the Loop manages to pull this off, it's at its best.

It's not far from Uxbridge tube station to the Loop, and it's worth keeping a look out for the Crown and Treaty pub on your left; this is where Charles I and the Parliamentarians met in 1645 to try to bash out an agreement, but despite 20 days of debate, it came to nothing.

Down on the canal, the Loop heads off along the towpath, past the Swan and Bottle pub and up to Uxbridge Lock, where it's fun to watch the tourist boats bumping and grinding their way through the palaver of getting through a canal lock. A little further on the larger Denham Lock is equally charming, and there's even the attraction of a tea house sandwiched between the canal

and the Frays River, which might be a handy stop for lunch if it took you a while to get to Uxbridge.

Enjoy this section, because once you've left the locks, the Loop gets back into rural Greater London; if you've been walking the Loop in order, then the last real piece of rural walking was way back on day 5 in Coulsdon. Although some parts of the Colne Valley can be a little gloomy when the sun hides behind the clouds, the lakes that now fill the old gravel pits are tranquil and pleasant to walk along. It's no surprise that this is a popular fishing spot; it's a long way from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Along the Canal

Even though the Loop passes between quite a few fishing lakes, the canal towpath is the main route, and after a pleasant detour through a wooded picnic spot (marred only by the odd burned-out car, a sight that walking the Loop will surely make you immune to) it's back to a more traditional towpath along the side of the Union Canal. I found the boats along this stretch particularly fascinating; peering into narrow boat windows and imagining just who lives there is one of the most entertaining aspects of canal walking, and the section past South Harefield can be a good spot for people watching. If you're lucky you might also get attacked by the local crusty's dogs; they don't bite,

according to the owner...

Fear not, for there's a worthwhile pub about a mile along the canal. The Minnow might feel like a chain pub, but sitting out in its canalside garden on a sunny day is a treat, and as the Loop finally leaves the Union Canal here, it's a good place to stop for a final goodbye.

There now follows a fairly stout walk uphill towards Hill End, where there's a pub that's been turned into a children's learning centre (the pub sign is still there); and from Hill End it's farmers' fields all the way to the busy Harefield Road, another pub (which was advertising all-day strippers when I hurried past), and then a pleasant walk through Bishop's Wood Country Park to Batchworth Heath, where – you guessed it – there's another pub, Ye Olde Greene Man. This is your last chance to grab a drink while sitting outside and looking over the heath; it's a nice spot for an ale.

From the pub it's a short hop along an old country boundary path, through some utterly urbanised woods and into Northwood, where the tube is a short hike along the railway line. Like most Loop days the end doesn't justify the means; this section is a lovely walk with a couple of enjoyable pubs and precious little evidence of London. Enjoy.

Day 10: Moor Park to Elstree

Written: 17 April 2003

Oh dear, this is a boring walk. I was lucky enough to do it on the hottest and sunniest day of the year so far, a delightful Thursday in April that woke up to blue skies and temperatures in the mid-20s, but even the weather didn't manage to hide the fact that this section of the Loop dragged on and on for me. Sure, the walking is easy enough, the length is about right, and there's plenty of countryside to look at, but before I was even half way through the walk, I wanted it to be over. The reason? Nothing interesting happens on this walk; most of the time you're wandering round farmers' fields, skirting along the outside of uninspiring Green Belt villages, walking through endless beech forest, or stomping along roads. It's not offensive, but neither is it comparable to some of the wonderful walks on the southern half of the Loop, or the pleasantly rural stretches of canal walking in the west. Perhaps that's the problem; this section has no personality.

Despite the lack of excitement in the walk itself, there are some good stories to be discovered on the way, and there's at least one good pub. But these are all in the second half of this section, so try to keep them in mind as the Loop weaves its way through the rather insipid first half. Things kicks off with a golf course – hardly the most exciting walking environment – but try not to

get too wound up as today doesn't just start off on a golf course; no, you have to cross another half way through the walk, and you finish on one too. Hurrah.

An Uninspiring Start

But never mind; the golf course doesn't last forever, and it isn't long before the track plunges into Oxhey Woods, where things start to get really uninspiring. I normally quite like trudging through English woodland, but Oxhey Woods didn't do anything for me at all. True, it doesn't feel as if you're in London, and it's an English wood, but it all felt a little bland as I tried to follow the irritatingly stuttered instructions, which read more like the instructions to opening a safe than an interesting walk. 'Turn left... bear right... keep ahead... fork left... go right... cross road... keep left... drop down... turn left' reads the book, and all of this is inside a bloody wood! I found myself pining for the delights of the Grand Union canal, where getting lost isn't an option and the guidebook waxes lyrical about coal taxes and mileposts instead of having to devote pages to intricate instructions. I dare say it was as boring to write, as this section was to walk.

I managed to scrape through the wood with the promise of a view over 'much of London' soon after the end of the woods. I thought this would be a great spot for lunch, but in the event the view turned out to be

practically non-existent. A solitary spire on a distant hill was obviously Harrow-on-the-Hill, but the rest of London was invisible despite the clear weather; instead of a leisurely lunch overlooking the capital, I found myself defending my sandwiches from the inquisitive horses who lived round the viewpoint with no view, and I eventually decided that moving on had to be my best bet. Unfortunately I was wrong.

Fields, Dumping Grounds and More Golf

The sweet little houses clustered round Pinnerwood Farm were well worth a shot or two, and I thought for a minute that things were going to liven up. Unfortunately the next mile or two was even worse than the lacklustre start to the walk, and this is where I started wishing for a swift run to the end. From Pinnerwood the Loop wanders around some pretty standard Green Belt fields and along the back of some pretty standard Green Belt houses, enlivened slightly by the fact that you can sneak a peek through the fences into suburban gardens that vary from the manicured to the dismal. But from the houses of Hatch End the Loop crosses a field and disappears into a soulless path that squeezes between a wall and a railway for a fair distance, only to be followed by a long stretch of utterly forgettable road walking along the B4542. Not content with the level of boredom this inevitably dumps on the Loop walker, the

path then winds through a squalid collection of rubbish-flecked hills that must have been a dumping ground in a previous life, and as a *coup de grace* it then leads you to another golf course, where you have to walk uphill alongside a fairway, where a sliced ball from the tee up ahead could easily put a premature end to the walk. At least it keeps you on your toes after the last few miles of banality; I was grateful for the mental exercise in dodging the balls, anyway.

Luckily the Loop picks up a little bit from hereon in, though only in comparison to the previous part of the walk. At the top of the golf course is Grim's Dyke, an ancient earthwork that nobody really knows much about and which is pretty imperceptible these days, but at least it's a point of interest, as is the rather dilapidated pond that the Loop now winds round. WS Gilbert, the lyricist who formed one half of the amazingly successful partnership of Gilbert and Sullivan, once owned this pond. Here, in the grounds of Grimsdyke House, Gilbert created a beautiful little paradise, a spot so enticing that he declared that when he passed away, he would like it to be in his garden here, on a summer's afternoon. Unfortunately his wish came true, though a little early; he drowned in this pond in the summer of 1911, which adds a certain poignancy to the decaying grot that chokes the place today.

After a wander through the – woo! – beech forest of

Gilbert's erstwhile estate there's at last a viewpoint that actually has a view, and a little way up the road is the kind of pub that's lovely enough to forgive all the tedium of the preceding miles. The Case is Altered (for that is the pub's name) is a cracker, and I highly recommend a pint or two here, if only to get you through the next block of woodland, which is (surprise, surprise) not the most exciting stretch of forest on the planet. Luckily it soon gives way to woodland that's no more interesting, but at least it hides a secret, for tucked away behind the undergrowth, and practically invisible to the walker, is Bentley Priory, the headquarters of Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain, and still a functioning RAF base. The woods also give up after a bit, giving way to much more pleasant grassy slopes that eventually lead into the sort of suburbia that is so obviously expensive it doesn't even try to look like a nice place to live.

Home Stretch

The next segment weaves and winds through to Stanmore Little Common like a drunken teenager, and it's just as irritating. OK, the path has been sent this way to avoid the obvious but boring shortcut along Warren Lane that would cut out all this meandering, but the path twists and turns so much, you have to glue your nose to the guidebook to make sure you don't shoot off in

completely the wrong direction. It's a positive relief to end up on a straight northbound path, until you realise that the views over the rolling fields are somewhat marred by the M1 to your right, which you soon have to go under via a bridge, a roundabout and a lot of traffic. Things don't get much better for a while, as the Loop goes along the road until it skirts past the southern end of Aldenham Reservoir, but eventually you get to walk along the reservoir itself, right up to the dam that was built by French prisoners of war in 1795, and which provides pleasant though uninventive views over the reservoir itself.

By this stage I could sympathise with the poor French POWs who were forced to build this dam – though I was impressed that they managed to do such a bad job that the dam leaked until the invention of concrete, a great piece of getting your own back – and I walked like a zombie through yet another collection of fields, across Watling Street, into another field, into another golf course, and, at last, into Borehamwood. It's hard to believe that this section is only 10.5 miles; it feels a lot longer...

Day 11: Elstree to Cockfosters

Written: 4 November 2003

The first hour of this walk is dismal, and is probably the

least interesting section on the entire Loop, but persevere and the rewards are there. The last three miles from Barnet to Cockfosters are sublime, so if you're not too fussed about completing the whole Loop and fancy a good long day walk, you could do worse than start at High Barnet station and walk all the way through to the end of day 12. It's one way of chopping out the first bit, anyway.

The reason that the first hour is so dismal is that it's almost all along roads, and not terribly interesting ones at that. OK, so the first bit through Elstree is interesting enough if you like walking through suburbia, and it looks like a pleasant part of the planet to live in, but the problem is that it's about a mile before the Loop leaves the tarmac, and then it's only to pass through the relatively small Scratch Wood. The wood is pleasant enough, but it isn't long before the screaming A1 spoils the party; this is without a doubt the Loop's most irritating road crossing, because you have to walk half a mile south along the side of the carriageway before coming to a grotty underpass, and then you have to walk another half a mile back up the other side. It's a right pain in the arse.

But there is an upside to this annoying plod along the roadside. The next section wanders through the pleasant woods of Moat Mount and through the fields to Dollis Brook, which takes you all the way to Barnet, and

after the roaring A-road and the endless miles of concrete and tarmac, it's utterly beautiful. Whether it would be so enchanting without the appalling start to this walk is hard to say, but I thoroughly enjoyed this part of the Loop. I walked it in November as the leaves burned a fiery red and turned the woods into oil paintings, and once the screeching of the A11 disappears into the distance, you're most definitely out in the countryside again.

Crossing Barnet

Unfortunately the rural plodding alongside the trickling Dollis Brook doesn't last forever, and Barnet gets in the way. The houses of outer Barnet appear pretty suddenly and the Loop has to go right through town to get to the treats on the other side, but although this is a pretty long suburban section, it's not without its interesting side. Remember day 7 when the Loop passes through the entire British class system as it winds from Kingston to Donkey Wood? Well, the Loop section through Barnet is similar but in reverse, and it's over a much smaller distance.

It starts off in graffiti-laden south-west Barnet, where the Loop squeezes between Dollis Brook and the houses of a large estate. The most impressive shock of Barnet's outskirts is the amount of rubbish that suddenly chokes the poor brook, and even with the rolling grassy

fields and open spaces of the nearby football pitches, this is a part of town that's most definitely got grit.

Things change pretty suddenly once the Loop leaves the sports ground, and the houses start to take on a much more middle class air. As you head north over the main road the Loop ducks into serious commuter belt, which is hardly surprising given that High Barnet tube station is just down the road. Small but perfectly formed flats line the road, and after a short section through more middle class suburbia the Loop climbs up into King George's Fields, a pleasant but featureless park that gives good views back to London.

The biggest treat is yet to come, and as soon as you step out of King George's Fields you just know you're in the realm of the landed gentry. This is Hadley and it's utterly charming; it's also utterly posh, and the houses are large, expensive and to die for. There's a lovely green, complete with swans swimming on a picturesque lake, and every other house is stunning. There's Livingstone Cottage, where the famous explorer stayed on returning from his first African trip in the 1850s, and on the corner are Sir Roger Wilbraham's Almshouses, which ooze history.

It gets better, because beyond the church the path skirts the edge of Hadley Common, a lovely wood that's lined with the largest and most decadent houses of the entire walk. This is where you live if you've made it,

and it's fascinating to think back over the last mile or so and how these mansions compare to the estate on the other side of town. Hadley Common is a pretty place to walk through, especially when the winter sun is low and lights up the reds and golds of the autumn. It's worth popping up the steps to check out Beech Hill Lake, a popular fishing spot, and after passing a few more decadent, if more modern houses, you suddenly reach Cockfosters station, and it's time to stop gawking at the rich and go back to reality...

Day 12: Cockfosters to Enfield Lock

Written: 3 September 2003

Although this isn't one of the most stunning walks on the Loop, it is pleasantly rural, and it does have a couple of highlights that make it worthwhile. When I walked from Cockfosters to Enfield Lock the long, hot summer of 2003 had taken its toll and the normally green spaces the walk passes through were dry, dusty and brown, but with a little imagination it wasn't hard to see how pleasant this part of the world must be in kinder climates.

Perhaps the best aspect of doing this part of the Loop is that it forever changes the way you think of Piccadilly line tube trains. Most eastbound Piccadilly

line tube trains have ‘Cockfosters’ on the front, and until I did this walk I never even stopped to think what Cockfosters might be like; I’m happy to report that it’s a lovely part of the world, and now when I’m standing on the platform, getting ready to crush myself into the mass of commuters heading into town, I think of the London Loop and the pleasant fresh air of this section. It’s much more pleasant than thinking about the rush hour...

Into the Greenery

Right from the word go this walk is a rural one; if you’re looking for a pleasant stroll for you and your dog, you could do a lot worse than this section. From Cockfosters tube station the Loop takes about two minutes to slip into the countryside, starting off with a woodland wander through Trent Country Park, which has a pleasant café that would be a perfect resting place if it wasn’t so early on in the walk (if you’re stringing days 11 and 12 together into one long day, then this would make a great lunch stop). Assuming you’d rather build up a thirst before taking a break – and there’s a great pub later on that’s spot on if you do – the Loop dives into Enfield Chase, a pretty country estate that’s halfway between being manicured and wild. As you walk up the hill after the lakes, don’t miss the corridor that links the house of Trent Park on your right and the obelisk on your left. It might be pointless but it’s pretty,

and just up the hill are some pleasant wooden benches that provide a good view of the estate, and make a good spot for a bit of contemplation; if you've already had a long journey to get to Cockfosters then this is a good place for lunch.

Coming out of the Chase and across the Hadley Road, the vista opens up to reveal a valley that's unfortunately not that inspiring to walk through. The path is easy to follow and there's precious little sign of urban sprawl, but for a mile or two you follow the edges of farmers' fields and shadow Salmon's Brook, which sounds a lot more interesting than it really is. The view back from Brooke Wood is worth turning round for, but this isn't up to the heady standards of day 5 and the views from Farthing Downs.

Never mind, it's not far before things start getting interesting again. The Loop crosses the busy Ridgeway A-road and passes the Royal Chase Hotel, and after a left turn and a walk past the barns of a farm it meets the Turkey Brook for the first time. The Loop follows this brook on and off until the start of day 13; sometimes it's charming and sometimes it's horrible, but for the moment it's just a small stream that's pretty unremarkable. March uphill, past the Red House and through some light industry, and turn right into Hilly Fields Park, and there's the Turkey Brook again, a lovely stream in the middle of a park full of hilly fields

called – you guessed it – Hilly Fields Park.

Hilly Fields Park is pretty and has an odd little bandstand that sits alone at the bottom of the hill, and make sure you read the Loop information board at the far exit to the park; it contains some interesting stories about the New River and Elsynge Hall, which you'll come across in a minute. First, though, the Rose and Crown pub across the road is a great place for a refreshing pint, especially as by now you're well over halfway through the walk.

Forty Winks

From the pub the path follows the Turkey Brook once more, and although it's easy to take the wrong turning (as I did), if you make sure you keep the brook to your left you can't go far wrong. You have to navigate your way over the New River, a manmade river that was dug in the early 17th Century to carry water into London, but it's worth the effort because after walking through some dank fishing pools you come out of the woods and there, to your right, is Forty Hall. The Loop goes straight on, but I highly recommend the short detour to explore Forty Hall; it's arguably the highlight of this section, even though technically it's not on the Loop.

This area is steeped in history. The Elizabethan stately home Elsynge Hall was built somewhere round here – nobody knows where – and this is where Sir

Walter Raleigh was supposed to have thrown his cloak over a puddle so Queen Elizabeth could walk over it without getting wet. Forty Hall itself dates from the 1630s and is utterly charming, with a very pretty pond reflecting the symmetrical architecture of Inigo Jones in its water. There's also a café here, and the gardens are well worth exploring.

Make the most of Forty Hall, because this is where the walk starts to deteriorate. Not far from the stately home's gardens a bridge crosses a river and into the suburbia of Enfield, and the Loop crosses over the New River again (which runs underground at this point), over an A-road, past a cemetery, through some forgettable suburbia and into Albany Park, where the Loop continues to follow the Turkey Brook. By this stage, though, the brook is hemmed in by steep walls, and it's choked with rubbish and shopping trolleys as it oozes along the back of a row of houses. This is not a great part of the Loop, but escape is close at hand; go over another railway, turn left and there's Enfield Lock station, with regular services to Liverpool Street.

Day 13: Enfield Lock to Chigwell

Written: 24 September 2003

Here's a tip. If you're planning to walk this section of the Loop on a nice sunny day, like I did, then make sure

you pack a peaked cap or wide-brimmed hat. I didn't bother because I thought the September sun wouldn't be strong enough to warrant protection from ultraviolet, and as a result I spent most of the walk squinting. This is where the Loop turns south on its journey back to the Thames, and that means you're walking right into the sun. Shades won't be enough; bring a hat, or it'll drive you nuts.

Given proper protection, this isn't a bad walk. It's not fantastic and it's not awful, but it sits happily in the middle strata of Loop sections, and as the walk wears on the Loop moves from the suburbia of Enfield through to some lovely countryside; unfortunately this doesn't last as long as you'd like, and although the rest of the walk is through some of the least offensive suburbia on the entire Loop, it's still pretty uninspiring. Luckily there's a good pub at the end, and the forest sections are good enough to make it a worthwhile walk.

The Lea Valley

The walk starts off by joining the poor, choked Turkey Brook once again; it's a sad start, seeing your walking companion from day 12 suffering from too much rubbish and too little attention, but things soon improve as the Turkey flows into the Lee² Navigation and the

² According to the Ordnance Survey, the River Lee is also known as the River Lea. However, everyone seems to call this part of the river the

Loop reaches the edge of Enfield. Enfield Lock itself is a fairly forgettable canal lock that's sandwiched between a tacky looking pub and a housing estate, but that doesn't stop this area having an interesting history. In the distance, across the car park, lies a converted factory that might not look that special these days, but back in 1859 this building was named the Small Arms Factory, and it churned out a revolutionary new rifle that would be the backbone of the British Army through the Boer War and both World Wars. The rifle was, of course, the Lee Enfield.

But it's not worth hanging around too long because the best is yet to come, and getting there requires some inoffensive but uninspiring walking. Ducking off the canal and across a car park, the Loop follows the Lee for a while, with its surprisingly clear flowing water; the path can get overgrown but it's not a bad little bit of riverside walking, and the Sewardstone Marsh Nature Reserve through which the Loop cuts is... well, it's green. It's not that thrilling, though.

What is thrilling is the view that you get from the top of a long and boring cinder track that heads up into the Sewardstone hills. The sweeping vista over the huge reservoirs of King George's and William Girling is impressive, especially when you consider that these two

Lee Navigation, while the valley is more often called the Lea Valley. Go figure.

reservoirs provide over a quarter of London's water. Unfortunately the views don't last, and the next section involves a small wood, a road and a long driveway, eventually taking the Loop past Gilwell Park – the headquarters of the Scouts movement, no less – and along a bridleway. Ducking off this for a small woodland path is rewarding; the Loop heads down into a small valley, and it's gorgeous. London disappears, and suddenly you're in the country; this is a good spot for a picnic lunch, and the wood at the top of the hill is delightful. Sadly the Loop manages to avoid Epping Forest pretty comprehensively, steering to the south of the forest and avoiding anything substantial, but the walk through Hawk Wood is a wonderful taster of English woodland, and it's arguably the highlight of this entire section. Enjoy.

Back into the 'Burbs

Of course, the walk through Hawk Wood ends all too abruptly, coming out at a road that you don't realise is there until a car zooms past, right under your nose. For the rest of the day suburbia is never very far away, and the road section into Chingford is only marginally improved by following the bridleway that runs parallel to the road, just inside the edge of the wood. However Chingford Plain is open and breezy, and after a dog-leg around the golf course's cafeteria (called, groaningly,

the Tee Shop) there's a rewarding bunch of buildings to look at.

Queen Elizabeth's hunting lodge isn't obviously a Tudor building, as it's changed a bit since then, but it's unique in being the only three-storey Tudor grandstand left in Britain. When it was commissioned by Henry VIII in 1542-1543 it wouldn't have had any walls or windows, as it was simply designed to be a viewing platform for the deer hunts in this former royal hunting forest. Next to the lodge is a mock-Tudor hotel from the Victorian age, but more interesting is Butler's Retreat, an early 19th Century barn that's now a restaurant, conveniently positioned on the Loop itself.

The Loop now heads east along a wide grassy avenue and into the suburbs of Buckhurst Hill, where it passes the posh-looking Roebuck Hotel and plunges into a bizarre collection of houses with rounded walls and Disney-esque towers. It's quite pleasant, but it's not long before the Loop is back into grittier parts of town, crossing over the Central Line and up to the shores of a lake formed by flooding the gravel pits used for the construction of the M11, which isn't far away.

Little remains in this section except a long diversion around a sports centre, a crossing of the M11, and a wander into Chigwell, where the Loop ends. But if you're feeling like a refreshment or two, I recommend turning left in Chigwell and continuing along the Loop

for five or ten minutes until you reach the Kings Head. Sure, you'll pass this pub on day 14, but you're unlikely to stop for a pint that early in the walk, so do yourself a favour, buy yourself a drink, head out into the beer garden, take a seat, turn around, and marvel at the view. Now you know where all the inspiration comes for the tacky mock-Tudor houses that have taken over this part of Essex...

Day 14: Chigwell to Harold Wood

Written: 10 October 2003

There's a definite theme to this section of the Loop, a theme that's surprisingly lacking in most of the rural walking of the previous few days. Today is most definitely a day for wide-open spaces and large skies, and although the scenery isn't breathtaking and things go a bit askew for the last couple of miles, this is another pleasant piece of Green Belt walking.

The first sweeping view kicks in pretty quickly, especially if you already popped into the pub in Chigwell on day 13 and aren't tempted to grab a morning pint. It takes a while to get there, as the Loop mucks around with an annoying zigzag across the fields, but where the path stops following an orthogonal route and cuts diagonally across a field, turn round and soak in the view. Fields stretch into the distance, and

although you can still see plenty of evidence of man in the undulating landscape, it's an especially pleasant view on an October morning as the autumnal winds bring the first real chills since spring.

You could be forgiven for thinking that the next obstacle on the map is one of those repugnant sewage farms that we met on day 6, but don't panic; this is a water works, and it doesn't smell one bit. Indeed, it's rather well hidden, and the large round tank the Loop wanders past provides a welcome resting spot for birds, no doubt to the management's irritation. One word of warning: as the path rounds the tank and comes to a stile, you might have to watch out for deep mud. I got muddy feet and it hadn't rained for some time, so there might be something else feeding the mud here; whatever, be warned.

Hainault Park

After a short but intriguing passage through Chigwell Row, where the Loop seems to pass straight through people's private gardens, the path crosses an A-road and plunges into Hainault Park, a lovely stretch of parkland and forest that's quite rightly in the process of applying for Nature Reserve status. Initially the Loop strides along pretty birch woodland and along a broad bridleway, but suddenly it bumps into a lovely little lake that's home to plenty of wildlife. You might see the odd

fisherman casting away, but a large portion of the lake is protected from human interaction with the express purpose of encouraging wildlife, and if you ignore the high-rise blocks in the distance, it's a pleasantly rural scene.

Heading past the lake things open up yet again, though this time it's not so much a vista as a huge area of open grass. On a summer's day this would be an excellent place to bring the kids and the dogs to tire them out completely, and the walk up past the golf course is another enjoyable experience, especially as it's the kind of park that makes people friendly. Remember friendly? Remember people saying hello to complete strangers? It happens in Hainault Country Park, you know, and it's wonderfully refreshing.

From the park the Loop ducks into a golf course and follows yellow paint marks on the trees to take you back onto the fields, this time within sight of Bromley. Luckily the section through the golf course coincides with the first London Loop sign of the day – the first part doesn't have any, though there are plenty of footpath signs to help you on your way – so you're unlikely to get lost. The same goes for the section past Bromley and into Havering Country Park, which goes through fields before turning left and going uphill to a bench with a great view over east London. You can't miss Canary Wharf; it's amazing how close London is,

especially given the park the Loop now enters.

Into the Redwoods

Try not to take any notice of the build-up that the official guidebook gives to Havering Country Park; calling it an ‘awesome moment’ might be pushing things, but there’s no denying that this, the second largest plantation of redwood trees in the country, is a great place to explore. There are apparently 100 trees in the park, and although they’re relatively young, they’re easy to spot as the Loop wanders through the trees. London feels a long, long way away.

This feeling continues as the Loop passes through the pleasant village green of Havering-atte-Bower – make sure you check out the village stocks and whipping post at the far corner of the green – and it’s not long before the path winds through the village and back out into the fields. There’s a fair bit of dithering around here and it’s worth keeping an eye on the map, but it’s well signed and the rewards are worth it. The views are delightful and the sense of space is huge; at one point the feeling of open countryside is intense, something you might not expect from London, but that’s one of the delights of the Loop.

Unfortunately, this is where things start to go a bit tits-up. There’s a pleasant wander past country houses and farms along Paternoster Lane, but at the end the

Loop strikes for the heart of Harold Hill and then Harold Wood, and for the last couple of miles it's dismal. This is not a great part of the world – it's the kind of place where the pedestrian signs have graffiti genitalia – and even more depressing is the fact that here the Loop meets the poor, unloved Carter's Brook, which forms the mainstay of day 15. Apart from a short section where the Loop ducks into an urban dell to follow the trickling brook, this final stretch follows the route of the river without ever letting you see it through the choking brambles and rubbish that blight so many of London's streams.

Never mind; the rest of the day is worth it, even if Harold Wood isn't.

Day 15: Harold Wood to Coldharbour

Written: 5 December 2003

Incredibly, the Loop saves the very worst for last. I would love to be here writing about the perfect end to a lovely long-distance walk, but I can't because day 15 of the Loop is abysmal. I've been straining my brain to think of a worse day's walk, but I genuinely can't; the last 11.75 miles of the London Loop easily rate as the worst day walk I have done, not just in Britain, but in the whole world. It's a really huge disappointment, and

to cap it all it's the longest day on the entire Loop.

Starting in Harold Wood sets the scene perfectly. I didn't rate the place when I arrived there at the end of day 14, and I still don't rate it having started there on this section. Luckily it doesn't take long to escape into the countryside, where the Loop starts to follow the Ingrebourne (the same river as the poor, choked Carter's Brook from the end of the previous section). The scenery is dull and the river all but invisible in its overgrown trough, and soon enough the path turns right towards Hall Lane, a nondescript B-road that the Loop follows over the A127 and past Strawberry Farm. This is inane road walking of the worst kind, but get used to it, as there's more to come.

Ducking out through more suburbia the Loop heads through a small wood and into fields full of horses, before sidling past a school and slipping back into tedious housing. After tracing three sides of a square in a boring but unavoidable detour the path drifts back towards the fields, but don't get too excited because all it does is wander along the back of the houses of Hornchurch, sandwiched between the choked Ingrebourne and the suburbs.

Windmills and Marshes

More banal suburbia takes you to Upminster Bridge tube station where you can take a worthwhile detour to

see Upminster Mill, a windmill plonked in the middle of all this development, but for the next mile or so the Loop follows the Ingrebourne Valley Green Way, a tarmac path that winds alongside the uninspiring Ingrebourne River. The urban sprawl is never far away to the right and this is hardly countryside walking, but persevere because a mile-and-a-half from the tube station is Hornchurch Country Park, the first half-decent spot on the walk.

The reason Hornchurch Country Park is interesting is because in the winter it floods and creates London's largest freshwater marsh, which in turn brings in the wildlife. In reality the marsh is a pretty desolate place (though after the walk to get there it's almost pleasant) and the views are somewhat limited. At least the path remains good and firm – it's still tarmac – but after the next section the thought of yet more hard paths will drive you mad, for it's time to hit the road again.

After passing a lake and Albyns Farm the Loop ducks back into the conurbation of South Hornchurch, and deadly boring it is too. The guidebook even advocates the use of a bus to get to Rainham, but for those of us who are doing this walk because we want to complete the Loop, there's no choice but to plod on for another weary mile or so along backstreets and the A125. It's uninspiring and depressing, but eventually you reach Rainham Village and things take a slight turn

for the better.

To the River

Rainham Village is home to an imposing church and an old townhouse called Rainham Hall, though the village feel of yesteryear has been somewhat squashed by its proximity to the train station and a massive amount of engineering work on the Channel Tunnel rail link.

Rainham station is also the only option for returning home, which is incredibly irritating because it's still a couple of miles to the end of the Loop at Coldharbour Point, two miles that you have to retrace to get back to civilisation.

And what a bloody awful two miles they are, definitely the worst end to a long-distance walk that I've ever encountered. From Rainham the Loop follows Ferry Lane all the way to the Thames, going past huge yards full of containers, passing under the rumbling A13 trunk road and picking its way through the industrial quagmire that this part of the world has become. Stick to Ferry Lane and don't turn left down Coldharbour Lane (a new road that's not mentioned in the guidebook) and you'll eventually reach the Thames after a thankless trudge through miserable car yards and lonely industrial units.

The guidebook reckons that the sight of the Thames is enough to make up for all the industry, but I'm

obviously firing from a different set of cylinders. The Thames round here is lonely and windswept, and the riverside path that wanders past the Tilda Rice factory and east towards the end of the Loop is notable only for the optimistically large number of benches that line it. I have no idea whether anyone ever uses them, but once you pass the factory and a collection of fascinating scuppered concrete barges that were used during the D-Day landings, you're into the bowels of hell.

The hills to your left are the grassy result of landfill, and they'd be almost pleasant if that was all there was to it. Unfortunately the dumping hasn't stopped yet, and just round the next corner the hills are live with the delights of rubbish. The whole place stinks to high heaven – yes, even worse than the sewage works in Kingston on day 6 – and then, just when you think it can't get worse, the path ends at a rusty gate in the middle of nowhere. And that, ladies and gentleman, is it; at the risk of dropping an awful pun, it stinks.

So that's the end of the Loop, and one thing's for sure. When I think about the London Outer Orbital Path I'll remember the stunning downs of south London and the lovely canal walking of north-west London. I'll recall the walks through the British class system and the myriad stately homes that pepper the path, and I'll remember quite a few delightful pubs. One thing I'll be trying to forget, though, is the last section from Harold

Wood to Coldharbour. What a terrible way to end such a great walk.

THE END

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