



Odiham and the Basingstoke Canal

Odiham is located in one of the more densely populated corners of Hampshire. But don't let that put you off. Outside the town are tracts of pretty countryside bisected by the delightful Basingstoke Canal, one of the south's most popular waterways.

This very varied walk starts in Odiham and then crosses farmland to follow the canal towpath. In due course you reach the remains of King John's Castle, located by the water. Only the octagonal keep survives and in a certain light in the depths of winter, the castle ruin is deliciously eerie, the long shadows, the crumbling walls and the glow of the setting sun creating a magical atmosphere. You half expect the figure of King John to materialise before you.

From the Greywell Tunnel on the canal the route returns to Odiham via the Greywell Moors Nature Reserve and field paths.

The Trail

With its wide main street lined by handsome 18th century buildings, Odiham is regarded as a jewel among the smaller country towns of southern England. Its focal point is All Saints' church, the largest church in North Hampshire. The impressive pulpit carved with scrolls and vases of flowers is well worth a look, as are the 17th century brick tower. Not far from the north side of the churchyard are stocks, together with a whipping post. Inside the churchyard are the graves of several French prisoners from the Napoleonic wars and near the church is a 'Pest House' into which were incarcerated suspected plague sufferers.

1. From the centre of Odiham follow the High Street in an easterly direction. Pass a turning to the Basingstoke Canal and turn right just beyond it to join a footpath. Keep ahead, crossing several roads, and make for the outskirts of the town. Pass between wooden panel fencing before reaching a field. Turn left here and skirt the pasture, making for two stiles. Swing to the left of a hedge in front of you and head diagonally across the field to a stile. Turn immediately left, keeping the hedgerow on the left, and head for a footbridge. Maintain the same direction and cross a stile leading out to a road. Turn left and walk along to the A287.
2. Cross over to a footpath at Penarth Stud, keeping to the left of the buildings. Follow the path ahead over several stiles, then along the edge of a paddock and through the trees to the corner of a large field. Keep close to the left edge until a thatched cottage is reached on the left. Swing left just beyond the cottage and cross a footbridge. Join a drive beyond it and turn right at the T-junction, opposite Wincombe Cottage. Follow the lane along the Basingstoke Canal. Cross the waterway at Broad Oak Bridge.

Completed in 1794, the Basingstoke Canal is 37 miles long and was originally designed as a major commercial route linking London and Guildford with Southampton. However, the canal's fortunes were never particularly good and eventually the western end was filled in. It was the dawning of the railway era that eventually sounded the death knell. In its heyday the Basingstoke Canal carried vessels loaded with coal, grain, malt, chalk and farm produce. Wayward youths, pickpockets and a variety of other criminals often took a ducking in the canal as punishments for their anti-social behaviour. Restoration work on the canal, involving large numbers of volunteers, began in 1973. Reopened in 1991, much of the waterway is navigable once again.

3. Look for a fork to the left of a bylaws sign and a footpath sign. Keep left here, veering a little to the left when you reach a sign – 'public footpath, no horses'. Continue through the woodland to a drive and turn left. Pass Bagwell House and when you reach the road, turn left to the junction with London Road. Turn left to another bylaws sign and then swing right here, passing between trees to reach a stile. Cross a paddock to a double stile and then go slightly left in the next field to another stile. Cross the next field to a double stile in the far boundary, then cross the next one immediately to the right of it. Now begin walking diagonally across a large field, aiming for the arch of a bridge over the Odiham bypass. On reaching the field corner, go forward to a stile, then head obliquely up the bank to another stile and turn left to cross the bridge.



Odiham and the Basingstoke Canal

4. Turn right to join the Basingstoke Canal and walk along to the garden entrance to the Jolly Miller at North Warnborough. Pass under the road bridge and continue to a swing road bridge by some cottages. Keep ahead on the towpath and before long you reach the entrance to King John's Castle on the right.

The castle dates back to 1212 and it was from here that King John set out for Runnymede during the summer of 1215 to sign the Magna Carta. The following year the stronghold managed to hold out for two weeks against an attack by a French expeditionary force under the Dauphin. King David of Scotland was held captive in the castle for ten years during the 14th century. The sole remaining part of the castle today is its intriguing octagonal-shaped keep – the only one of its kind in the country.

5. Resume the walk along the towpath, passing over the River Whitewater and beside the remains of a disused lock. Ahead now is the outline of Greywell Tunnel, constructed in the 1790s and intended as a short cut to save the canal a circuitous 6-mile cross-country trip.

The tunnel, which extends for 1,230 yards (getting on for a mile) is the largest known bat roost in Britain, giving it significant ecological importance. Up to 12,500 bats of all native species hibernate here and the tunnel enjoys status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The tunnel collapsed on two separate occasions – in 1872 and then again in 1932.

6. Follow the path over the tunnel's portal and drop down to the road. Turn right, then left at the junction, and walk through the village of Greywell. Continue along the road to the lychgate of St Mary's church, pass through a kissing gate and head diagonally over the field. Three-quarters of the way across it, veer right and join a woodland path, crossing the Whitewater to Greywell Moors Nature Reserve. Keep ahead through the trees and pass a memorial to the eminent botanist Ted Wallace. Go straight ahead to a stile and then veer obliquely left across a large field to reach the road.

7. Turn left for a few paces to a footpath on the right. Follow the path, swinging left after a few paces. Head diagonally across a paddock, cross another stile and maintain the same direction, heading obliquely across the field to the road. Cross it and in the field veer half-right, looking for a stile in the hedgerow, just to the right of three chimneys. Cross over to join a path by a school. Turn right to the road and swing left towards Odiham. When the road veers left, go straight ahead into West Street and on to the main junction. Cross it and return to the centre of town.

