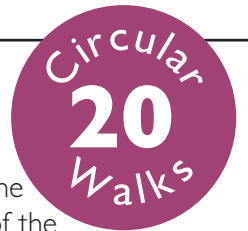


Circular Walk Twenty - Thornfalcon, Ham and Creech St. Michael - Exploring Taunton Deane



General Information

Distance of Walk: 7 kilometres

A walk from the hamlet of Thornfalcon north to the River Tone and the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal.

Caution: the walk includes one crossing of the railway tracks.

OS map - Explorer 128, Taunton and Blackdown Hills.

Terrain - Generally level ground

Parking - At Thornfalcon Church, grid reference 283 239

Refreshments - The Riverside Tavern, Bull Street, Creech St. Michael. There is also the Bell Inn and a general store in Creech St. Michael

Landscape characters of the walk - Thornfalcon lies in an area of landscape described as Low Vale. This is gently undulating and in parts of the Deane rises to 100 metres. The higher ground is often accentuated by copses, such as Thornfalcon Clump, and scattered throughout this vale are small pockets of broadleaf woodland and orchards. Ash and oak are the dominant woodland and hedgerow trees. The underlying geology is predominantly marls and the agricultural land is generally of good quality, suitable for mixed farming and market gardening.

As you approach Ham you enter the catchment area of the River Tone. The River Flood Plain is a low-lying area, from about six metres to 50 metres above sea level. In Taunton Deane it extends west to Wellington, with Taunton midway along its length. The land is well treed with open river edges and extensive areas which are liable to occasional flooding. Typical tree species are grey and black poplar, white and crack willow, aspen, oak, ash, and alder, with an understorey of blackthorn, goat willow and grey willow. Land use is mainly permanent grassland suitable for stock rearing and dairying with some cereals where the flood risk is low. The soils are mainly alluvial and clay with some overlying peat.

Directions

A From the parking area in front of the church turn left along the tarmac lane and follow it first to the right (in front of the house) and then, after 50 metres, left. You now follow this track for three quarters of a kilometre, passing over the old Chard Canal.

B On reaching a junction, turn left to follow another track. When this track turns left, continue ahead onto a grass path and down to a metal gate. Go through and follow the field boundary to the left. Ignore the first gate, but continue round to go through the next gate. Turn left and follow the field boundary alongside the water. At the next gate turn left to walk along the farm track. Follow this, between the hedges, to the road at Ham.

C Cross over and go ahead along the footpath and over the River Tone. (*At this point a short-cut can be taken - see below). Cross the stile and walk half-right across the field. Walk to the right of the gates to cross the stile in the hedge. Turn right. After about 70 metres turn sharp-left over a stile and walk across the field to the far corner. Go over the stile and follow the field edge a short way to cross another stile. Continue to follow the field edge to the kissing gate, and then very carefully cross the railway. Continue ahead past the buildings on the right, over another stile, to the canal towpath.

D Turn left. At the next bridge (alongside the houses) turn left, go past the gate and join the road which crosses back over the railway. Turn right between the brick piers and follow the road to the junction. Turn right into Bull Street, then cross the main road and turn left. Continue on this path, back over the River Tone and past Ham Road on the left.

E Just before the remains of the old Chard Canal/railway bridge, cross the road and follow the track ahead alongside the stream. Go through the gate and follow the hedge on the right. Where the hedge turns right, continue ahead across the field to a stile in the next hedge. Walk slightly right across the next field. At the rhyne turn right and then after a few metres cross the rhyne via the bridge on the left. Walk

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straight across the field to the stile, and again across the next field to another stile. Continue straight ahead, crossing the line of the old canal again, to a further stile to the left of a gate. Continue ahead, following the hedge on the right, through another gate and round to the left past the farm buildings on the right to a stile in the far left corner of the field. Turn left to walk to the lane.

F Turn left again and walk back in the direction of Thornfalcon. At the T-junction turn left and at the memorial turn right to return to the church and your car.

** If you wish to shorten the walk (and avoid the railway crossing), turn left to walk along the north bank of the River Tone. Continue ahead onto Bull Street and follow to the main road to rejoin the above route.*

Points of Interest

1 Thornfalcon Church

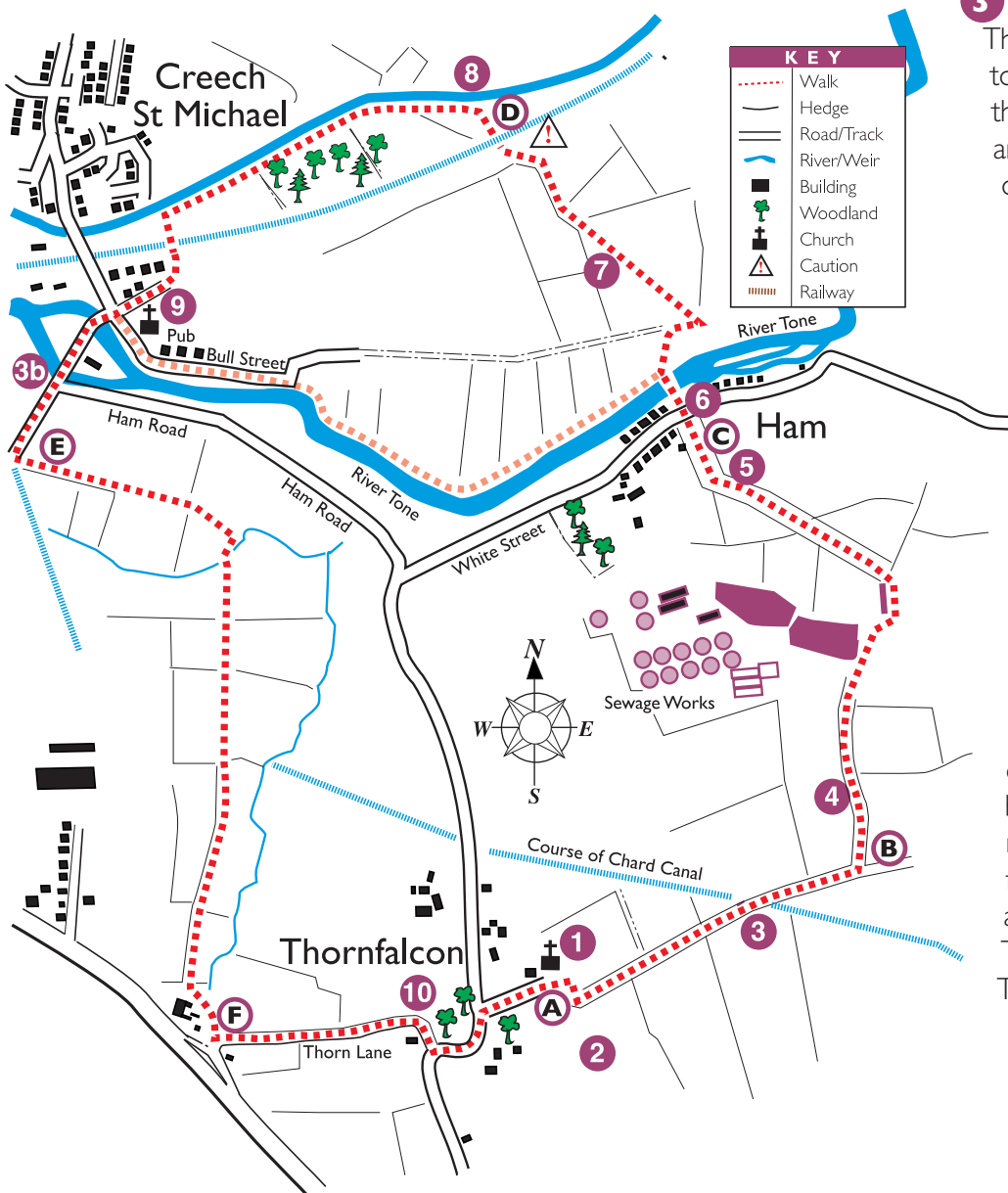
It is known that there has been a church on this site since the second half of the 13th century, and the font dates from this period. Most of the datable parts of the present building are the result of extensive alterations from the late 14th century onwards, but the walls and nave may well contain some of the earlier work. The south door is an excellent piece of late-medieval wood and iron work, and among the fine bench ends two are dated 1542. More information can be found in the guide available in the church.

2 Thornfalcon Clump

This perpendicular style church was almost entirely rebuilt in the 19th century. There are traces of Saxon work in the west wall of the north aisle and in the nave some 13th century responds.

3 Chard Canal

The Chard Canal, which linked Chard to Taunton, was built at the end of the canal era. Work started in 1835, and after seven years it was opened on the 24th May 1842. It cost £140,000 to build, was 13.5 miles long and technically advanced, rising 231ft from Taunton to Chard with three tunnels and four inclines. To the west of where the footpath crosses the canal was the Thornfalcon incline, raising and lowering the tub boats by 28ft in six-wheeled water-filled caissons. The canal provided low cost haulage for Chard which was an expanding industrial centre, carrying mainly coal, culm (coal slack), stone and grain. It was, however, a financial disaster and in 1866 it was replaced by a railway line. At 3b notice the remains of the canal traversing the field to your right, where a three arch bridge took it over the River Tone to meet the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal.



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4 Pillboxes

During the Second World War, a defence line was built, 44 miles long, from north of Bridgwater to Seaton on the south coast, to protect against invasion from the south west. It consisted of pillboxes, anti-tank ditches and concrete blocks ('dragons teeth') located on or close to canals, rivers and railways. It was completed in five weeks by local labour. Many of the pillboxes remain. The idea for these miniature forts is thought to have originated in France during the First World War; the term pill box referring to their resemblance to contemporary boxes used for carrying pills and medicines.

5 Ham

This was an important settlement from the middle ages to the early 19th century as it was the nearest navigable point on the River Tone to Taunton. Barges brought coal and other goods from Bridgwater and Langport to wharves at what is now called Coalharbour. Cargoes to and from Taunton were carried by packhorse and cart until, in 1699, the Tone Conservators were established to extend the navigation to Taunton via a series of locks at Ham, Creech St. Michael, Bathpool and Obridge. The navigation prospered until the opening of the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal in 1827, and the coming of the railways hastened its decline, the last barge reaching Ham in 1929. The Wharf House, Ham Mills and Lock Cottage (all private dwellings) are evidence of the village's past activity.

6 River Tone

The river flows for 33km down from Beverton Pond in the Brendon Hills, due south at first before turning east (where it forms the border between Devon and Somerset) to flow into the River Parrett at Burrowbridge. It is an important wildlife corridor; and notable species to be seen are kingfisher; water vole and otter; as well as the more common grey heron, moor hen and mute swan. Look out also for birds of prey such as buzzard, kestrel and sparrowhawk.

7 Black Poplar

This tree is nationally rare (approximately 10,000 trees have been recorded in Britain) but Taunton Deane has a relatively high number. It can reach a height of 30 metres, growing rapidly until reaching maturity in about 100 years. Many of the old specimen trees have been pollarded. They are usually found growing in the alluvial soils of river flood plains, and have traditionally been planted beside wet ditches, farm ponds and wells, and on parish boundaries. All black poplars are dioecious, ie. male and female flowers are on different trees. Nationwide, however, only 5% of trees are female. This tree is male.

8 Bridgwater and Taunton Canal

Opened in 1827 as part of an ambitious plan to link the English Channel to the Bristol Channel, this short 22.5km length of canal superseded the River Tone as the primary navigation between Bridgwater and Taunton, forming a much shorter route to the River Parrett at Bridgwater than the river navigation via Burrowbridge. It was engineered by James Hollinsworth and featured a short brick tunnel and 12 swing bridges. There was opposition to its construction by the Tone Conservators, and in 1832 the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal Company agreed to take over the navigation of the river. By 1838 the Grand Western Canal had reached Taunton and a junction between the two was formed at Firepool. The coming of the railways led to the demise of the canal, and commercial traffic ceased in 1907. During the Second World War the swing bridges were fixed, the locks decayed and the canal filled with silt and weed. In 1966 the Somerset Inland Waterways Society was formed to work for the restoration of the canal for amenity purposes. For more information contact the Waterway Manager, South Wales and Somerset Canals, Canal Office, The Wharf, Govilon, Abergavenny, NP7 9NY, telephone 01873 830328., www.waterscape.com.

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9 Church of St. Michael

This 13th century church has a number of interesting features including a fine waggon roof, an unusual number of niches, and some good carving on choir bench-ends, some of which have been used to make a reading desk. There are stocks in the churchyard, and in the churchyard wall there are stone tablets engraved with the initials of people who had agreed to maintain a small part of the wall in return for rights to common land. It is thought that the big yew tree could be 1,600 years old.

10 Orchards and mistletoe

A typical Somerset scene, these old orchards have recently been restored with new apple trees. Old orchards make good habitat for wildlife - watch out in winter for large flocks of fieldfares feeding on the remaining fruit. Notice the mistletoe on some of the apple trees and other trees in the area, particularly the limes near Thornfalcon Church. Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) is a semi-parasitic native evergreen plant that lives partly off a host tree into which it sinks its specialised roots, and partly off food produced with its own chlorophyll. It flowers from February to April and has sticky white berries from September to January. It is spread by birds (often Mistle Thrushes) which feed on the berries and then wipe the seeds off their beaks on to branches where they take root. The usual host trees are apple, lime, hawthorn, poplar and willow. It has for many centuries been a sacred plant of the Druids, associated with fertility from which developed our custom of kissing under it.

Sources of information and further reading

The Book of Taunton - *Robin Bush*

Listed Building Database - *TDBC*

The Buildings of England - *South and West Somerset - Nikolaus Pevsner Penguin Books*

All Saints Church, Trull - *leaflet obtained from the church*

Website for the Countryside Agency
www.countryside.gov.uk

The Hidden Landscape - *Richard Fortey - Pimlico*

The Deane Tree Plan - *TDBC*

Geology and Landscape of Taunton Deane
Hugh Prudden - TDBC

Guide to the Care of Ancient Trees
English Nature - Veteran Trees Initiative

If you would like to make any comments about this walk, or would like to suggest other points of interest, please contact Ian Clark at:

i.clark@tauntondeane.gov.uk, or write to him at Taunton Deane Borough Council, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 1HE.

For comments regarding the condition of the paths, stiles, gates etc. please contact Rights of Way at Somerset County Council, 0845 345 9166

If You Require Further Information Please Contact:

The Heritage and Landscape Team,

Taunton Deane Borough Council,
The Deane House, Belvedere Road,
Taunton, TA1 1HE

Tel: 01823 356491

Email: heritage.landscape@tauntondeane.gov.uk
or parks@tauntondeane.gov.uk

www.tauntondeane.gov.uk

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heritage.landscape@tauntondeane.gov.uk

Bengali

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Chinese

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Hindi

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