

Help look after the brook

Please don't feed the ducks

Many people enjoy feeding ducks but this is harmful to ducks and the environment. Feeding can cause:

- Poor nutrition
- Overcrowding and spread of disease amongst ducks
- Unnatural behaviour
- Pollution and environmental damage
- Increase in rats

If you care about the ducks then please do not feed them – allow them to return to their natural habits.

Save water

Lifestyle choices, population growth and climate change are placing increasing demands on our water supplies. When we turn on the tap in this area we take water from local aquifers that supply the Letcombe Brook.

To ensure that there is enough water for both us and wildlife in years to come please use water wisely. Contact Thames Water 0845 9200 800 www.thameswater.co.uk/waterwise for free leaflets on saving water.

Local information

Wantage – www.wantage.com

Wantage Town Council – 01235 763459

Vale and Downland Museum – 01235 771447

www.wantage-museum.com

Vale of White Horse District Council –

01235 520202, www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk

Environment Agency – For pollution and flood defence matters call 24-hour emergency hotline 0800 80 70 60.

Letcombe Brook Project

The Letcombe Brook Project works with local people and organisations to enhance and protect the natural beauty of the brook and to help people appreciate the environment. The project undertakes work to encourage native wildlife, improve the landscape, remove rubbish and alleviate future flooding along the brook. You can learn more by coming on a guided walk or joining a conservation task. Schools can come river dipping as part of their local river study.



School group measuring the brook

Letcombe Brook Project

C/o Vale and Downland Museum

Church Street

Wantage

OXON

OX12 8BL

01235 771447

letcombebrook@hotmail.com



Volunteers

Partnership

Environment Agency

Wantage Town Council

Grove Parish Council

Letcombe Regis Parish Council

Vale of White Horse District Council

Leaflet sponsored by



LETCOMBE BROOK DISCOVERY TRAIL Wantage

A 3 mile (4.8km) walk, 1½ hours return,
exploring the brook through the town and
nature reserve

Discovery Trail

The Letcombe Brook flows through the small historic market town of Wantage in the Vale of White Horse in Oxfordshire. The trail leads you through the town and natural areas such as Willow Walk Nature Reserve.

The name Wantage historically means intermittent stream. Long ago people chose to settle along the brook as it provided a clean and plentiful supply of fresh water.

The character of the brook has been shaped and changed by centuries of human endeavour as it was used for water collection, farming and industry. The trail helps you explore and discover the brook as it weaves its way through the town often hidden from view. It highlights natural, historic and other interesting features along the route.

Distance and time: The trail starts at the Vale and Downland Museum and finishes in Willow Walk Nature Reserve. From here you retrace your steps back to the museum. It is a linear route, 3 miles (4.8km) return and takes approximately 1 ½ hours.

Accessibility: The walk is mostly on level pavements until it passes through Willow Walk Nature Reserve (point 11), where it is on uneven grass.

i Wantage is a great place to visit with plenty of places to eat and drink and a good range of shops. For more information visit the Vale and Downland Museum 01235 771447 or go to www.wantage.com

P WC Long stay parking and toilets in Wantage Portway car park.

LB More information can be found about the brook on the boards in Mill Street and Willow Walk.

Our local place names reflect the presence of the brook

Letcombe Brook

The brook is a chalk stream and these are globally rare. It is fed from groundwater held in the chalk in the hills above Letcombe Regis and Letcombe Bassett. When it rains the chalk or aquifer, acts like a sponge and soaks up and holds water. Water emerges at ground level in the form of springs which feed the brook. Regular winter rainfall is needed to recharge the aquifer to keep the brook flowing throughout the year.

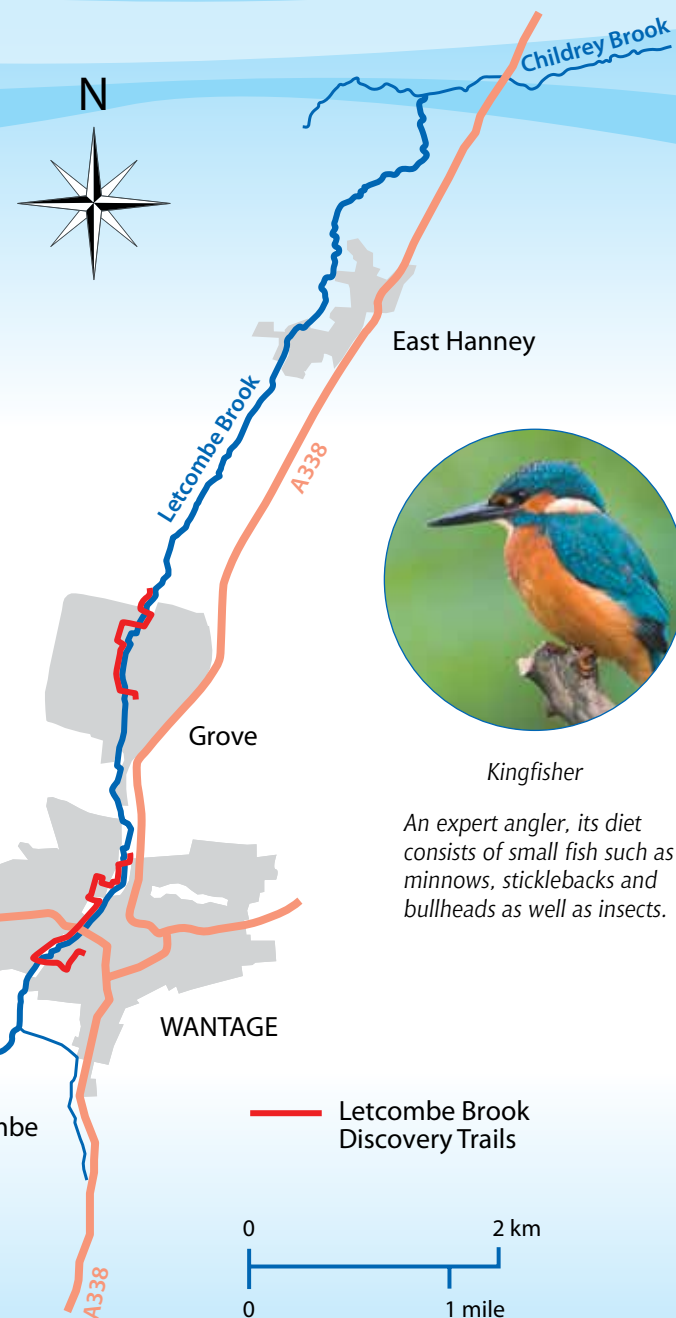
Chalk streams are a naturally rich habitat, and support many different plants and animals including some of the UK's most endangered species. The brook is home to bullhead and wild brown trout feeding on invertebrates such as mayfly larvae and freshwater shrimps. Kingfishers and bats can be seen above the waters, and water voles and otters have returned to the brook.

The brook flows for 7½ miles (12km) through the Vale of White Horse where it meets the Childrey Brook, which flows into the River Ock and on into the River Thames.



Water vole

Once a common sight but now Britain's most endangered mammal due to loss of habitat and predation by mink.



Kingfisher

An expert angler, its diet consists of small fish such as minnows, sticklebacks and bullheads as well as insects.

Letcombe - ledge in the combe
Wantage - intermittent stream
Grove - thicket or copse
East Hanney - island of water fowl

Discover the Letcombe Brook, Wantage

1 Vale and Downland Museum

features displays on the local landscape, history and people. Here you can find local information, a cafe serving drinks, snacks and meals along with displays of arts and crafts from local artists.



With your back to the Vale and Downland Museum, turn left and follow the road round into Priory Road.

2 **Priory Road** used to be known as Tanner Street when these houses were occupied by workers of the tanneries. Tanning is the process of making leather from animal skins. This industry brought wealth to Wantage. It required huge amounts of water from the brook. Look for the blue plaque on house no. 22.



Continue until you come to Locks Lane on your right and take this road down the hill to the ford.

3 Mill, formerly **Willoughbys Mill** which in the past ground grist – maize, corn, barley, and produced poultry feed for farmers and was used to clean and full woollen cloth. In 1086 there were 10 mills recorded on the brook.

At the ford go across the footbridge, turn right and follow the footpath.

Option: Short diversion up to Alfred's Well. Bear left uphill for a short distance. Just before you reach the end of the road take the unsurfaced path on the right which is just before a house named Edgemead. Retrace your steps down to the footbridge, turn left and follow the footpath.

4 **Alfred's Well** is a dell containing natural springs which you can see issuing out of the chalk bank and these feed the brook. The name comes from Alfred Hazel, a founder Baptist in the area. He formed a dam at the springs to

control the water for a sheep dip to clean fleeces and cloth. The pool was also used for baptisms. In the late 19th century Lord Wantage VC bought the area and had it landscaped as a fern garden. In 1921 a descendant, Arthur Thomas Loyd, presented the area to the town of Wantage.



At the crossroads turn right across the bridge, and follow the leat to a seat by the brook.



5 You are approaching a mill. Look out for various structures such as the **leat and sluice**. In the past these were used to divert the brook to build up a head of water to power the mill.

Follow the brook to the iron bridge on the right. The main entrance to Betjeman Millennium Park is on the left.

Options: a) Visit Betjeman Millennium Park. b) To return to the Vale and Downland Museum go across the iron bridge and up Betjeman Lane.



6 **Betjeman Millennium Park** celebrates the life and works of Sir John Betjeman with a poetry sculpture trail and information boards. The poet laureate lived in Wantage from 1946 until 1972. The brook features in Betjeman's poems, 'On leaving Wantage' and 'Wantage Bells'.

6 **Groynes** – The brook here flows in a wide channel constructed to serve the mill, when it was in use. Bundles of willows have been placed in the brook to make the channel narrower. This speeds up the flow of water in the main channel and clears the river bed of silt. Silt is deposited behind the groynes. This improves the river for wildlife and reduces the likelihood of flooding.

Follow the brook along the footpath. Pass between two red brick mills to Mill Street.

7 **Wessex Mill** – A mill has probably occupied this site since Saxon times. The oldest part which straddles brook was converted from water to steam power in 1860. In 1910 the new mill was built, steam power replaced by gas and then electricity.



7 **Mill pool** – Look for the wild brown trout that enjoy the deeper waters here.

Option: Turn right up to Wantage's historic market square with King Alfred's statue, shops and lots of places serving refreshments.

8 **King Alfred the Great** - The Saxon King was born in Wantage A.D 849. The statue was carved in 1877 out of Sicilian marble by a nephew of Queen Victoria. It was paid for by Colonel Robert Loyd Lindsay (later Lord Wantage).



Cross the road and follow the cycle way with the brook on your right.

9 **The Wharf** - The Wantage branch of the Wilts & Berks Canal once terminated near here. Agricultural products, coal, timber, iron and stone were transported and traded along the canal. Flour ground by the mills here was shipped out to other parts of the country.



The Sack House dates back to the early 19th century and has an enamel sign which reads 'The West of England Sack Hiring Company Ltd'. It served as a depot for hiring sacks of a standard size to farmers and

corn merchants to transport their goods by the Wilts & Berks Canal.



Turn right through the cycle barriers and at the fork take the footpath on the right between the garden fences.

A photograph of a large, mature tree with a thick, textured trunk and dense green foliage. The tree is situated in a pond, and its reflection is clearly visible in the calm water. The surrounding area includes some reeds and other vegetation, suggesting a natural, possibly park-like setting.

Turn left onto unsurfaced path into Willow Walk Nature Reserve. Walk 40 metres and at junction take the right unsurfaced path down to the brook. When you reach the pipes turn left and continue to the wooden bridge that crosses the brook.

Pollarding lets light into the brook. This encourages plants to grow in the river and along the banks. The vegetation creates habitat for insects which the fish feed on and also provides the fish with cover from predators.

The trail ends here. Retrace your steps and return to the museum.