



Walk 11 The Source of the Thames

Start Tarlton, grass verge by water tower (ST 958994).

Distance 6.75 miles / 10.72km.

Refreshments Pub near end of walk.

Getting there M4 junction 18, north on A46 then right onto A433. 4 miles beyond Tetbury, take first turning left (unsigned) after left turn for Rodmarton. If you miss this, take next left signed Tarlton. In village, keep left to reach a water tower on the left.

An easy, fairly level walk through pretty Cotswold villages, using woodland tracks, field paths and lanes. The official source of the River Thames is visited, and a disused canal provides archaeological interest. The circuit should take about three hours.

The water tower stands at a junction of roads, take the one opposite the tower, signed Cherington, and walk out of the village to reach a kissing gate on the right alongside double field gates on the right, beyond which, tracks run left and right. Take the track right, and follow it to a cross-track with a house on the right. Cross over to a metal field gate, then go ahead

The Source of the Thames

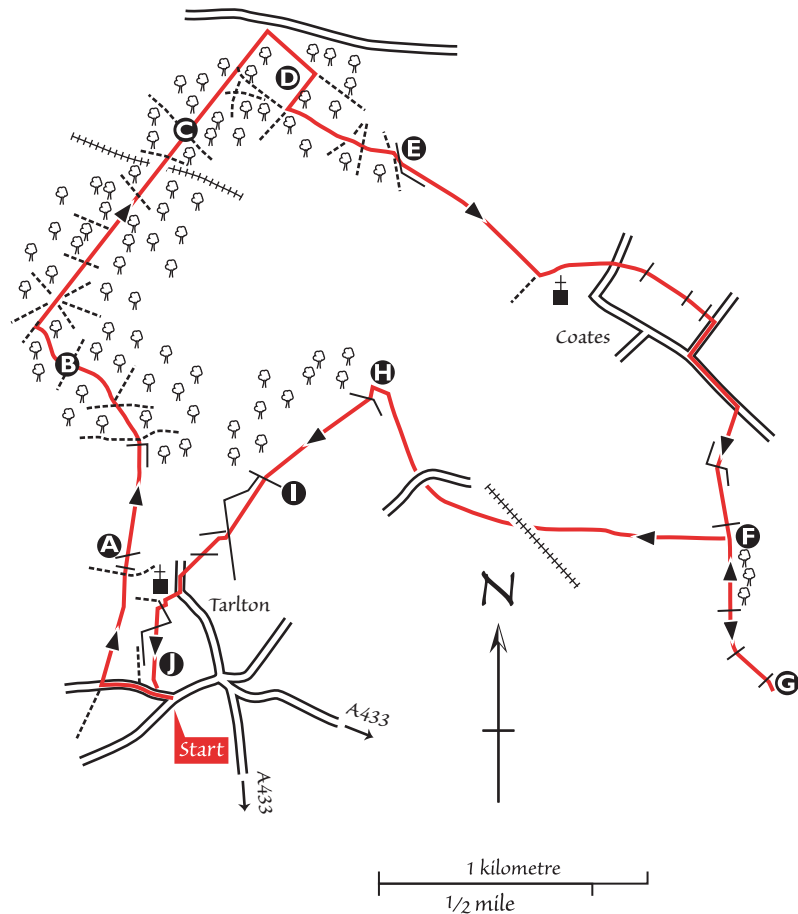
to pass another, the left-hand of a pair **A**. Now walk down the edge of the field to a wooden gate in the far corner, where you enter woodland.

Here, with tracks left and right, take the one ahead and follow it down to a five-way junction. Keep in the same direction, walking up the left-hand of two tracks that start to climb. After continuing past a grassy cross-track **B** another track joins from the left as your track makes an obvious right turn. A short distance beyond this, you enter a clearing known as 'The Star'. Eight tracks radiate from this point and your exit is straight ahead – easier said than done if you forget the track by which you entered! This broad track provides easy walking now, so continue without deviation, eventually crossing the Gloucester to Swindon railway line. Pass cross-tracks immediately beyond the bridge, then beneath your feet at the next pair **C** runs the Sapperton canal tunnel, to be seen later in the walk. Now continue until wooden gates come into view ahead with a road beyond. As you approach these your track bears right, keep with it, to reach a track on the right **D**.

To avoid walking through a sawmill ahead, the Public Right of Way has been diverted here (most of the tracks you have been following are 'permissive' paths), so take this right turn and walk to the next track junction, where you go left. Go ahead, ignoring two cross-tracks (which lead to the sawmill away to the left). At the third track junction, go right and walk for a short distance to a waymark post directing you left, through a gate into a field **E**. Now walk along the field edge, boundary right, to eventually reach the village of Coates, with the church ahead. Turn left and follow the driveway, passing the church on your right.

St. Matthew's church was built around 1086 and restored in 1861. The aisle and perpendicular arch from the nave to the tower are early English, while the south doorway has a Norman arch. The baptistry still has the original Norman font and stone seat.

The driveway brings you to a road, cross over and go through a kissing gate, then go ahead through another to enter a field. Here, keep to the right boundary as you walk down the field. Go through another gate and cross the pasture ahead to a further gate. Beyond this, a path leads



you between houses to a road. Turn right and walk to the road junction where you go left.

Follow the road out of the village, then look for a stone stile on the right, by a wooden gate. Climb over and walk down the field with the wall on your right to reach a stone stile in the bottom corner. Climb this and continue in the same direction with the wall now on your left,

to climb a further stile at the bottom of the field. Follow the track ahead over an old bridge to reach a path junction **F**.

This is Trewsbury Bridge, the best surviving example of a rough stone Thames & Severn Canal bridge – most of the other survivors have been subjected to extensive brick patching, whilst this one remains almost entirely in stone.

The next part of the walk is a there-and-back-again stretch totalling three-quarters of a mile, which takes you to the source of the River Thames. You will return to this spot, taking the path down to the canal.

So, walk ahead on the track climbing two ladder stiles. The route of the canal is in the woodland to your left, having changed its course from east to south, just beyond the old bridge. When you reach the next stile, a waymark post marks the start of the Thames Path, a splendid riverside walk of 180 miles. No riverside here, however! Climb the stile and keep left in the following meadow for a short distance, then look left **G**.

Here, in this Gloucestershire meadow called Trewsbury Mead, where the Romans fought a battle for the nearby British stronghold of Trewsbury Fort, is the official source of the Thames. The stone slabs at the base of an aged ash tree mark the spot where, in winter, sometimes – so rumour has it, a trickle of water can be seen! The stone monument confirms the location now that the statue of Father Thames, itself of historic interest as one of the earliest concrete statues, was moved from here to St John's Lock near Lechlade to protect it from vandalism.

Return now to **F** descending left to reach the canal towpath. The canal at this point is little more than a ditch. It is hard to imagine the activity here in the 1800s.

Opened in 1789, the canal was built to link the Thames at Lechlade with the Stroudwater Canal, which connected with the River Severn at Framilode. 44 locks were needed to carry the canal over the Cotswolds, as well as a 4 kilometre tunnel. In its heyday, 70-foot horse-drawn narrow boats carried a variety of freight from iron ore, coal and limestone to dairy produce and textiles. Competition from the railway and constant leakage

saw the closure of first the tunnel in 1911, followed by the eastern section in 1927 and the remainder in 1933.

Follow the towing path, eventually passing beneath Skew Bridge where the railway is taken over the canal. A little further on, you pass a circular brick structure on the left.

This was one of five 'roundhouses' built along the canal's course, and used by the lengthsman who looked after the daily running and maintenance of his stretch of canal and towpath. Roundhouses had three storeys, with the ground floor used as a stable and those above for living accommodation. They had a funnel-shaped roof that acted as a rainwater catchment, rain falling on the roof being channelled to a lead collecting bowl in the centre, which was connected to a cistern that stored water for drinking purposes. Behind this roundhouse was a small rectangular extension that used to house the kitchen, while a separate stone structure housed the privy.

Carry on, passing beneath a road bridge beyond which, the canal runs in a concrete channel.

This length of the canal leading to the Sapperton tunnel is called the King's Reach, following a visit from George III during the time of the tunnel's construction. This stretch suffered badly from leakage until Gloucestershire County Council constructed a sophisticated concrete channel with side vents above the waterline to relieve the ground water pressure, a successful solution that has lasted for about a century.

You finally arrive at the mouth of the tunnel (1) the portal being a wonderful piece of Georgian Classical stonework that was completely rebuilt in 1976-7. From here, the path leads you up to the left, where you find the Tunnel House Inn.

The inn was originally built as a hostel for the men building the tunnel, with large communal rooms for sleeping and eating. For many years it would have been the place where 'Leggers' waited to offer their services to passing boat crews about to enter the tunnel. With no towpath through the tunnel, these Leggers would lie on their backs on the canal boats and propel the craft

by 'walking' it along the sides of the tunnel. The building originally had three floors but was gutted by a severe fire in 1952, after which it was rebuilt as a public house, minus the top floor.

Sir John Betjeman once said of the pub, "My father took me here as a child and the romance of the place has never diminished for me". However, the romance may have diminished had he paid in 2011, so I'm told, £8.95 for the 'Ploughman's lunch', a slab of cheddar, slice of bread and butter, pickled onion and garnish.

To continue the walk; with your back to the front door of the pub, go half-right, across the grass and down to enter a field. Go ahead along the unploughed strip of land, walking parallel with the power lines off to your right. At the far side of the field, climb a stile (2) and continue ahead in the same direction, initially following the right boundary. As you climb this field, the boundary wall deserts you, veering right, but when it returns, look along it for a stone stile. Climb over and cross the following meadow keeping to the left of the electricity pole to arrive at a gate in the far boundary. Beyond here, continue in the same direction to reach a farm gate, located to the right of the cottage. Go through to the road.

You are now back in Tarlton. Go left along the road, then take the grass path on the right, signed 'To the Church'. To visit the little church, take the gate on the right and cross the track.

St Osmund's church was built in the 13th century as a chapel-of-ease for Rodmarton church, a mile or so away. It eventually fell into disuse and in the early 1800s was used as a farm building, before being restored in 1875.

Back on the grass path with iron railing to your left, follow it round to the left and climb a stile into a meadow. Turn left, passing an electricity pole on your right, to climb a stile in the cross-fence. Now walk straight down the following long meadow passing a redundant gateposts (3) and continuing to a field gate giving access to a road. Go left to reach your starting point.