



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 144

Birchanger – 3.5 miles (6 kms) (with a shorter option of 2.6 miles, 4kms)

This walk within the parish of Birchanger includes part of the village and two attractive bluebell woods, Birchanger Wood and Digby Wood. Birchanger Wood is noted for its well-surfaced paths and is especially attractive in springtime with an extensive carpet of wood anemones as well as bluebells. The route crosses the busy A120 twice. There is an option for shortening the route. Refreshments may be available at the Three Willows, which the route passes towards the end. Apart from crossing the A120, the route is on quiet lanes and footpaths that are generally well surfaced but with some stretches that may be muddy at times. There are no stiles.

Start and finish: The walk starts and finishes in the village of Birchanger, near the telephone kiosk in Birchanger Lane and a little way south-east of the village sign. There is usually space to park considerably along this road, ideally on the opposite side to the sports field.
Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL510226 - Postcode: CM23 5QH.
The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 195.
A diagram of the route is provided at the end of the description.

Using the pavement on the sports field side of the road, head south-east with the sports field on the left. When the sports field ends, continue for another 100 yards until house number 273 on the left. Here, cross the road with care and pass beside a gate onto a private road / footpath, lined with trees.

After 100 yards, ignore a footpath on the left and continue with horse paddocks on the right. At the end of the paddocks, turn left onto a field-edge path with a ditch on the right.

Follow the field edge round to the right, gently descending towards woodland.

At the end of the field, keep straight ahead into the wood. This is Birchanger Wood, an area of some 60 acres of ancient woodland, owned by Birchanger Wood Trust for the benefit of local people and managed by a team of enthusiastic volunteers. From March to May, the view ahead can be quite stunning: a white carpet of wood anemones. Such an extensive coverage is only normally found in ancient woodlands or churchyards, for this plant spreads only very slowly through its roots.

Take the path straight ahead into the wood. Quite soon, the path reaches a road, the A120, Bishop's Stortford bypass, which was constructed through Birchanger Wood in the 1970s. Descend to the road and cross with extreme care. Be prepared to wait a few minutes for a safe gap in the traffic from both directions. This busy road has a 60mph speed limit and traffic approaches extremely fast.

On the far side of the road, climb up into the wood and continue straight ahead. After about 50 yards, at a crossroads of main paths, turn right. Our route will take us on an anti-clockwise loop around this section of the wood and return to this crossroads.

The woodland on this, western, side of the A120 is also rich with wood anemones and here too are bluebells beneath the woodland canopy in springtime. The wood has a variety of species of trees including ash, birch, cherry, hazel, holly, hornbeam, oak and sweet chestnut. Trees that have fallen or been felled are often left on the ground for use by wildlife, especially insects and other invertebrates.

Continue past a path on the left. Volunteers have installed a large triangular seat at this junction. Further along, ignore another path on the left.

The path gently descends, crosses a stream, and then climbs again. From the top of the rise, in the distance beyond the edge of the wood, you may be able to see the roundabout at the junction of A120 and B1383 – this is close to the boundary of Birchanger parish. Then, as the path descends, the backs of the Homebase and Wickes stores come into view.

After crossing the stream again, the path climbs. Another path comes in from the right – this leads to the Wickes store. Continue ahead, still climbing gently. Stay on the main path as it bears left, soon passing residential properties to the right – these are just outside the Hundred Parishes on the edge of Bishop's Stortford.

Altogether, around 3 miles of winding, all-weather paths were installed in Birchanger Wood around 2010. The paths have encouraged many more visitors, at the same time deterring them from trampling on the native wild flowers.

Keep to the path to the edge of the wood. Near the top of the rise, we approach a large water tower and pass a compound on the right. This is where the volunteers who maintain Birchanger Wood store and sell logs; the proceeds contribute to the costs of maintenance.

Pass double gates to the compound and, at the end of the metal fencing, turn left at a crossroads of main paths, heading away from a wooden gateway that leads out of the wood.

In another 100 yards, we cross another path and keep straight ahead, soon reaching the A120.

Cross the main road with great care.

Re-enter the wood on the far side and climb up either the steps or the zig-zag slope. Almost immediately, turn left onto another well-defined and winding path.

The path descends, crosses a stream and bears to the right. A path joins us from the right as we bear left, now heading towards large warehouses visible through the trees.

The path soon leaves the wood. Immediately turn half right and pass the large buildings on the right.

After about 200 yards, the field on the left ends and we pass beside the hedge of a residential property as we come back into Birchanger village. Pass a bungalow on the left and then turn left, between residential properties. Immediately after the second bungalow on the left, turn left, now with a wooden fence on the right.

Soon, the path reaches the churchyard of Birchanger's parish church, dedicated to St Mary. Turn right and, in about 30 yards, turn left into the churchyard. The church dates from the 12th century and has two Norman doorways and a Norman nave. Two bells hang from a relatively modern bellcote, installed after a round tower was demolished in the 19th century.

Keep to the right of the church (visiting if you can) and then bear right to leave the churchyard through the lychgate. Turn right with care onto Birchanger Lane and, when safe, cross to the pavement.

Pass the children's play park on the left and the former rectory on the right. On the left, pass St Mary's Church Hall. Do not fork left onto the side road, but continue along the main road, passing Harrisons on the right. This residential road was named after the Harrison family who lived at Birchanger Place, a grand house that stood on this site until it was demolished in the 1960s.

Pause at the next junction. Here you will find the village sign, erected in 2002 and displaying an extract from the 1086 Domesday Book entry for Birchanger. The converted barn on the opposite side of Birchanger Lane dates from the 17th century.

Immediately before the village sign, turn sharp left into Birchwood. On the right, we pass Birchanger Sports and Social Club, opened in 1891 and a significant element of the village's social life. The Club and adjacent sports field are located on land donated by Charles Gold who served as club president for 30 years. He was elected as the local Member of Parliament and later knighted.

Here, there is an opportunity to take a shortcut, reducing the total distance by about a mile. For the shorter route, skip to the text in a box on the next page . . .

For the full route, ignore Wood Lane on the right. Keep right on the pavement and soon turn right into Birchwood. In 80 yards turn left, signposted to Birchanger Primary School. Soon, follow this road round to the right and keep right on the footpath with a metal handrail on the left. After a few yards, turn left through a gap in the handrail and pass bungalow 61A on the right. On reaching a chain link fence, turn left and then almost immediately right through the fencing.

Go straight ahead on the cross-field footpath, heading towards a wood in the distance. Here, we are on high ground, more than 100 metres above sea level. We are now heading north towards the adjoining parish of Stansted Mountfitchet. Ahead, you may be able to see Stansted Windmill and St John's Church.

Over to the left, after a while, you should see the white pavilion of Farnham Cricket Club at Hazel End and to its right, far beyond, at the top of the hill, the white water tower at Berden.

As we near the woodland, we can clearly see 21st-century residential development ahead. This is Foresthall Park, now part of Stansted Mountfitchet, built mainly on the site once occupied by the extensive Rochfords Nursery that was then within Birchanger parish. The parish boundary was realigned in 2012.

Before reaching the woodland. Turn right, following the field edge with a ditch on the left. The next 200 yards is not designated as a public footpath but it is well used by local residents.

At the far corner of the field, over to the left, you can see 17th-century Parsonage Farmhouse and its even older barn. Follow the field edge round to the right, keeping the hedgerow on the left. After about 50 yards, ignore a path that goes left through the hedge. After another 100 yards, turn left – across a dip – into Digby Wood. Follow the main path round to the right.

Digby Wood is usually richly endowed with bluebells in springtime. Keep ahead, with the edge of the wood close by on the right.

At the end of the wood, keep ahead with bungalows on the right. Pass beside a gate and continue past residential properties on the left. The track becomes a surfaced lane.

Pass Mulberry House on the left, and then a building used by the Scouts. Turn left beside the Scout hut and then left again. Then turn right onto a footpath between wooden fences. Ignore the text in the box . . .

For the shorter option, and a total distance of 2.6 miles, just after the Club, turn right into Wood Lane, and almost immediately bear right again into a parking area.

Keep to the left and pass the Scout hut on the left. Then, turn right onto a footpath between wooden fences. You have now re-joined the longer route.

In about 20 yards, the path emerges onto a playing field. We parked on the opposite side of this playing field before starting this walk.

Go straight ahead, keeping the playing field on the right, beneath a line of mature trees and soon with a low wire fence on the left. At the end of the playing field, go straight ahead through a gap in the hedge into a field.

Continue ahead on the field-edge path with hedgerow on the right. Over to the left, we can see the M11 motorway and the 200-foot tall control tower for Stansted Airport.

At the end of the field, turn right onto a short driveway and almost immediately return, once again, to Birchanger Lane. Here, turn left past 18th-century Willow Thatch and in just a few yards reach The Three Willows pub and restaurant. The building is believed to have served the village as a public house for over 200 years. Whether or not you pause at the pub, you will need to retrace the last few yards past Willow Thatch.

From the Three Willows, turn right to retrace past Willow Thatch and then continue along Birchanger Lane. Please use the pavement as much as possible. When the lane turns left and right, take extra care when crossing the road.

Once the lane straightens out, we pass a variety of older houses including the red-tiled roof of Centuries (number 293) on the right dating from about 1600AD; and Lavender Cottage (number 280), with two dormer windows, set back on the left and dating from the 17th or 18th century.

On the left is 18th-century Old Cottage, with three dormer windows, and on the right Green Farm, dating from the 18th or 19th century.

On the left, we pass the entrance to the footpath where we started. Soon, we return to where we parked, opposite the playing field.

You can read more about the parish of Birchanger on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

This route description, last updated 14 October 2022, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk Please email any suggestions for improving the route or the route description to hundredparishes@btinternet.com.

A diagram covering this route, based on the Ordnance Survey map, is shown below. It is published under © Crown copyright 2020 OS 100062498.

