

Journey to the source of the Thames



The Thames is the second longest river in the UK and at 215 miles, the longest river entirely in England. It flows through 8 counties, has 24 major tributaries including the Cherwell at Oxford where its known as the Isis. From its source at Trewsbury Mead in Gloucestershire there are many other famous settlements along its banks, Henley-on-Thames and Windsor probably being the most notable after Oxford, as well as flowing past Windsor Castle, Hampton Court and the Houses of Parliament to its estuary and mouth as far east as Southend on Sea.

Along its banks is the market town of Wallingford, significant due to the fact that if you are marching an army from the south it is the first place along the river that you can cross an army on foot. In 1066 William the Conqueror met Archbishop Stigand at the town to make the formal arrangements for the handover of the country following the defeat of King Harold's army at Hastings. Already one of King Alfred's Burgh towns, it marks the western edge of the Kingdom of Wessex, the Normans then built one of their largest fortresses at the site of the ford. The town then had its heyday up to the English civil war, at one time being the county town of Berkshire, however following the siege of Wallingford in 1646 when the castle was captured by Parliamentary forces in 1652 its destruction was decreed and the building materials it yielded were taken down river to be used at Windsor Castle.

Starting from the Market Square in Wallingford the route leaves the town westwards along Station Road and the Wantage Road, towards Didcot on the A4130 and takes the first right up Sires Hill with Wittenham Clumps on the right. About half a mile from the junction is a left turn that you can take to visit the Clumps, a pair of wooded chalk hills, one of which is a Bronze age hill fort have spectacular views of the Oxfordshire and Berkshire countryside. Once back on the route from the top of Sires Hill there is a fast descent at the bottom of which is a left turn towards Appleford and Sutton Courtney. In the church yard at Sutton Courtenay, look for the gravestone of one Eric Arthur Blair (aka George Orwell). The route here is flat, keep rolling towards Drayton making a left at the roundabout towards Steventon, follow the road under the A34 and you will come across a village green lined with large trees, turn right here towards East Hanney. West Hanney was the site of a discovery of an early Saxon grave from the 7th century that contained the skeleton of a young woman with grave goods including one spindle whorl, two iron knives and two ceramic pots that may have contained food.

From the Hanney's keep going west towards the Village of Charney Basset and on to Gainfield where you take a left on the B4508 towards Hatford and Shellingford, taking care when crossing the A417 (it's a single carriageway road with a 50MPH limit but the tall hedges make visibility at the junctions difficult). Shrivenham is about the 30 mile mark, so a good time to stop, there is a Co-op and a

Mcdonalds here, although 3 miles further on is the small town of Highworth (care needed crossing the A420, 60MPH limit here) where you can find a larger selection of refreshment establishments.

Head North East from Highworth towards Hannington and Castle Eaton where in the entrance to the churchyard a medieval standing cross that is a scheduled Ancient Monument. A high cross or standing cross is a free-standing, richly decorated Christian cross made of stone. There was a unique early Medieval tradition developed from earlier traditions using wood in Ireland and Britain of raising large sculpted stone crosses, usually outdoors. Although incomplete, the medieval cross in the churchyard of St Mary survives comparatively well in what is likely to be close to its original position.

Continuing Northeast at the T junction turn left then right towards Down Ampney, turn left through the Hamlet for a mile and a half towards the Cirencester Road. Here make a right turn and run parallel north westwards with the A419, at the roundabout turn left and head for the Cotswold Water Park, the site of former gravel pits that now form a nature reserve and leisure park with 170 lakes set over 40 square miles. At the 45 mile mark, the café in the Visitor Centre will provide some welcome rest. Continue down the Spine Road (B4096) to a staggered crossroad and turn right follow the road for another mile and a half to the next crossroads and turn left towards Ewen and Kemble.

There is a dogleg right left in Kemble, the left being Windmill Road which takes you up to the A433, Tetbury to Cirencester Road, so fast, you will need to follow it for a third of a mile and then take the track on the left that takes you to the Thames Head. Here a monument beneath an ash tree bears the inscription:

THE CONSERVATORS OF THE RIVER THAMES

1857-1974

**THIS STONE WAS PLACED HERE TO MARK THE
SOURCE OF THE RIVER THAMES**

A nearby basin of stones marks the spring; however, there is usually only water during a wet winter. However, there is a twist to this story, the source of the Thames has long been disputed, located some 14 miles farther at the intersection of the A435 and A436 roads, a second source at Seven Springs has long claimed to be the source of the great river. This location is the source of the River Churn, which flows south across the Cotswolds through Cirencester and joins the Thames near Cricklade.

This extension to the ride is a challenging one, the terrain changes dramatically as you climb up onto the Cotswolds, about 90% of this 14 mile trek is climbing and there is a small section of the A419 that is unavoidable, so it's not for the faint hearted. From the Thames head follow the path towards Trewsbury Road, turn left where the path meets the road then a sharp right and left take you up to the A419. The distance on the main road is 0.2 miles but does involve a right turn up Jackbarrow Road. Keep climbing with Sapperton Hill on your left all the way to Winstone where a left turn puts you on Pike Road which brings you up to the A417 by the Highwayman, avoid taking the main road, as there is a bridge that crosses it.

Beechpike Road takes you up to Cocklebird and after crossing the River Churn join the A435, this section is fairly wide and straight with a slight downhill which gives a nice run into the final mile to Seven Springs which is a left turn at the next roundabout, into the Seven Springs for some refreshments.

Wallingford to Thames Head

53.17 Miles, 1,269 ft Elevation Gain, 4 Hours estimated Moving Time

Wallingford to Seven Springs

66.53 Miles, 2,214 ft Elevation Gain, 5 Hours estimated Moving Time

