

Walk 3 – Beacon Hill, Exton and Peake Farm (6½ miles, 4 stiles, steep hill to descend and a few rough sections, otherwise easy walking)



From the village hall walk south along Lippen Lane, follow the footpath beside the A32 for 150 yards then turn right up Wheely Down Road. Take care – it has some blind bends and traffic can move very fast.

After ½ mile, at Wheely Down Farm (look for the steel sculptures in the paddock in front), take the bridleway left. Climb the hill and after 200 yd turn right through a gate into the field, following the bridleway along the hedge line, climbing gently all the way. Follow the signs through a gate, passing a new coppice on the left. As you go the view opens up across the side valley southward. This is Abbey Estate land, with Beacon Hill (English Nature) beyond. Keep straight on along the track, which forms a headland between fields. Follow the bridleway through a gate and up through the wood – on the right is private woodland behind a deer fence. On the left is open access land managed by English Nature.

At the Beacon Hill car park take the track into the nature reserve, then at the top of the hill stop to admire the view – southward past Portsdown Hill to the Solent and the Isle of Wight, then westward past the Fawley chimneys to the New Forest and northward to Beacon Hill, Highclere.

From the viewpoint follow the signs for the South Downs Way (permissive bridleway) to the right, down the hill to the lane. Turn left, then immediately left again onto a footpath. Follow it on its steep descent of the slope, stopping on the way to admire the fantastic view across the Meon Valley. It doesn't get much better than this! Descend through three kissing gates until the path levels out across fields towards Exton. Keep straight on until there is a choice of signed paths – bear left and follow on until you come out in Church Lane, Exton. Turn left.

At the T-junction - if you have time turn right and call in at "The Shoe". If not, turn left, walking along the lane past Manor Farm House with the river on your right until you reach the A32. Cross straight over, down the track with the old-style "no through road" sign until you come to the footbridge over the river. Beyond here the path can be very muddy and wet in winter.

Where the path forks keep left and follow it beside a stream bed. This is Garden Hill Lane – the watercourse is completely dry in summer but a clear running chalk stream in winter. Follow the path (lumpy and needing care in places) until you reach a big brick arch bridge where the stream runs under the old railway line (now the Meon Valley Trail).

Climb the steps on the left and then decide whether to turn left and take the short route home via the Trail, or to go via Peake Farm. For the Peake Farm route cross straight over the Trail and at the bottom of the ramp bear left along the path next to the stream bed. Keep going until the path and the stream bed merge (you can be paddling here in winter). Over the gate on your right is the site of Garden Hill Farm – nothing left to see other than the beautiful location.

At the T-junction turn left and follow the concrete road towards Lower Peak Farm. This part of the walk is very quiet – the whole Peake Farm area feels much more remote than it actually is. Before entering the farm take the well-marked footpath on the left, skirting the farm buildings, across the lane and past the riding school. At the rough drive to Upper Peak Farm turn left and follow for ½ mile to Hayden Lane. Turn left and it's another ½ mile back to Warnford.