

Out in the Country

with Graham Megson
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LATE summer sees an abundance of ripening fruit and seed from the farmers' fields to the wild hedgerows and woods.

This is the time for animals to lay down stores of food or put on weight for the lean months ahead. Birds are growing new feathers to replace worn out ones. During the summer, ducks are dull coloured so that when they are growing new wing feathers they are hard to spot by predators. Now they are back in their bright plumages, at least the males are.

While playing conkers is a declining pastime for schoolchildren, those



of us who are older can still recognise a horse chestnut tree (above) at a great distance. They are one of the earliest trees to start going yellow. Non-native to Britain, they have been widely planted in towns. Grey squirrels are fond of conkers, which, unlike sweet chestnuts, cannot be eaten by humans.

While the leaves of trees such as blackthorn, hazel and elder are beginning to die, their nuts and fruits are ripening. However, the berries of the rowan have already ripened and been eaten. Acorns and the seeds of beech trees will soon be falling. They will feed many animals over the winter.

Walk: Womersley

Explore the rolling countryside of the south of the county

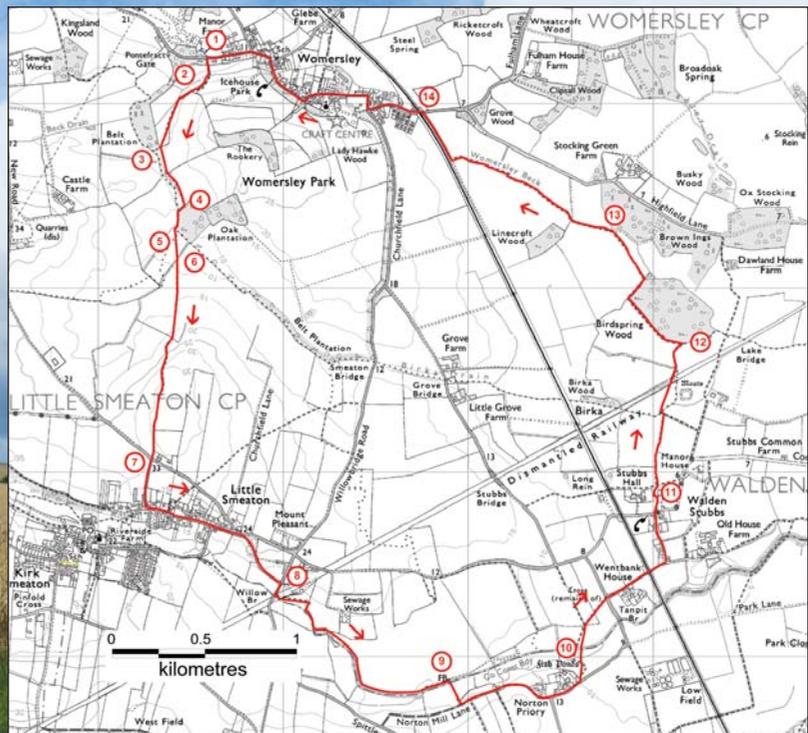
The route: A seven-mile (11km) circular walk, from Womersley via Little Smeaton and Walden Stubbs
Difficulty: Easy. There are several stiles and bridges, some narrow. The route runs mainly over fields so may be muddy. Sections follow roads that have no footway.

Map: You will need OS Explorer Map No.279 (Doncaster).

Start: grid reference: SE 526 192.

Public transport:

For public transport information, call Traveline on **0871 200 22 33** (calls from landlines cost 10p a minute) or go online to www.northyorkstravel.info.



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1. Starting on Main Street, Womersley, near Rookery Farm, head to the western edge of the village. About 100 metres from Rookery Farm is a public footpath sign on the left that leads over a stone stile next to a gate and down a track with stone walls on both sides.
2. Follow the track south, over the beck, then follow the line of trees that bear to the right so that you are heading south-west, keeping the field boundary on your left. Still following the field boundary, carry on until you get to the woodland, where you will find a metal squeeze stile.
3. With the woodland on your right, go through the stile and continue along the field edge next to the woodland until you come to the fingerpost. Follow the turn in the path and head into the woodland as shown by the fingerpost.
4. Follow the defined path through the woodland until you emerge on the other side. Turn left to head almost due south along the edge of the ditch. Continue along the path, with the ditch on your right, until you come to a bridge crossing the ditch.
5. Cross the bridge and turn to your left. Do not follow the path that continues alongside the large ditch you have just crossed but look for the hedge running across the field. There is a gap in the hedge below the highest point of the hill beyond it. Head for this gap and cross the bridge over the small ditch.
6. From this bridge head south, cutting the corner of the field to

another field boundary. Cross into this next field, continuing south towards a group of small trees and bushes. This is the start of a track enclosed by hedges. Follow the track south until you reach the road just north of Little Smeaton.

7. Cross this road and follow the minor road south into Little Smeaton. Turn left and head east through the village. Follow the road past the play area until you reach the junction with Willowbridge Road. Turn right towards the bridge over the River Went. Just before the bridge you will see a public footpath sign on the left.
8. Follow this path down, through a metal squeeze stile and across the field to another metal squeeze stile. Once through this stile turn right and follow the field edge beside the river until you come to a very narrow bridge across the River Went.
9. Cross the bridge and head south-east to Norton Mill Lane. Once on the lane, turn left and follow the lane past Priory Mill and Priory Garth. Just past Priory Garth there is a public footpath sign next to a stile. Climb over the stile and follow the path north across the field to a bridge across the River Went.
10. Cross the river and follow the path north across the field. Following the footpath, you cross two more fields, bearing slightly right until you are heading north-east. Pass through the gap in the hedge and emerge on Tanpit Lane. Cross Tanpit Lane and follow the minor road towards the level crossing. Once

over the railway, take the first road on the left and follow this through Walden Stubbs until you come to another junction. Opposite you is a kissing gate that leads onto a public footpath.

11. Go through the kissing gate and follow the path north past Stubbs Hall. Go north until you reach a track. On the track, turn left and follow it over the old railway line. You will now see Birdspring Wood ahead of you. Follow the path to the wood.
12. Once at Birdspring Wood, turn left and follow the path along the field edge with the wood on your right. Cross over the bridge at the end of the wood and turn right towards Womersley Beck. After about 130 metres, turn left and cross the field to the beck.
13. Once at the beck, turn left and follow it along the field edge path keeping the beck on your right. You will come to a wide bridge across the beck, ignore this and continue with the beck on your right. At the footbridge follow the way markers over the beck and turn left to again follow the beck, but this time with it on your left. Continue to the railway. Turn right and follow the line of the railway along the field edge path until you emerge onto the road beside Womersley level crossing.
14. Cross the level crossing and follow Station Road into Womersley. At the roundabout, turn right and follow Park Lane through the village until you return to the start near Rookery Farm.

Notes

Historic environment

You pass the remains of the original Womersley after you turn left into the park, which was laid out in 1867, leaving the old village deserted and the new one to be created outside the walls.

The big lump with trees on is a Victorian ice house used to store winter ice below ground to preserve meat. The ice could be used until summer.

East of Little Smeaton is Norton Priory, the site of a medieval manor house. The path passes the dry moat, but there were also fishponds, a pigeon cote, mills, bakehouse and brewhouse.

Marks in growing crops on the ploughed fields show a big farmed landscape of fields and trackways dating to the pre-Roman period.

Between Walden Stubbs and Birdspring Wood is a patchwork of small fields enclosed after 1540 and retaining a lot of original boundaries, identifiable by their curvy outlines.

Ecology

The walk passes through a largely arable area, but dotted across the landscape are small woodlands. These include Birdspring Wood and Browns Ing Wood (at points 12 and 13). Both are ancient woodland, land that has been continually wooded since at least 1600. Ancient woods are one of our most valuable habitats, supporting diverse plant and animal species. We have lost nearly half of our ancient woodland since the 1930s to agriculture, development and non-native conifers for commercial forestry. Birdspring Wood and Browns Ing Wood have been felled in the recent past and partially replanted or colonised with non-native trees, such as beech, sycamore and spruce. However, they retain plants characteristic of ancient woodlands, such as bluebell and ramson's. These species are best seen in spring, but another, dog's mercury, will still be visible.

• **More on ancient trees: p12**