

SGEG - Shamley Green's Special Places

4. The Wey and Arun Canal

Just a short way from Shamley Green is a brilliant circular walk giving glimpses into the history of this area before the days of the petrol engine. It follows the Wey and Arun Canal, disused since 1871, which was built to link the Wey and Arun rivers and is now being restored for much of its length, and returns via the Downs Link path which is on the site of the railway which usurped the canal, but was then closed in 1965.

To get to the canal, take the bridleway leading west from Lords Hill. It goes down a dip and suddenly you are in a shady dell with Cranleigh Water tumbling noisily beneath you over a weir, with lovely spring displays of golden marsh marigolds around the pool below. Cross the little bridge over the weir and up ahead you will see a strange green-painted contraption, 'Birtley Lift Bridge no.2', which was installed in 2023: if boats ever navigate this bit of the canal again it will lift out of the way to let them pass, and as the bridge is counterbalanced with concrete beams one person can easily raise and lower it without needing any electric power.

Turn left here, along the path beside the canal, with Cranleigh Water meandering through woods below on your left and then lovely views open up across fields to the hills of Winterfold. There are big patches of comfrey on the banks, lots of foxgloves (in 2024) and a whole host of smaller wildflowers. Dragonflies patrol the duckweed-covered water, and if you're lucky you may spot a water vole as it scurries for cover, or the electric blue of a kingfisher in flight. There is a very wide bit of canal which is a 'winding hole' where the barges using the canal could turn – holding 30 tons of cargo, they could be pulled by a single horse, making for a much easier way of transporting heavy goods than by road.

This tranquil waterway was never really all that busy – it was conceived as a back way from London to Portsmouth, avoiding the English Channel which was dangerous during the Napoleonic Wars, but by the time the canal was completed in 1816 that danger had receded and the demand for military supplies was over. Instead it was mainly used for transporting coal, roofing tiles, imports from ocean-going ships in Portsmouth Harbour, chalk, lime, manure and other heavy goods.



Birtley Lift Bridge no.1

After about half a mile Birtley Lift Bridge no.1 comes into view, the identical twin of no.2, and you cross the canal here, maybe stopping a while at the bench to admire the view before making your way to the Downs Link/Wey South Path where you turn right.

You are now on the route of the railway - when railways arrived as a quick and convenient means of transporting goods they sounded the death knell for canals over the whole of the UK. The Cranleigh Line connecting Guildford and Horsham opened in 1865, but rather like the canal it replaced, being largely rural it was never as profitable as hoped, and was finally vanquished by the A281 a hundred years later. Now it's a haven for wildlife and provides a delightful wooded walk back to our first bridge, with quite dramatic views down steep embankments to the canal on your right.

There are boards with interesting information about the Wey and Arun Canal at both bridges, and lots more on the Wey & Arun Canal Trust website <https://weyarun.org.uk/backdrop/history-wey-arun-canal>. Do go and explore this unique area, it's a very different part of Shamley Green!

There's lots more interesting information about the natural world in and around Shamley Green on our website www.shamleygreenenvironment.co.uk