

# Flood Meadows Trail

## Introduction

'...as English as a Hampshire water meadow.'  
**John Buchan**

Alton's Flood Meadows, owned and maintained by Alton Town Council, consists of two areas separated by New Odiham Road (B3349). The river connects Flood Meadows and former watercress beds with Will Hall Meadow near to the head of the river. Together both form the western end of the Wey Walk which starts at Alton station and goes by King's Pond (see the King's Pond Trail leaflet).

While walking the Trail please observe the Countryside Code, respecting your surroundings. There are places on both meadows to enjoy a picnic. The nearest public toilets are in the Lady Place Car Park off Lenten Street.

Alton as a gateway to the South Downs National Park boasts an extremely rich and diverse countryside with an extensive network of footpaths enabling walkers to enjoy the great outdoors. The town is an accredited 'Walkers are Welcome' destination. For more information on walking in Alton please visit [www.walkalton.org.uk](http://www.walkalton.org.uk)

Alton Town Council hosts an annual Walking Festival throughout the month of May. If you would like to join a guided walk or for more information on other local walks please visit [www.alton.gov.uk](http://www.alton.gov.uk) or telephone 01420 83986.



## Useful Information

### Public Transport

By Bus: [www.stagecoachbus.com](http://www.stagecoachbus.com) Tel: 0345 121 0190

By Train: [www.traveline.info](http://www.traveline.info) Tel: 0871 200 2233

### Local Walking Organisations

Walk Alton: [www.walkalton.org.uk](http://www.walkalton.org.uk)

Walking for Health: [www.walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk)

Alton Ramblers: [www.altonramblers.org.uk](http://www.altonramblers.org.uk)

### Flood Meadows Trail

The Flood Meadows Trail leaflet was produced by Alton Town Council. For more information or copies of this leaflet please contact:

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Thanks to Charles Kaye and Louise Parker from Amery Hill Residents Association, Jane Hurst, and Dr June Chatfield OBE for contributing the text and photographs for this leaflet and for dedicating their time to this community project.

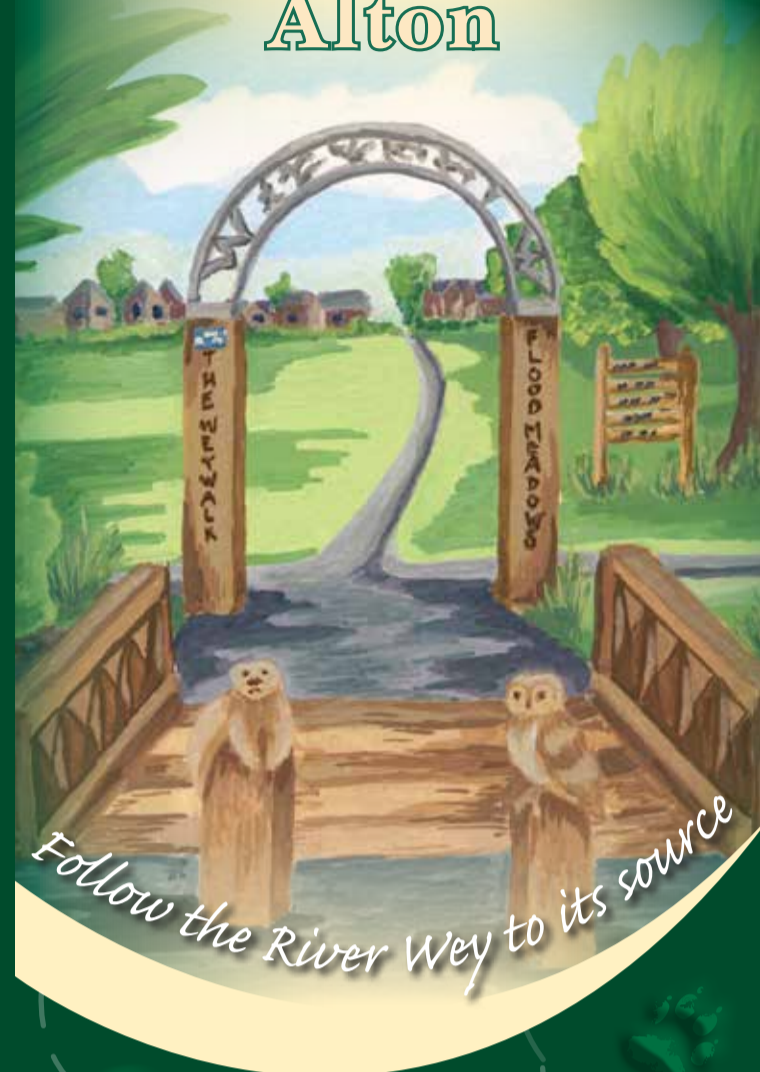
Cover painting courtesy of Pam Pell

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Alton Town Council

# Flood Meadows Trail Alton



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## History

By 1086, the area of Flood Meadows was part of the demesne land of Hyde Abbey – the Lords of the Manor of Alton Eastbrook. Meadows were valuable as they provided an early crop of grass for the animals. The first reference to the name of Flood Mead/Meadow comes from a 1788 sale of Amery (as the estate was now known). A new farmhouse (now known as Amery House) was built which was occupied by the Chalcrafts for over 150 years and they used the meadow as 'an enclosure of rich feeding pasture'.

The area was crossed by the old sunken road to Shalden and it was down here that the Parliamentary troops came from Farnham to attack the Royalist men stationed in the town on 13th December 1643 - resulting in the Battle of Alton. This was also the route Frederick Baker took 'Sweet' Fanny Adams to meet her sad end.



In 1893, the Local Board inspected the river looking for a desirable site for a Bathing Place but it was found to be unsuitable 'due to the insufficiency of water' and one was created below King's Pond.

By this time, 'prolific water-cress beds' had been created and cultivated by George Mills. A bunch 'could be bought for a halfpenny or a penny'. Later, when Mr Tabor took over, it became 'Weyspring Watercress'.



Further upstream, across the New Odiham Road, lies Will Hall Farm which has belonged to Winchester College since the late 1400s. In the Victorian period, their meadow contained ash, willow, walnut and poplar trees and was home to partridges, pheasants and water rail.

## Natural Habitats and Species

The area of Flood Meadows is the riverside pastureland and watercress beds of the former Amery Farm and Will Hall Farm. Both farmhouses still exist as private residences behind the flint wall at the top north-east corner of the site (Amery) and at the foot of Brick Kiln Lane (Will Hall).

The bedrock is chalk and marl with some overlying gravel and alluvium (silt). The chalk marl is poorly drained so the water table is not far below the surface. Hence springs emerge from the ground below the bank at the back of the cress beds, under the lime tree by the bend in the river and in Will Hall Meadow. The river is a winterbourne and naturally dries up for a few months in summer. The water is alkaline providing calcium for shells of water snails found in the cress beds and river.

The richest wildlife is along the river and cress beds with their aquatic habitats and marshy banks. Stream water crowfoot, typical of chalk streams, has its fine filamentous green leaves in the spring-fed waters of the cress beds while in May and June, the white buttercup-like flowers protrude above the water surface for pollination. Here also are white four-petalled flowers of watercress (cabbage family) in early summer and later the umbrella-like yellow-green flowering heads of fool's watercress (carrot family) that is distinguished by the crushed leaves smelling of parsnips.

Metallic blue-green mint beetles feed on the leaves of watercress and mint while other insects take nectar from the mauve flowers of water mint in late summer. A number of land snails live along the edges of the cress beds and the broken shells of yellow or pink white-lipped snails may be found on the path, the remains of a blackbird or thrush's breakfast. Some shells have brown bands. The small white Ashford's hairy snail, with hairs on the shell, is a wetland species with the core of its world distribution in Britain. A similarly small, girdled snail with a sharp keel to the shell marked with a white line was first found in Alton in 2008 and occurs around Flood Meadows.



Early in the year frogs come to the cress beds to lay their jelly-like eggs and a little later, newts lay eggs individually on water weeds. The juvenile stages of frogs and newts live in water. Birds associated with the water include mallard ducks, moorhen, grey heron, little egret (a small white heron), grey wagtail and, occasionally, kingfisher. In winter bird visitors may include snipe and water rail. Along the path leading up from the river to the bridge are various willows including osier with narrow leaves, silvery below; this was cut for basketwork probably in association with the watercress industry that finished in the 1950s.

Grassland is divided between areas of short mown grass for recreation and areas of tall meadow grass with a range of grass species and wildflowers that provide home and sustenance to many different species of insects, including butterflies with some species using the grass as food for its caterpillars.



There are four species of buttercups in the meadow: bulbous buttercups with sepals hanging down are the first to flower, followed by creeping buttercup along the riverside paths; the woodland buttercup, goldilocks, grows in a copse of trees at the top of the diagonal path and cherry walk and last to flower is the meadow buttercup in the long grass.

The two "Trees for Life" plots provide opportunity to see a range of native British trees including beech, English oak, ash, lime, field maple and silver birch.

In Will Hall Meadow, two fine trees survive, the large plane tree near Brick Kiln Lane entrance and an English oak by the Basingstoke Road, while there are some willows in the river channel. The eastern end may flood in winter due to ground water emerging.



## Flood Meadows Trail Route Description (circa 0.7 miles)

**The suggested walk start point is the entrance off Tanhouse Lane, Alton, GU34 1HR (Grid Ref: SU 71590 39480). The nearest public pay and display car park is Bank Car Park, Vicarage Hill, Alton GU34 1HT.**

1. Enter Flood Meadows from Tanhouse Lane, named after former tanneries in this locality. In the Lane, notice the flint and brick walls with ivy-leaved toadflax in mortar lines and pale grey crust lichens on the brick. An information panel is at the entrance to the Meadows.

As you enter the Meadows, to your right is an open area where the Battle of Alton, English Civil War re-enactments have been staged.

2. Follow the riverside path left. The river is a chalk stream and a winterbourne. Its level varies naturally and considerably during the different seasons, in part depending on the seasonal rainfall and discharge from springs.

The path leads between the River Wey and an old watercress bed. There are several aquatic plants found here – stream water crowfoot, starwort, waterweed and various floating duckweeds. Brooklime has tiny blue flowers in summer. Other plants such as great willowherb, hybrid water speedwell, water mint and water forget-me-not grow at the water's edge. Flowers of water mint are a nectar source for hoverflies while metallic green mint beetles feed on the leaves.

3. Look across the watercress bed to your right and you can see the Dipping or Observation Platform. This was designed to enable children, under supervision, to dip their nets into the water and examine their 'catch'. It provides a good vantage point across the watercress bed. You will also see the expanse of iris and, probably, moorhens and mallard ducks.

4. Take a small path right through the cress beds and notice the gentle flow of water under the bridge. Newts and frogs come here to breed in spring, but please do not take them away - they are happier in their own habitat. Look for small birds such as finches, tits, wrens and warblers in the patch of willow trees on the left and admire the mature willow tree on the far side of the cress bed.

5. Turn left above the bridge and walk down the slope towards the archway. On your right is a grove of trees, 'Trees for Life'. Each tree is dedicated to a named individual but no signs are allowed on site. A dedication book with full details of the donation and dedication is kept by the Town Council. There is another grove of trees in the north-east corner of the Meadows on the way to St. Lawrence Church. All the trees are native species.

6. The grass below and behind the trees is maintained to a plan. The short-mown grass is for recreational use and is well used by local people. The longer grass is mown only twice a year and allows wild plants and insects to flourish.

7. Go down the path to the bridge across the river. The arch, bridge structure and posts were part of an improvement scheme carried out in 2019. Turn right at the bridge and walk past the wildflower meadow and the seating overlooking the river (on your left) and climb the slope to the narrow footpath between the houses. The river continues its course behind you, although hidden by trees.

Look back over your right shoulder. In the distance you can just see between the trees the spire of St. Lawrence Church which was besieged by Roundhead troops during the Civil War engagements.

8. The footpath takes you out on to the road. Turn left and walk down until you see a sign on the opposite side of the road which identifies the source of the River Wey. This marks the entrance to Will Hall Meadow.

9. This meadow became a public open space in 2021 following the building of the estate above it. The river here has been the subject of a major improvement scheme which will mature over the coming years. Above the river are two balancing ponds which collect surface water drainage from the estate before its controlled release into the river.

10. Exit on to the corner of Brick Kiln Lane where the river rises beyond the land on the far side of the Lane.

From here you can either retrace your steps back across the Meadows to your starting point at Tanhouse Lane, perhaps to then visit the nearby attractions such as the historical St. Lawrence Church, the Allen Gallery or Curtis Museum.

Alternatively follow the Basingstoke Road back to Lenten Street and into the town centre where a variety of independent boutiques, shops, cafes, restaurants and pubs can be found.

If you would like a longer walk, then you could join the 'Six Hills of Alton' walk which continues up Brick Kiln Lane. Or complete the 'Wey Walk' in reverse, heading back through Flood Meadows. Following the river's course through the town centre and finishing at the train station, home of the Mid Hants 'Watercress Line' heritage steam railway. These walks are published in printed leaflets available from Alton Town Council and downloadable from [www.alton.gov.uk](http://www.alton.gov.uk)

## Alton's Flood Meadows

