



Chalk Stream Challenge

The River Itchen, Bishopstoke



The walk starts from the Bishopstoke Road car park. Take the path north between The Hub building and the tennis courts, across the playing field and through the rough grassland to the far-right hand corner. Here you will find a metal railing with an opening to the footpath just behind it (not accessible for pushchairs or wheelchairs).

Challenge route: 2 miles

You should be able to cover these parts of the challenge on this walk:

- Section 1: 1
- Section 2: 2 and 3
- Section 3: 8, 9, 10 and 11
- Section 4: 12 and 14
- Section 5: 16, 18, 19 and 20

Kindly funded by



Go through the gap to see the River Itchen in front of you. Turn right to follow the footpath south with the river to your left. This is the Itchen Way, a long-distance footpath which follows the River Itchen from its source just south of Cheriton to its mouth at Woolston, where it flows into Southampton Water. The River Itchen is a chalk stream: a unique and rare habitat. At its source cool, clear, mineral rich water bubbles up from the chalk aquifer below ground, with the chalk acting as both a filter and an underground store.

Here the River Itchen gently flows with plentiful vegetation on the banks. Over hanging trees provide shady spots for fish such as brown trout (1) to shelter. Hemp agrimony (2), great willowherb, sedges and grasses along the bank provide places for demoiselles to rest and lay their eggs, often going completely underwater to inject them into the stems or leaves. During the warmer months you should spot these metallic-coloured insects darting around.



1

2

There are several places along the path where the bank is clear of vegetation, giving opportunities to stop and peer into the river. Keep going until you reach the steps which provide structured access for dogs to enter the water, preventing the riverbank from further erosion. Can you see any brown trout predating here mid-channel or shoals of small fish, such as minnows (3) closer to the bank?

3



Continue along the path, across the small bridge and notice the smaller stream down to your right. Just past this there is a large weeping willow on your left. Can you see its boughs in the water?

Next you will reach the weir and sluice. You may hear it first as the water rushes over the edge of this human feature - notice that the channel is straighter here with manmade banks. Spot the black sign on the far side informing you this was the site of Stoke Lock (4), one of 15 locks built along the river. The River Itchen has long been an important route and in the past was used to transport cargo from Southampton to Winchester. As parts of the river were difficult for boats to navigate, straighter channels were dug and the water was diverted into these. This improved 10-mile stretch of river, known as the Itchen Navigation, opened in 1710 and was used for about 150 years until railways became the preferred mode of transport. Look at the stone bollard to see what materials travelled up the river.

4



By the weir and footbridge, the side stream is still down to your right. With water on either side of the footpath, why not find a stick and compare the flow between the two or play pooh sticks from the bridge? Cross over the Itchen Navigation via the footbridge and follow the tarmac path, doubling back on yourself. This is a good place to notice the difference in water levels either side of the weir, which makes it difficult for fish to migrate upstream to spawn. After the path bears right you will reach another small footbridge, this time crossing the River Itchen.

5



The path emerges into the grounds of old St Mary's churchyard. Leave the tarmac path and follow the gravel path round to the right until you reach the corner leading to Church Road. Cross over the large driveway keeping Church Road to your left and head to the area affectionately known locally as Bishy Beach, a popular place to paddle during low summer flows.

6



This is a great spot to see the gravel riverbed, a feature of chalk streams. Unseen, under the stones there are freshwater invertebrates. The nymphs of mayflies (5), dragonflies and demoiselles and the larva of caddisflies (6) grow and moult in the river until they reach the adult stage of their life cycle and emerge from the water as winged creatures. Freshwater shrimp, leeches, snails and beetles are also amongst the life on the riverbed.

The variety of species can provide an indication of the river's health, as some species are more sensitive to pollution than others. These hidden animals are also a food source for other river wildlife, including fish and water birds.

7



At Bishy Beach, keep an eye out for swans, ducks, moorhens, grey herons and even little egrets (7) which are all frequently spotted on this stretch of river. You will need to cross over Riverside road when the pavement disappears to follow the road south, crossing Spring Lane and Montague Road. Notice the small stream that appears on your left. If walking the route in summer, can you identify any of the bankside flowers?

Cross back over Riverside road using the pedestrian island. The route now takes you west along Bishopstoke Road, however before you continue pause here at the display hut to learn about the history of Bishopstoke's past and Shears Mill (8).

8



Back on the route keep to the righthand side of Bishopstoke Road and be careful as the pavement here is narrow. You will pass over the river in two places before passing several commercial buildings and some houses. Once over the third bridge turn right to take the footpath heading north. You are back on the Itchen Way with the Itchen Navigation to your right. You should get a clear view into the water whilst walking and see different species of aquatic plants trailing in the current. Water crowfoot (9) and Lesser water-parsnip provide shelter for river life such as fish and invertebrates.

9



Look out for the woody berm (10). This fallen tree has been cut back and secured in place in the channel to encourage the build up of sediment and vegetation immediately downstream, where the flow is now slower. Chalk streams naturally twist and turn as they make their way from source to sea, and debris from trees often drapes or falls into the channel. These natural meanders and fallen branches bring about variations in water flow, resulting in faster stretches and calmer eddies which in turn create different habitats within the river, increasing the biodiversity. Can you spot different speeds as the water flows past?

10



The car park from which you started is now to your left and you could leave the river here, taking the path on your left just past the berm to walk directly into the car park. Alternatively, you could keep following the path north, retracing your steps past Stoke Lock to the wooden steps. Just by the steps a gap in the fence to your left will bring you back out into the playing field and from here you can head back to the car park.