Wellington and The Wrekin, Shropshire

Strenuous Terrain

8 miles
Circular
4 hours

050419

An 8 mile circular walk connecting the historic east Shropshire market town of Wellington to The Wrekin, one of the Midlands most famous natural landmarks.

The journey begins in the centre of medieval Wellington and explores The Ercall (the most northerly of the five hills of the Wrekin range) before following the main track to the summit of its iconic 1334-foot sibling. The trail leaves Wellington following the orange-coloured Buzzard signs indicating the new main route of the long-distance Shropshire Way footpath, which continue all the way to summit of The Wrekin. Returning, the route detours through the town's Bowring Park and historic Market Square before arriving back at the railway station.

ADVICE: The heathland atop The Wrekin is a precious landscape that can be easily damaged. Please do not trample on the heather and bilberry and keep dogs on their leads during spring and early summer, when many ground-nesting birds are present. Similarly, the hillfort is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) and visitors are encouraged not to walk on its ramparts.

FACILITIES: The walk starts at Wellington rail station, where tourist information and maps of footpaths in the wider area are available. A cafe is situated on Platform Two and public toilets can be accessed with a key during booking office opening hours. Pay toilets are also located at the adjacent bus station, while free facilities can be found at Wellington Civic Centre in Larkin Way. The route also passes the Red Lion pub on Holyhead Road, while Wellington town centre is home to many catering establishments. A new visitor facility at the Halfway House on The Wrekin opened in the summer of 2018. Its opening hours are variable but can be checked week-to-week online by visiting: www.halfwayhouseonthewrekin.com

Getting there

The walk starts and finishes at Wellington rail station, making it ideal for arriving by public transport. If you are coming by car, the station only has a small car park for rail users, so the best parking is a long stay pay-and-display car park accessed from Tan Bank (the Belmont-Tan Bank Car Park). It is easy to pick up the walking route on Tan Bank, within the first walk section.

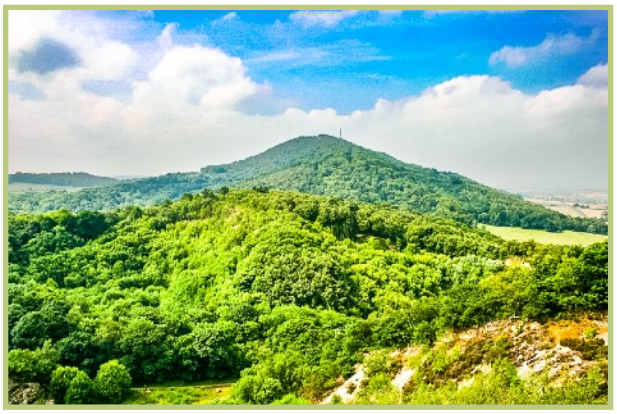
Approximate post code for this parking, **TF1 1HJ**.

Access Notes

1. ***The trail includes several climbs and descents throughout, most notably around The Ercall and The Wrekin itself and the total ascent is 681 metres.***
2. ***The unmade woodland paths can become seasonally boggy and wet in places. In many areas, walkers also share access with horse riders and cyclists. The trail is free from cattle and livestock, but involves sharing the road with traffic in Ercall Lane, Golf Links Lane and on the Wrekin Course.***
3. ***There is just one stile, at the southern entrance of the footpath around the Ercall Reservoirs. It contains a fence gap suitable for small to medium sized dogs, while larger dogs will need to climb over.***
4. ***There are staggered railings near the end of the footpath connecting Ercall Lane and Hampton Hill, and a small footbridge (suitable for single file passage) just past the entrance to the footpath into Ercall Woods from Golf Links Lane.***

Walk Sections

Go 1 Start to Sunnycroft



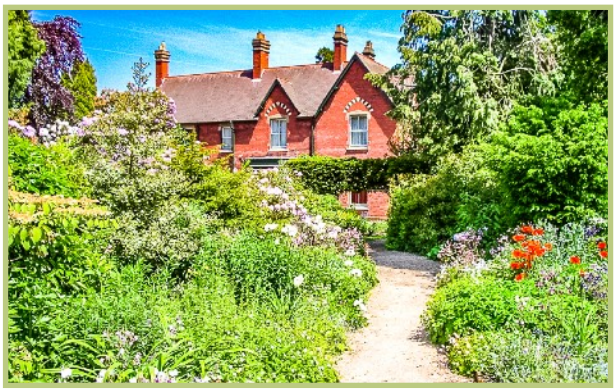
Our journey to The Wrekin begins at Wellington rail station, which opened in 1849 on part of All Saints parish churchyard (located opposite). Legend has it that a number of bodies were exhumed during its construction and, to commemorate the area's former inhabitants, a series of crosses were cast into its ironwork as a mark of respect. They are visible within the framework of the awning over platform two and atop the roof of the booking office — in the form of weather vanes at either end of the building.

After the coming of the railways Wellington became a magnet for Victorian era travellers, forming a convenient stopping off point en-route to The Wrekin. When visitors alighted the train, horses and traps were used to ease their passage to the famous Shropshire landmark, and were readily available for hire from the nearby Station Hotel (originally a railway refreshment room). Literally thousands of tourists were ferried to the Forest Glen Pavilion beneath the hill in this way… but more about that later!

DIRECTIONS: Leave Wellington station via platform two, walk up Station Road and turn left into Market Square following the orange Buzzard discs of the Shropshire Way main route. Walk across the Square, through Crown Street and then straight on up Tan Bank. Half way along its length, Tan Bank is bisected by Victoria Road (Wellington's inner link road). Cross over, pass the large two-storey Art Deco-style building on your right and continue straight on until you reach a waymarked footpath opposite the police station. Turn right and follow this narrow, brick-lined path to the next street, Roseway. Take the footpath on the opposite side of the road and continue straight ahead on a southwards tangent until reaching Holyhead Road (the entrance to Sunnycroft is situated about 500 yards to your left).

1 2 Sunnycroft to The Ercall

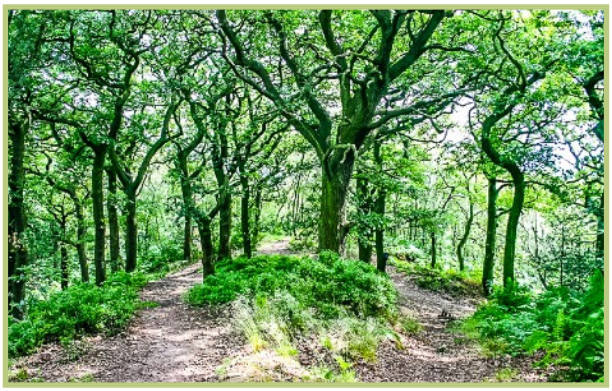
As Victorian Wellington became more and more prosperous, many members of its newly wealthy mercantile class sought to establish a lifestyle reflecting their upwardly mobile status. Well-appointed homes on the edge of town, akin to a country estate in miniature, were very much the fashionable countrywide thing, and so it was in Wellington. Whereas many of those properties have since been subdivided into flats, or disappeared under new housing, the National Trust's Sunnycroft property on Holyhead Road offers a rare glimpse into a lost world of Edwardian era opulence. JG Wackrill, a Market Square vintner, built the original property. However it was later remodelled by the Lander family under whose stewardship it remained until the



1990s, barely changing in that time and providing us with a perfect snapshot of Wellington's very own imperial era.

DIRECTIONS: From the footpath, cross directly over Holyhead Road into Golf Links Lane and follow the roadway uphill to the overbridge carrying the M54. After passing underneath, turn right immediately through a wide gap in the fence onto the waymarked footpath. Go over the footbridge and then bear left (a very visible blue motorway sign on the adjacent embankment marks the spot where the footpath veers off). You are now in the Wrekin Forest proper — at the northern end of The Ercall.

2 3 The Ercall to Ercall Quarries



The Ercall and nearby Limekiln Wood are home to some of the most important woodland habitat in Shropshire. The diversity of the geology beneath your feet is such that every soil type found in the county is represented here, and all within the space of around two square kilometres! This has given rise to a very high diversity of plantlife (over 150 different species have been recorded here), while the area is also an important county site for mosses and lichens.

Atop the hill itself, the thin acidic soils overlying the local sandstone have created ideal conditions for heathland species such as Bilberry and Heather, although precious little of this nationally scarce habitat remains — having been overtaken by Sessile Oak woodland. These trees are generally more stately and elegant than their English cousins and lack the stalks, or peduncles, on which the acorns of the latter are borne. Keep an ear open, too, for the area's birdlife. All three British woodpeckers (including the vanishingly rare Lesser Spotted variety) have been recorded around The Ercall, while several pairs of summer-visiting Pied Flycatcher, Wood Warbler and Common Redstart also nest in the area… but more about them later!

DIRECTIONS: Continue walking straight ahead along the rising bridle path in a southerly direction, following the Shropshire Way around the near, eastern side of the hill. At the T-junction, turn left and head downhill along the winding path until it turns right

and reaches a fork. Bear left and follow the route as it continues in a westerly direction towards the rock face at the foot of the Ercall Quarries.

3 → 4 Ercall Quarries to Forest Glen

The rocks underlying The Ercall and Limekiln Wood were formed in ancient seas 300 to 600 million years ago and their sheer diversity has long made the area a target for the extraction industries. Standing at the southern foot of the hill, the impact of recent excavation is obvious (quarrying ceased here in 1986). However, this disfigurement has also revealed an epoch defining moment in the history of our planet, for which The Ercall is now internationally renowned. In the rock face, a subtle colour change from pink to grey is detectable. This 'unconformity' marks the transition from the pre-Cambrian to the Cambrian era, when life on Earth became more numerous and varied, and there are few places on the planet where that change is recounted so graphically.

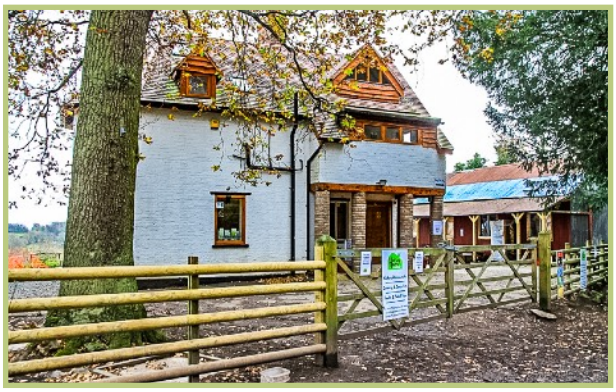
Thankfully, natural regeneration has also endowed the modern day Ercall Local Nature Reserve with a wide range of flora and fauna. Its precious acidic grasslands are a haven for countless plants, animals and insects, including many butterfly and moth species. Brownfield sites are capable of providing a wide array of habitat features that, because they are very closely linked, allow many creatures to live out their lives in a way they never could elsewhere. As such, even the bare rock itself provides valuable sunny spots in which to bask, especially for reptiles such as Slow Worm and Common Lizard.

DIRECTIONS: From the foot of the Ercall Quarries, continue to follow the old quarry track straight ahead, as it travels in a westerly direction to a junction with Ercall Lane. Turn left and carry on walking past the reservoir on your right until you reach the road junction at the Forest Glen. Turn right and the entrance to the main track to the Wrekin's summit is situated immediately on your left.

4 → 5 Forest Glen to Halfway House

Until 1993 the Forest Glen car park, which is carved out of a former quarry on the southern edge of St Lawrence's Hill, was home to an ornate pavilion that once served tea to hordes of Victorian travellers ferried by horse and carriage from Wellington to The Wrekin. Nowadays, the mode of transport is invariably motorised and, although the pavilion itself is long gone (transplanted to the Blists Hill open-air museum in Ironbridge Gorge), this is still very much the starting point for most visits to the hill.

The upland oak woodland of The Wrekin is a local stronghold for a trio of summer migrant birds that enjoy a rich association



with the Marches of western England and Wales. From late April, Pied Flycatcher, Redstart and Willow Warbler can all be seen and heard on the main track to the Halfway House. Spending most of its time hunting insects high in the canopy, the Willow Warbler is more conspicuous by its call, which is reminiscent of a coin coming to rest on a plate. However, the robin-sized Redstart and Pied Flycatcher are far more visible and males of each possess very distinctive plumages: the former, a vivid black head, red breast and rump and the latter, as its name would suggest, striking black and white markings. The trio are right on the edge of their UK ranges here, and The Wrekin plays a vital role in maintaining the population of these declining species.

Within this section, as the track bends sharply towards the Halfway House, look out for ripples in the sandstone rock fringing the path. They are evidence of a prehistoric beach dating from a time, between 542 and 635 million years ago, when the volcanic events responsible for the formation of the hill (which was never itself a volcano) took place. In that cataclysmic period, which gave rise to several other local peaks, including Caradoc, The Lawley and Lilleshall Hill, Shropshire formed part of a landmass situated in the South Atlantic!

DIRECTIONS: Follow the main track up the hill on a rising gradient and turn right where it divides in two (the seasonally boggy footpath to the left provides a circular route around the flanks of The Wrekin). After a short climb, you will find the Halfway House situated on a small plateau on your right-hand side.

5 → 6 Halfway House to Heaven Gate

The Halfway House has been a resting place for generations of weary Wrekin pilgrims, a journey folk have been regularly making, according to the local archaeology, for at least 3000 years. The summit is encircled by the earthen defences of an ancient hillfort that was the principle headquarters of the Cornovii, a Celtic tribe that controlled a large, pre-Roman kingdom stretching from the Wirral to the borders of modern day south Shropshire. Its era of pre-eminence ended in AD47 when

the Romans invaded the area. What happened next is not fully understood but the locals eventually relocated to the incomers military camp-cum-town of Uriconium-Cornoviorum (Uriconium of the Cornovii), better known today as Wroxeter.

DIRECTIONS: The main track takes a hairpin turn to the left just past the Halfway House, as it heads southwards to the summit along the spine of the hill. Follow the path round and head straight on until you reach the very obvious earthen mounds of the Heaven Gate.

6 → 7 Heaven Gate to The Summit

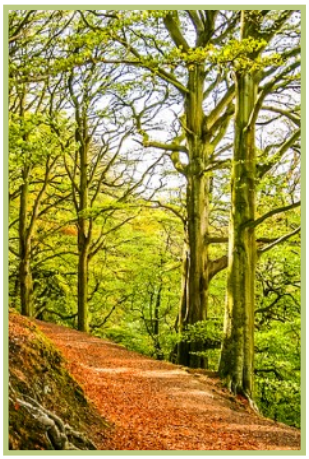
Greeting your arrival at Heaven Gate, the ancient inner entrance to the hillfort, is the distinctive form of the BBC transmitter, which became operational in 1975. On a clear day, twenty historic counties are visible from the top of The Wrekin, so it should be no surprise to learn that the 171-foot mast is the principle means of broadcasting TV and radio signals to Shropshire and the Marches. If you're visiting at dusk, you'll also notice that the tower hosts the latest incarnation of The Wrekin Beacon. The Tudor antiquary John Leland first recorded it and its 'crest of light' once forewarned the approach of the Spanish fleet so famously recalled in Lord McCaulay's poem The Armada. The return of the blinking red light is a relatively recent addition, its predecessor having been permanently switched off in 1970. Its concrete base is still in place a little to the south of the transmitter, near the former summit, or 'old top'.

The origins of the heathland within the inner defences of the hillfort are as old as the ramparts of the structure itself and speak of a time when Bronze Age settlers first began to clear the land for cattle grazing. This type of habitat is among our most precious ecological resources but its need for regular maintenance (without which it would simply revert to woodland) means it has become increasingly scarce in Britain. Many specialist plants and insects can be found among this Bilberry and Heather dominated landscape but two of the most apparent are a pair of streaky brown birds: the Tree and Meadow Pipit. While fairly unremarkable in appearance, the males of both species partake in regular parachute displays in spring that end, as their names suggest, on the ground or in a tree. It is by far the easiest way to tell them apart!

DIRECTIONS: After passing through Heaven Gate, continue along the main track to the summit, which is marked by a trig point and toposcope.

7 → 8 The Summit to Wrekin Course

Take time to explore the summit and enjoy the views. The hill's main landmarks can be located as follows: the Raven's Bowl is the large rock situated due south of the hilltop, immediately to



its west is the Bladder Stone and then the Needle's Eye, with its famous cleft. The footpath bisecting the latter two rocks leads downhill to the Calendar Stones, which can be found a few hundred yards beneath the Raven's Bowl.

On a clear day, distant peaks as far flung as Yorkshire and Oxfordshire are visible from The Wrekin but, contrary to what the toposcope indicates, Snowdon is not one of them (its sightline being blocked by the 38-mile distant Cadair Berwyn). Many myths and legends surround the rocky outcrops atop the hill. Despite the near constant presence of the charismatic corvid at the summit, the Raven's Bowl (or Cuckoo's Cup) takes its name from a small depression atop the rock itself, which is said never to run dry of water. Passage through the cleft of its near neighbour the Needle's Eye also has many accompanying superstitions. Since the 1990 earthquake, however, only the most agile can pass comfortably through the much-narrowed gap. However, a more practical purpose awaits visitors to the lesser-known Calendar Stones, where the passage of a coin sized shadow across the rocks marks the transit of the sun at each seasonal equinox.

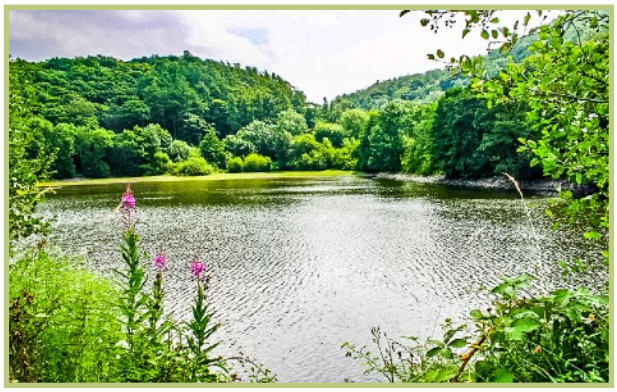
Descending the western slopes of The Wrekin on the Beech Avenue, the character of the landscape changes once more. Here, the rich understorey of Oak is replaced by more open conditions favoured by woodland birds such as Nuthatch and summer-visiting Spotted Flycatcher. Now and again, large metal danger signs warn of live firing from the nearby rifle range. However, the former army training facility, once used by the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, has not been active for many years.

DIRECTIONS: After leaving the summit, retrace your steps down the main track. Turn left just before the track turns sharply right towards Halfway House, leaving the Shropshire Way and travelling westwards along the winding Beech Avenue. Towards the bottom of the incline, a fallen tree partially blocks the footpath, but it is reasonably easy to navigate the obstruction with care. Soon afterwards, the trail reaches the footpath around the bottom of the hill, where the remains of an old cottage can be seen in the foliage off to the right-hand side. The former Rifle Range is located a short distance along the path to the left but, to follow this trail, turn right and head through the woodland until you reach the roadway.

8 → 9 Wrekin Course to Ercall Reservoirs

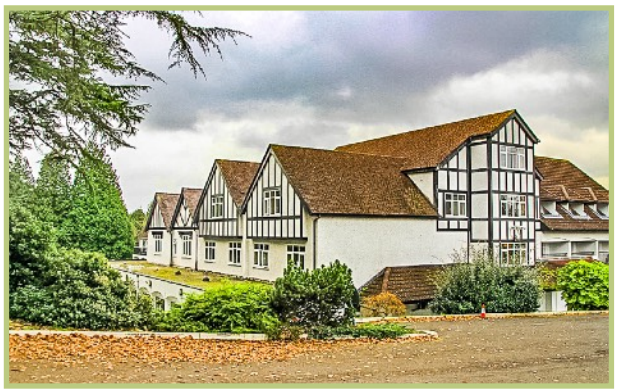
The road between Aston and the Ercall Reservoirs is known as the Wrekin Course and once formed part of an 18th Century racecourse frequented by the local gentry.

DIRECTIONS: Turn right to follow the Wrekin Course to its



junction with the minor road (connecting the Forest Glen to the nearby hamlet of Cluddley). Climb over the stile directly opposite the junction and follow the footpath towards the largest of the reservoirs (the smaller pools are located to your left a few hundred metres along the path).

9 → 10 Ercall Reservoirs to Bowring Park

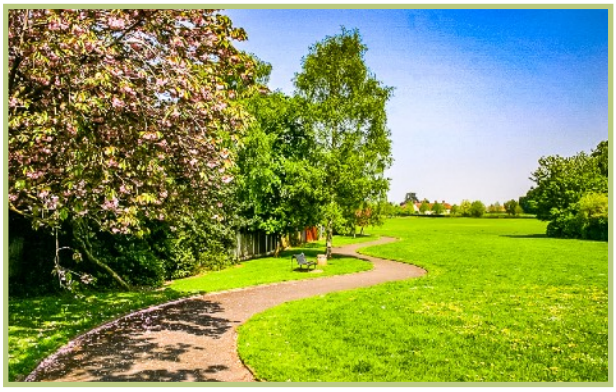


By the mid-Victorian era, the interests of the area's well-to-do had become more philanthropic and the Ercall Reservoirs (which once supplied Wellington's drinking water) were constructed by TC Eyton, whose company also brought mains gas to the town. Eyton led something of a double-life and was widely regarded as one of Europe's leading ornithologists, publishing many books on the subject and influencing the work of his friend Charles Darwin (with whose theories he profoundly disagreed!). Today, Eyton would find much avian interest in the scrub surrounding the reservoirs, which are a vital local breeding ground for Common Toads. This area also offers the best views of St Lawrence's Hill, which lies sandwiched between The Ercall and The Wrekin.

As you walk this next section, traversing the suburban outskirts of Wellington at Hampton Hill, it's impossible not to notice the tremendous views over the burgeoning North Shropshire Plain. This contrasting landscape, quite at odds with the hills and vales of the Wrekin Range, took shape at the end of the last Ice Age — some twenty thousand years ago. Just beyond Wellington it encompasses the Weald Moors, a vast peatland that forms part of the wider Meres and Mosses natural area. With a range of habitats and wildlife that you won't find anywhere else locally, it's well worth exploring in its own right and further details about the east Shropshire moorlands can be found at Wellington Railway Station.

DIRECTIONS: Follow the path to the far end of the reservoir, go straight on past the shrubs and small trees fringing the waterside then turn sharply right onto the wide grassy path. At the side of Ercall Lane, walk through a wide gap next to a five-bar gate and turn left. Follow the road to a point just past the Buckatree Hotel, and then cross over onto the woodland path to the right-hand side of the thoroughfare. After re-joining the road and passing over the M54 road bridge, turn left immediately and pass through a staggered gateway onto the footpath leading to the top of Hampton Hill and its commanding views over north Shropshire. Follow the road downhill through the housing estate to its junction with Holyhead Road. The gated entrance to Bowring Park is located a few hundred yards to your right opposite the Red Lion pub.

10 → 11 Bowring Park to Market Street



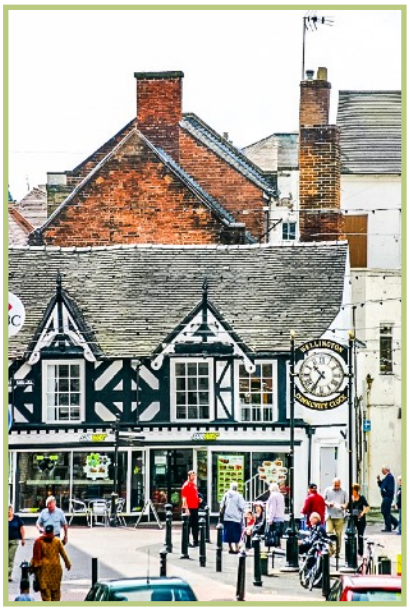
Walking along Ercall Lane, it's hard not to notice the opulent surroundings of the Buckatree Hotel. Just like Sunnycroft, it was conceived as the forest-edge home of a local notable — in this case, Sir John Bayley, the founder of Wrekin College. Bowring Park owes its existence to another Victorian townsman, John Crump Bowring, whose wealth was founded on bringing fresh fish to Wellington from Grimsby via the railways. His wife gave the land that forms this cherished green space to the town's residents in JC's memory. Their elegant, Italianate home, Bradleymoor House (which later served as a maternity home), stands opposite the fine wrought iron gates at the Haygate Road entrance to the park, which is our route back to the centre of Wellington.

The 'Haygate' from which the thoroughfare takes its name refers to a former entrance into Wellington Hay, the ancient royal deer park associated with the Wrekin Forest. It is one of many close connections between the hill and a town that was known in medieval times as 'Wellington-Under-The Wrekin'.

DIRECTIONS: Follow the surfaced footpath across the edge of Bowring Park, then past the grass tennis courts, bowling greens and kiosk and to the large iron gates at the Haygate Road entrance. Turn right and continue to the junction with Bridge Road. Turn left, walk past the Art Deco facade of the former Clifton cinema before turning right at the pedestrian crossing at the next set of traffic lights. You are now at the junction of Market Street.

11 → 12 Market Street to End

Wellington's origins as a modern town can be traced to the moment in March 1244 when Giles de Erdington was granted a royal charter to hold a regular Thursday market within its precincts. This historic agreement heralded a physical expansion of what was then a small village centred on the green outside All Saints Church. A new Market Square was laid out south of the church with new streets radiating outwards in all directions, replete with parcels of land to entice new merchants to move to the new township. Evidence of their distinctive



narrow footprints can still be seen in modern day shop fronts, while the medieval street grid itself remains largely intact.

Originally, Market Square was much bigger than it is today. The narrow streets leading from its southern end (Duke, Crown and Bell Street) were once simple stalls that became permanent buildings over many generations. Until the early 1800s, a market hall also stood in the Square (look out for the iron discs in the paviours marking its dimensions) but the Victorian edifice that still serves the town today eventually replaced it in 1866.

In the southwest corner of the Square, within the frontage of a well-known travel agent, a pair of decorative tiles provides a clue to the town's rich literary heritage. Depicting a printing press, they commemorate the former location of Houlston's Printers. This early 19th Century business published, among many others, the poetry of Patrick Bronte (who was once a curate at All Saints Church). The evangelical tone of its titles greatly influenced Hesba Stretton, the best-selling Victorian author who was born just round the corner in New Street. She was certainly not the last major literary figure to be associated with Wellington. The 20th Century poet Philip Larkin was Wellington's librarian between 1943 and 1946 (when his first work, the North Ship, was published), while Bruce Chatwin, author of On The Black Hill was educated nearby, at Old Hall School.

One of Wellington's most famous sons is Dr William Withering, whose pioneering work on the properties of Digitalis paved the way for modern cardiac treatment. Born in the town in 1741, his exhaustive studies into the medicinal properties of plants also led him to publish the first modern scientific guide to British botany. Emblems of foxgloves incorporated into the refuse bins around Market Square commemorate his endeavours.

DIRECTIONS: Walk along Market Street, which terminates in the middle of Wellington's historic Market Square. To reach the railway, simply follow the road round to the left and then turn right into Station Road.

This route was devised by:

Wellington LA 21 Group

Supported by:

EnviroGrant

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Disclaimer

This walking route was walked and checked at the time of writing. We have taken care to make sure all our walks are safe for walkers of a reasonable level of experience and fitness. However, like all outdoor activities, walking carries a degree of risk and we accept no responsibility for any loss or damage to personal effects, personal accident, injury or public liability whilst following this walk. We cannot be held responsible for any inaccuracies that result from changes to the routes that occur over time. Please let us know of any changes to the routes so that we can correct the information.

Walking Safety

For your safety and comfort we recommend that you take the following with you on your walk: bottled water, snacks, a waterproof jacket, waterproof/sturdy boots, a woolly hat and fleece (in winter and cold weather), a fully-charged mobile phone, a whistle, a compass and an Ordnance Survey map of the area. Check the weather forecast before you leave, carry appropriate clothing and do not set out in fog or mist as these conditions can seriously affect your ability to navigate the route. Take particular care on cliff/mountain paths where steep drops can present a particular hazard. Some routes include sections along roads – take care to avoid any traffic at these points. Around farmland take care with children and dogs, particularly around machinery and livestock. If you are walking on the coast make sure you check the tide times before you set out.