

A Walk.

Take the train to a little town that is our nearest sanctuary. Leave the busy, tidy platform, past the car-park, turn right. Past houses we'll never be able to afford, not even renting, and go to the right down the alley, past more homes, right over the railway bridge, through the little suburban cul-de-sac then left towards the trees.

We take a deep breath, feel suburbia drop off our shoulders, walk into an arboreal tunnel. A long straight road, one car wide, leads to an unvisited destination. It is roofed with leaves, fluttering. It is shadowed, even in winter.

Step gingerly over the muddy verge and left into the wood proper.

Woodpeckers, jays, chiffchaff and wrens. Scotch pines and dark hollies, scrawny birch and delicate beech. In autumn an abundance of toadstools.

Out into the park, heading south west. Happy dogs and friendly owners. Past the dead tree, sculptural, down to the shallow stream then along a rising boardwalk to the narrow road. Into a coppice, teenage oaks, deeply muddy at the wrong time of year. Come out into fields, take a left, and another left, past corn and trees that knew Shakespeare's Arden.

A kissing gate and a lane between mansions, right onto the road. A few hundred yards then right at the triangle and left at the stile, hard on the hips, made for tall men.

The three fields, one, two, three. Sometimes sheep, sometimes flowers, once a startled detectorist. Fields one and two down to the streamlet, over a troll bridge. Field three rises to the road. On the right a church, a manor, a moat, oddly melancholy, dark with ghosts.

We turn left to the road, another kissing gate, right towards the big house, busy with trippers. Beautiful gardens and a noisy cafe, but a good place for tea, and scones. We walk the straight

road that cuts through the estate. On our left a field and a long straight track, bordered with oaks and grazing sheep. To our right the house, a lake, roses and flower beds, ancient yews, ravens and sparrowhawks, specimen trees of ravishing beauty..

Past this magic place, the road straight as the Roman, to a dangerous corner as it joins a busier thoroughfare. A short, but tense walk beside this busy road, sharply noisy, picking our way along the rutted grass verge.

At the corner, dangerous with rushing SUV's turn left onto a stony track. Only pedestrians and the owners of the farm at the end, allowed here. It's quiet again. It looks like a place where there should be owls.

At the end of the track turn right to the canal, past the red brick lock-keepers cottage, busy with flowers in pots, and scattered bits and pieces, all the stuff of countryside living.

Follow the canal east. Seven locks. Ducks in the reeds. After the seventh, cross over the water and continue east. At the bridge take the steps up onto a narrow road and turn left over the ancient, humpback bridge.

Walk on a quiet country lane. More raven calls and jackdaw, robin and wren, goldfinch and gunfire *crack* of startled pigeons bursting from the hedges. An Elizabethan house half hidden behind wall and wrought iron.

The road rises a little and we lean in a little.

Half hidden among trees and the hedgerow, on the other side of the lane, another kissing gate, wooden, green with lichen. Three very beautiful, mature oaks stand sentinel alongside the field boundary.

Take the path through this field and the next, both rich with flowers and wild grasses. Butterflies and horseflies, beauty and the beasts, dance here in summer. In winter the bottom of the field is sodden, in spring, bluebells paint the banks with sky.

Right at the stile, broken and rickety and suddenly, steps!
Metal steps, a second railway bridge, posterred with kind
entreaties from a mental health charity.

Step down onto the quiet platform. Take a bench and sit in peace
among the songbirds, waiting for the train to fetch you back to
the city.

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