

THE MEDWAY, OASTS AND ORCHARDS

South of Hadlow flows one of the most attractive stretches of the Medway. It has been an ambition to find a suitable Probus walk in the area, but the problems were finding parking and a suitable pub, all within a reasonable distance of Sevenoaks. The solution was two circular walks based on the Bell Inn at the hamlet of Golden Green. After a short spell along the road, we were strolling along the River Bourne, as it chuckled through rushes and reeds, and then into a field of ripening barley, with a trio of oasts peering above the trees. The route follows a stream lined by silver birches, passes a rare hop garden, and on to Ford Green Bridge on the Medway. Here, the Medway is broad and tranquil, trees down to the water's edge on one bank, sheep pasture on the other, before reaching open countryside at East Lock. A lone fisherman stared gloomily into a deep pool; obviously the perch or carp weren't biting. After just over a mile, we reached Hartlake Bridge, where I was reliably informed nightingales can be heard on a spring evening. We turned north and into the huge, impressively-managed apple and pear orchards of Hadlow Place Farm. All the fruit is destined for export, the man in charge told me. Workers from Eastern Europe are housed in a sizeable caravan site. After a straight-forward but freshly-cooked meal at the Bell, it was back along the other bank of the Bourne, and again to a stretch of intensively farmed fields, irrigated by three newly-constructed reservoirs. A slight diversion to admire an enormous duck pond at Style Place Farm was followed by a pleasant but unremarkable stretch of country which took us back to the start. A fine day's walking – and with hardly any stiles.

By complete contrast, our other new walk in the summer presented at least 18 stiles before lunch – and then I stopped counting. This was in hilly country between Stansted and Hodsoll Street. While close to heavily-populated areas, it feels secretive and remote. Stansted itself is a picturesque little village well worth a visit. There's a pub, a village hall which actually welcomes use of its car park, and an old grey church, St Mary the Virgin, dating back to 1312 but restored by the Victorians. The Probus walking group has two other walks in the vicinity, but the new route was chiefly to enable us to sample the pleasures of the justifiably popular Green Man hostelry at Hodsoll Street, which the other routes frustratingly pass by. The first-rate lunch and beer, I felt, was a well-earned self-indulgence after much puffing and creaking knee joints.

Gwyn Jones.