

The Mill Trail:

An attractive circular walk of up to 7 miles (shorter circuits are available)

This is one of three Basingstoke Heritage Trails

The Mill Trail

Whitchurch is a mill town. Once a working mill was located along the River Test every half mile through the town. Today all but one of the mills have been converted into private houses. This picture was painted at a time when water power in Whitchurch was nearing its peak of industrial production.



▲ Whitchurch in the Regency era, (Hampshire Record Office)



▲ Whitchurch railway station circa 1940's, (photo Hampshire Record Office)

The Railway

Rail power followed the decline of water power. Now railway transport has in turn given way to roads. This photo shows Whitchurch station in busier times.

The River Test

To follow the Mill Trail turn left from the Station and look for the waymark arrows on lampposts and follow them to the first mill on the Trail, the Town Mill.

These waymarks will take you to the footpath in Kings Walk, a small cul-de-sac off of the main road into town. They then lead down this footpath, across a road and along to Town Mill Lane.

At the Town Mill you will find a choice of a circuits to take.

The shortest is a mile walk which takes you west to the Silk Mill and Fulling Mill then back.

Alternatively, the Trail takes you east to Laverstoke and Freefolk and back. This 3 mile circuit, crosses and re-crosses the River Test by footbridges, and passes two more mills and the charming church of St Nicholas at Freefolk.



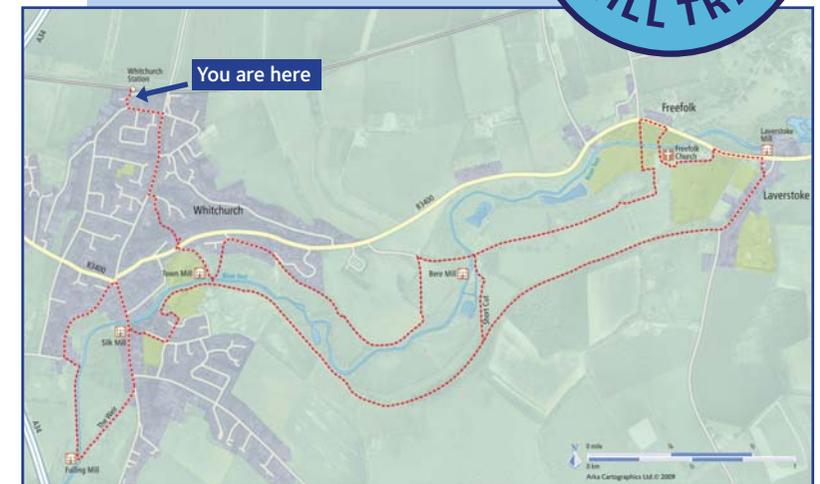
▲ The River Test

The Mill Trail is a waymarked walk along the River Test which includes several river crossings which creates several separate circuits. This Trail features:

- A start point at Whitchurch Station, or alternate start points at Laverstoke or Whitchurch Silk Mill
- An attractive walk along the River Test which passes five different historic mills, The Silk Mill is the only one remaining in manufacturing use; the others are now residential properties.
- Short cuts to create walks of either, 2, 3.5 or 4.5 miles

Interpretation panels are located at key points along the trail which describe the various features of interest en route

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Town Mill

A mill on this site was mentioned in the Domesday Book. The Town Mill was still in regular use milling corn until 1940, the last miller being Henry Lloyd. However after the war the mill fell into disrepair, until it was purchased and adapted into a private residence in 1969.



▲ Town Mill, circa 1950 (photo Hampshire Record Office)



▲ Bere Mill. This and Laverstoke Mill were both paper mills owned from the early 18th Century by the Portal family. It is now a private house

Choice of Routes

From here you can walk east to Laverstoke and Freefolk, by crossing the river and turning left. To Laverstoke and back is about 3 miles, but you can reduce this by taking a short cut to Bere Mill. Alternatively, cross the bridge and turn right to follow the path to the Silk Mill. This is a shorter circular walk of about a mile.

The River Test

This is a chalkland river of great wildlife diversity; it is also nationally renowned for its fly fishing. From the footbridge you can often see large brown trout below.

The unimproved grassland bordering the river courses forms a habitat particularly rich in wild flowers and valuable to birdlife. Once such habitats were more widespread but they are now much diminished elsewhere due to agricultural improvements.

◀ The River Test in spring (photo Hampshire Record Office)

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Laverstoke Mill

The hamlet of Laverstoke grew up around the Laverstoke paper mill, which was founded in the 15th century. The existing mill building dates from 1719 and became of national significance since it supplied the paper for the banknotes of the Bank of England. One could almost state the Portal family became rich by making banknotes! Sadly today the mill is defunct and it is planned to be converted into residential use.



▲ Laverstoke Mill, circa 1920's (Hampshire Record Office)



▲ Mill cottages in Laverstoke Lane

Laverstoke Lane and the Millenium Green

The Portal family built many houses for their mill workers. A distinctive row of properties line the adjacent lane. Built in the early 20th century their quality of construction and spacious setting reflect the philanthropic ideals of that time. Wall plaques on two properties along the road record their benefactors.

Most recently Laverstoke's Millenium Green was created in 2000. It offers a natural environment in a parkland setting and includes a children's play area, woodland walk and a contemplative garden. The Green is managed by local Trustees and volunteers.

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The Church of St Nicholas, Freefolk.

The settlement of Freefolk is small but ancient; its name is thought to relate to it being a free settlement outside of the feudal system.

This tiny single-cell church has white walls of flint rubble and lime plaster, topped by a tiled roof and a white painted bell-cote. The church was founded in 1265 but its current appearance is probably more characteristic of the early 18th century. Its decorated interior exudes a simple charm, the royal coat of arms of King William III still hang inside.

Services are held monthly and the church remains in use. It is cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust.



▲ St Nicholas Church, Freefolk



▲ Manor Cottages, the longest thatch in England?

Manor Cottages

This is rather an oddity; a thatched terrace of eighteen estate workers cottages, which fronts the main road. It was architect designed as recently as 1939 and is certainly one of the longest, impressively thatched, buildings in England. However, its striking frontage contrasts with a rear view that is more utilitarian.



▲ The River Test

River Test

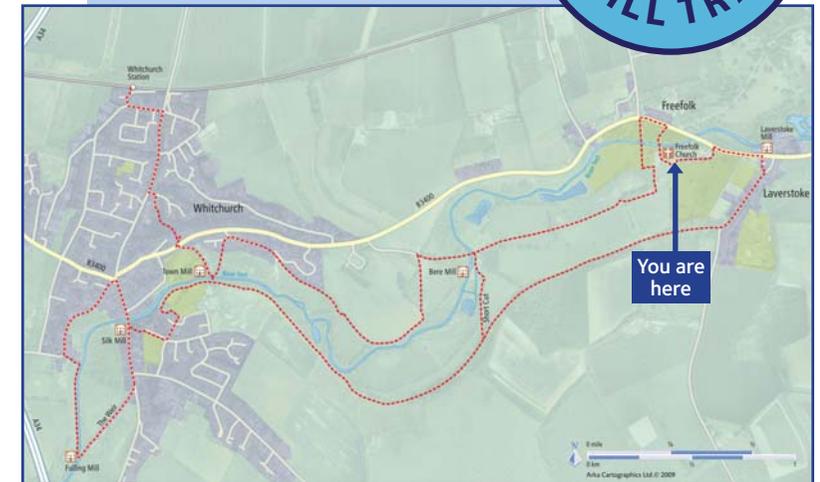
The Trail crosses the River Test several times at Freefolk. Public access is very restricted throughout the whole length of this river; due to the valuable fly fishing rights being controlled by private owners. But since this Trail uses public rights of way you too can enjoy the beauty of one of the most unspoilt, unpolluted rivers in lowland Britain.

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Here at the Western End the Mill Trail creates a mini-circuit. (see Map). Leaving the Silk Mill, walk along the road, away from the town centre until you reach a road named The Weir. Take this road, then at the old Fulling Mill, turn in front to follow the riverbank path to the Church, then along Church Street to the town centre. Then you can either return back here, or else continue back uphill to the Rail station; or even carry on following the waymarks along the rest of the Mill Trail



▲ Whitchurch in the Regency Era



▲ Whitchurch Silk Mill

Whitchurch Silk Mill

The Silk Mill is the only mill along the upper reaches of the R. Test still in productive use – but even this is mainly dependant on electric power.

The Mill building dates from 1800 and started producing silk soon afterwards. Its beautiful silks are used in costumes, fashions and interiors. Royalty have traditionally been amongst it many customers.

As well as manufacturing silk, the Silk Mill encourages visitors and schools. It opens at 10.30am from Tuesdays to Sundays.



▲ The River Test at the Old Fulling Mill

River Test

From the Fulling Mill you can walk alongside the River Test back towards town. This walk is one of the very few places on the upper Test where you can get full access to the riverbank. Look for the brown trout swimming amongst the water crowfoot and watercress that grows in the pure river waters.

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