Introduction

The Avon Valley Path is a 34 mile long-distance walking route that takes you from Salisbury — one of the most beautiful cathedral cities in England — to Christchurch Priory and the sea. It was opened in 1992 and runs from Wiltshire; via the Avon Valley National Park to finish in Dorset. The Path is named after the river whose course it follows. Please bear in mind that this route can become severely waterlogged from December to May.

The Path has been divided into five sections, each providing a really good day out. Choose between white meadows buzzing with wildlife or high chalk downland with exhilarating views, peaceful village pubs or a sophisticated cathedral city, or relaxing with a picnic while watching the grazing Forest ponies or bathe a still trout lake. Keep an eye out too for the flash of blue as a kingfisher speeds by, or the slender body and brown fur of the elusive otter.

The Avon Valley is a very special place; it has a greater range of habitats and a wider variety of flora and fauna than any other chalk river in Britain. The broad flood plain of the lower valley mainly comprises hay meadows and pastures dissected by drainage ditches and streams, which frequently flood during the winter, and this flooding has possibly saved the area from intrusive development.

Wildland wildflowers thrive, such as water avens, meadowsweet and tubular water-dropwort. In the more arable areas look for larkspur, Devil's-bit scabious or red campion. Nearly seventy species of wildflowers and twenty-four species of fish have been recorded, including barbel and salmon. The valley is of national importance for birds, particularly over-wintering waders such as white-fronted geese and Bewick’s swans. Lagopus, golden plover and black-tailed godwits. The lakes around Ringwood play host to ducks, great crested grebe, coot, commoners and many other species of bird.

In spring the valley supports huge numbers of breeding lapwing, redshank and snipe and in the summer the reedbeds and scrub are alive with reed buntings, blackcaps, sedge warblers, reed warblers and the rare Cetti’s warbler.

Special care should be taken to avoid disturbing sensitive species, especially wildfowl and ground-nesting birds such as lapwing, redshank and snipe. Walkers with dogs are particularly requested to keep them under close control during the nesting season (April to July), or when wildlife are present.

The river and its water meadows dominate this route. You pass mills, weirs and sluice gates along its length. Water meadow channels were cut to carry water on to the pasture and then drain it off again. Keeping a steady trickle of water through the grass roots during the spring prevents them from frost and results in a valuable earlier crop of grass or hay. The man employed to manage this critical water flow was called a Drowner.

There is the magnificent city of Salisbury and the New Forest town of Christchurch where you can visit antique shops, sample local crafts and food or even stay for a night or two. There are also some charming villages such as Dinton, Hatchet Green and Membury, where you can explore the village churches and twisting lanes, stop for a rest at welcoming pubs to sample the local beer or learn some local lore.

History

In Salisbury, the skyline is dominated by the medieval cathedral’s soaring spire. Built in just 38 years, it is a magnificently example of early English Gothic architecture, and stands in the largest medieval city in Britain. Within this elegant cove, you can find the most perfect example of Queen Anne architecture, Monmouth House.

Just past Charlton Dairy Farm, look across the valley to Trefalgar House, splendidly situated on a plateau overlooking the bread valley. It was built in 1584 as a mark of gratitude for Horatio Nelson’s victory and was given to his brother, the first Earl Nelson.

Further south at Downham is Parsonage Manor House, once the home of Sir Walter Raleigh’s mother and brother. Two hundred and fifty years later a portrait of Sir Walter, painted in 1588, was discovered hidden behind oak panelling. It subsequently became the first purchase of the National Portrait Gallery and is the best-known portrait of him.

The beautiful priory in Christchurch is famous for the Miraculous Beam. It is said that during early building work, one mysterious carpenter was never seen to take refreshment or collect his pay. One evening a wooden beam was found to be too short, but the next morning the workmen found to their amazement that it had grown to the proper length overnight and had already been placed in the correct position. The mysterious carpenter did not appear after this and it was assumed by everyone that he must have been Jesus Christ helping to build his own church, which thus became known as Christ’s Church of Toymen, later Christchurch.

There were few ports more suited to smuggling than Christchurch. It was surrounded by gently shelving beaches, with few rocks and good paths and easy land from the major cities — and it was also close to the French coast. A huge variety of contraband was smuggled including silk, cloth, lace, tea, tobacco, spirits, pearls, casks, sugars, tea and even French refugees escaping from the French Revolution in 1793.
Salisbury to Downton

**Distances: 8 miles**  
**Time: 3-4 hours**

The Avon Valley Path begins in the county of Wiltshire at the statue of The Walking Madonna by Elizabeth Frink, which stands near the north porch of the magnificent medieval Salisbury Cathedral; its landmark spire is the tallest in Britain and is visible for miles around, guiding travellers into the city.

The cathedral was built on a manstyle site where five rivers – the Wyley, Avon, Ebble, Nadder and Beare – all converge. Surrounding this awe-inspiring cathedral are the massive ancient walls and serene lawns of The Close where you will find the charming Mansion House, a 13th century baronial hall and two outstanding museums, the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum and the Warefrord Military Museum.

Leave The Close by the South Gate (Hamharn Gate) and cross the River Avon via Harmanh Bridge built in 1245. Then past the Rose and Crown Inn, or perhaps stop for an early rest at this half-timbered 13th century inn, as the view across the river to the cathedral from the riverside lawns is outstanding.

Continue along Bishop’s Walk and up Harmanh Hill and then over the open chalk downland of Hampton Down towards Squeax Farm, before dropping down to the River Ebble and the pretty village of Oldstark. Stop for a break at the renowned New Tree pub or visit St Mary’s churchyard where the rose covered grave of Joshua Scamp lies. Then the Path takes you south of the village of Nunkorn.

The Path winds around the foot of Clearbury Down from which you can clearly see Clearbury Ring, an Iron Age hill fort, past the curious octagonal Round House and through Charlton All Saints; it then runs alongside the water meadows where you get your first sight of the intricate irrigation system used to ‘draw’ the meadows. At the 17th century New Court Farm, turn left over the bridge and follow the causeway through the meadows and into Downton.

**Accommodation:** Salisbury TIC 01722 334956  
**Refreshments:** The Bull, Downton 01722 510574  
**The King’s Arms, Downton 01722 510646  
**The White Horse, Downton 01722 510408  
**Rose and Crown Hotel 01722 599955  
**Yew Tree 01722 329784**

**Places of Interest:** Salisbury Cathedral 01722 555120  
Old Sarum 01722 325598  
Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum 01722 332151

**Public Transport:** Downton: Wilts & Dorset X3, Pulceline 01722 334665

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Downton to Fordbridge

**Distances: 7 miles**  
**Time: 3-4 hours**

Downton is the oldest town on the Avon Valley Path. The route travels up the High Street to Meet Lane, where there are the remains of a Norman castle and an impressive 18th century landscape garden, in the centre of which is a man-made mound, now called the Meet. Continue past Meet Farm and climb up to the top of the ridge. Take a break here: look back to views of Salisbury Cathedral’s spire, Downton and Clearbury. Now descend through woodland and cross into The New Forest National Park and Hampshire North. Here, teach Hatching Green, a typical New Forest village with thatched cottages overlooking the green where the Forest pannies graze.

Continue alongside a wonderful avenue of lime trees that lead to a Georgian mansion, Hale House, and the church of St Mary with its splendid Renaissance and Baroque architecture.

The Path then turns west to the village of Woodgreen where Palaeolithic material has been found. Follow the road around the medieval earthwork castle at Castle Hill, where there are superb views across the Avon Valley and to Dorset. Then the Path turns west across the water meadows to the suspension bridge at Burridge Manor Farm, where Kingfishers swimming low over the water is a common sight. The bridge was replaced in 1950 after being destroyed by a tank during the Second World War. The Path then crosses the disused Papple to Salisbury railway line and into Fordbridge town.

**Accommodation:** Ringwood VIC 01425 470896  
**Refreshments:** Horse & Groom, Woodgreen 01725 510739  
**Places of Interest:** Bremage Manor House & Museum, nr Fordbridge 01725 512248

**Public Transport:** Fordbridge: Wilts & Dorset X5 01722 334665

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Fordbridge to Ringwood

**Distances: 9 miles**  
**Time: 4-5.5 hours**

Fordbridge grew up as a market town on a fording point, and despite being surrounded by so much water, it suffered several devastating fires. It has a magnificent seven-arched stone bridge spanning the River Avon. In the 18th century the town was renamed for its textile industry.

The Path passes down the centre of the town and through St Mary’s churchyard, which has some fine examples of medieval craftsmanship, and then heads south along the west bank of the River Avon before looping away past the small hamlets of Harbridge Green and Turmer.

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Ringwood to Speley

**Distances: 6.5 miles**  
**Time: 2.5-3 hours**

Ringwood is a bustling town, with a market attracting large crowds every Wednesday. Walk through the centre of the town past the church where the route heads west, passing Swanmore House, where the Duke of Monmouth was held prisoner before being taken to the Tower of London to be beheaded; then leave West Street by a bridge over the mill stream.

The Path passes Brickeley Common, and on to the disused railway line where it continues south over the water meadows to Kingston. Walk past Wattons Ford before rejoining the road at Bisterne Church. The Path uses the main road verge for a short distance past Bisterne Manor to North End Farm, where a track leads the road and turns south through some woods. Walk straight ahead of fields to another road, where the path joins a stream leading to Speley. West of the path is Tyrells Farm. In 1320, King Rufus was killed by a loose arrow while hunting in the New Forest. The shiel was fired by Sir Walter Tyrell, who then fled to Normandy, crossing the river at the ford now named after him.

**Accommodation:** Ringwood VIC 01425 470894  
**Public Transport:** Speley: Wilts & Dorset 175 01202 673355

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Speley to Christchurch

**Distances: 3.5 miles**  
**Time: 2-2.5 hours**

Speley is a charming village with a mill that is now a restaurant. Close by on a mound is the 13th century church of St Michael and All Saints which has a fascinating oak beam interior. The Path passes the 17th century Woolpack Inn and enters Speley Park by the Clock House and the old well.

Continue on, crossing the fields to Stand Cross, and once past The Lamb Inn, follow the stream to Burton through a housing estate to the B3347. After this, the path returns to the calm of the water meadows, home to numerous water birds. Look across the valley for views of St Catherine’s Hill and its Bronze Age barrows.

The Path crosses the river at the weir by the Water Wheel. The path passes back on the railway line, and turns right to a row of cottages. At the end of this row it continues to the High Street with the Priory directly ahead. The Path ends at this splendid medieval monastic priory, built in 1294.

Christchurch is a historic town with a strong smuggling history and many places of interest to explore, including Plain Mill and Constable’s House. Why not enjoy a picturesque walk by the river or even take a boat trip using the nearby boat hire. Take a break in one of the cafes, restaurants and pubs, or browse in the shops before finishing with a walk to the nearby harbour.

**Accommodation:** Christchurch Tourist Information Centre 01202 471780  
**Refreshments (small selection):** The Fishermans Haunt, Winkton 01202 477283  
Woolpack Inn 01202 672522  
**Places of Interest:** Priory Country Park 01202 485804  
Red House Museum & Gardens 01202 482440  
**Public Transport:** Christchurch: Wilts & Dorset m2, 121,123, 127, 175, 01202 673352  
Yellow Bus X32 1a, 1c, 3a 01202 634040  

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