

Mole Valley Nature Conservation Group and Mole Valley District Council have devised this 2.5 mile circular trail.

An aerial view shows that Leatherhead is a town with many green spaces and large numbers of trees in streets, parks and gardens. This trail guides visitors through attractive places which demonstrate the value of urban areas where people and wildlife co-exist happily.

Leatherhead is a small market town with some interesting natural features. A major one is the River Mole corridor, designated as a Local Nature Reserve. Only a few minutes walk from the commercial town centre, the Mole offers an important wetland habitat with several islands providing relatively undisturbed habitats for plants, birds, insects, reptiles and other animals. The Mole acts as a link between the town and its surrounding countryside.

Leatherhead also has interesting and varied parklands, such as the Red House Gardens, Mansion Gardens and Thorncroft Manor. In the past these were associated with large houses and contain fine trees planted to provide a dramatic setting to the buildings. There are also urban parks, such as Park Gardens with its mellow brick walls and lovely views, and the steeply sloping King George V Memorial Gardens.

These different places are the backbone of this walk, but private gardens, road verges and graveyards also provide places for wildlife to flourish. The walk encompasses open parkland with native and exotic trees, meadows, the river, a pond and small woodland areas.

A surprising variety of trees, butterflies and other insects, birds and mammals can be seen during this 2.5 mile walk. Leatherhead was built on river terraces above a floodplain, so the walk is undulating and is challenging for disabled people. However the Riverside Path provides easy access, as do the Red House Gardens, and there are seats along the way.



Birds of the River

The river channel near Minchin Close is the former mill race, where water levels rise and fall quickly, depending on weather conditions. This is a good place for bird watching. On the river itself coots, moorhens, mallards and mute swans are common. Grey wagtail and heron are also common and nuthatches and, occasionally, treecreepers can be seen amongst the alders. In winter siskins and redpolls can be seen feeding high in the canopy, with occasional blackcap closer to eye level. The most iconic bird of the river corridor is the kingfisher which is often seen as an iridescent flash of colour flying just above the water.



Kingfisher



Heron

Mink and Otters

American mink are regularly seen around the Town Bridge. They are highly intelligent and effective predators with a diet that ranges from water fowl to fish. They are not native, are not easy to eradicate and can have a devastating effect on native species such as the water vole.

The most effective control would be the return of the otter. Thanks to the efforts of conservation groups and the Environment Agency otters are returning to some of their old haunts in lowland England, including Surrey.



Otter

Lichen

Graveyards are important places for lichens, providing a range of habitats in a small area. The number of species of lichen on gravestones is in part determined by the type of stone, with few being found on hard shiny granite, whilst softer more calcareous limestones support the greatest number. The aspect is also important; note the difference between the two sides of the stones. Gravestones have been used to date lichen colonies and to indicate growth rates under different conditions; the year of death can indicate approximately when the lichen started to grow.

Since the Clean Air Act and the reduction of sulphur pollution, there has been an increase in the number of lichens found in our area.



The River Mole

About this Guide

This guide has been produced by Mole Valley District Council with support from the Mole Valley Conservation Group. For a complete guide to Leatherhead visit the town website: www.visitleatherhead.com

Other Information

There are several guided walk leaflets for Leatherhead and its surroundings. These and other local information can be obtained from the Help Shop, 25-29 High Street, Leatherhead and from the Leatherhead Museum in Church Street.

Leatherhead Town Tree Trail

The walk begins in North Street by the War Memorial.

The trail begins at the **Indian Bean Tree**, or **Golden Catalpa** 1 a prominent natural landmark. Its sheltered site in the town centre offers good growing conditions for a tree normally used to hot, dry climates. The large butter-yellow leaves look spect-acular when the sun shines through them. Large, long 'runner bean' seed pods, retained over winter, add more character to this tree.

Walk up the hill 2, away from the town centre towards Station Road and the Red House Gardens.

A magnificent **Cedar of Lebanon** 2 frames the view into Station Road. Its spreading branches carry the canopy across the whole road. It marks the entrance to Red House Gardens. A small wildflower meadow has been created just inside the entrance, beneath a row of stately **Limes** 3. Here a number of species can be found growing including wild carrot, knapweed and scabious which are particularly useful sources of nectar for insects.

Within the wildflower meadow are two trees quite literally growing together. A large **Wellingtonia** has a **Holm Oak** growing out of its base 4. Both these 'exotics' grow well in our climate. In Britain, the Wellingtonia, probably the world's largest tree species, only grows to about half the height it achieves in its native California. The Holm Oak, a Mediterranean native, is evergreen.

Inside the Red House Gardens 5

Walk towards the huge **London Plane** in the right hand corner. This magnificent tree dominates 5 the skyline, its trunk measures 6 metres in circumference. This hybrid between the oriental and the American Planes, possibly arose in Spain in the 17th century. A very resilient tree, it grows in difficult conditions and tolerates pollution. Over half of London's street and parkland trees are Planes.

The red-barked **Western Red Cedar**, another native of West Coast America, is growing a little further along 6. It gives off a scent of apple or pineapple on damp days. Two more trees of note grow on the west side of the Red House Gardens. The small one on the diagonal path is a **Pear** 7. A misshapen and spreading **Silver Maple** is in the

southwest corner 8. The silver undersides to its leaves and fiery red autumn foliage are characteristic.

Exit the Red House Gardens in the north east corner by Park House, turning right through the car park 9 and then through a gap in the boundary wall onto Bull Hill. Follow the pavement down the hill, and cross the road via the traffic island, to enter the King George V Memorial Gardens 10.

Here and elsewhere in the town's open spaces, management is aimed at creating a mosaic of habitats. The lower bank is planted with spring bulbs 9. The surrounding grass is allowed to grow until late summer and cut after the seeds have set. Removing grass cuttings lowers fertility, which helps native flowers to thrive.

The path snakes up the embankment towards Wesley House and past a young **Ginkgo**, the **Maidenhair Tree** 10, with its delicate fan-shaped deciduous leaves which turn golden in autumn. This is an ancient and long-lived species, often considered one of the oldest trees in existence and biologically distinct from all others. It was introduced to Britain from Japan in 1754, and the first tree planted still survives in Kew Gardens.

Exit the Memorial Gardens by Wesley House and turn right, down a flight of steps into Leret Way 11.

The steep banks and verges 11 here are maintained informally to help a range of wildflowers and grasses to establish. Only the edges are trimmed until late summer, when the whole verge is cut after the seeds have set. The effect may seem untidy to some, but it produces a wonderful display of colour in spring and summer, and is good for invertebrates.

Our only native pine, the **Scots Pine**, has been planted on both sides of the road. Although a feature of many of Surrey's heathlands, it is not a true native in England.

Turn left and walk to the junction with Epsom Road. Turn left into Epsom Road 12.

There are some fine trees here. The first of note is a **Deodar** 12, a cedar from the Himalayas, with its distinct shape and spire top. A magnificent **Wellingtonia** and a row of pollarded **Limes** 13 are located at the entrance to St. John's School. Pollarding is a traditional way of cutting back a tree at above head height to gain fodder and small-size timber in pasture woodland. Pollarding produces a distinctive multi-trunked shape, and is used in towns to control the height and bulk of trees.

Carefully cross the Epsom Road to the opposite pavement, and turn back 14 towards the town centre.

A large elegant **Beech** grows on the corner

of Windfield 14. This versatile tree is used for both hedging and in forests, and also in avenues as pollards or coppice. Coppicing involves cutting a tree to its base to encourage the sprouting of long straight shoots for fencing and charcoal. Coppice 'stools' (often of Hazel and Sweet Chestnut) are a familiar feature in Surrey woodlands. This management method supports a good ground flora, high in conservation value.

When back at the traffic lights, turn left into Church Road, and walk through 15 to its end, crossing the road behind the White House, and enter the Churchyard.

A weeping **Ash** grows in the north east corner 15. A tall **Lime** tree growing among the gravestones supports a good mass of mistletoe 16. These green clumps, with their fishbone leaves, show up well in winter against the skeletal, bare branches. Lime is a favourite host tree for the semi-parasitic mistletoe, but in Surrey it has been found on about 35 other tree species. Mistletoe has been attributed with magical and aphrodisiac properties since at least the Middle Ages.

Yew trees are often associated with churchyards and here an avenue of Yews stands close to the east end of the church 17. About 500 churchyards in England are reported as having Yew trees some older than the churches themselves. The dense green foliage and sinuous trunk make Yew an easy tree to recognise.

Follow the path to the west front, and into Park Gardens 18.

The ceremonial approach to St. Mary and St. Nicholas church is marked by an avenue of **Limes** 18. Most of these are replantings following the devastating 1987 storm.

Nearby are stately **Scots Pines** 19 and on its own on the lower grassy bank in Park Gardens, is a **Walnut** tree 20. Walnuts were once widely grown in Surrey and many trees could be found in nearby Norbury Park. This mainly southern European species grows well on a variety of soils.

Leave Park Gardens by the Lime avenue, 21 and turn right along Church Street back towards the town centre. Cross the road at a suitable point, heading back to the town centre. Turn down Vicarage Lane, a rough track adjacent to the coal merchants. Enter the Mansion Gardens by a gap in the brick wall on the right.

Mansion Gardens, once part of Mansion House grounds, hosts some interesting trees. There is a **Black Mulberry** 21 to the right of the central path. It has delicious fruit, with juice that stains everything it touches. This beautiful tree with its gnarled trunk, has branches reaching down to the ground. This species was planted extensively in George III's reign to promote British silk production. Unfortunately silkworms eat only the leaves of the White Mulberry. To the left and beyond the Mulberry is a **Golden Rain Tree** 22. A native of China and Korea, it produces long branches of bright yellow flowers in August. Its distinctive bladder-like fruit ripen to a pinky-orange colour in autumn. There is a small pond at the bottom of the path. This was once spring-fed but now its

water comes from a pipe linked to the river. A **Medlar** tree 23, with its characteristically contorted trunk, grows at its edge. This native of south-east Europe and south-west Asia produces large, brown rose-hip-like fruits. In Britain these only become edible when raw when they are softened and part-rotted (bletted). They can also be made into jelly.

Move clockwise round the pond to follow the river downstream 24.

The most common tree along this stretch is the **Alder**, a frequent inhabitant of river banks 24, which delights in damp conditions. The male trees carry small catkins and the female small hard cones. At ground level the flowers of lady's-smock can be seen in the spring and early summer and ransoms carpets the islands in spring. Dragonflies and damselflies are one of the delights of the river, flitting about on the river's edge. Guarding the end of Minchin Close is the more exotic **Japanese Black Pine** 25 a tree more usually associated with coastal conditions of poor soils and salt-laden winds.

At the Town Bridge cross over the road to follow the river downstream 26.

Several notable trees grow along the river bank. A **Snowy Mespil**, or **Juneberry**, native to North America 26, adjoins the car park. The lime green leaves and thorny branches belong to the **False Acacia**, whilst the whitish silky leaves of spring and early summer belong to the native **Whitebeam**. The **Field Maple** 27, with its small 5-lobed leaves which turn golden in autumn, is a tree of native hedgerows and ancient woodland. Its seeds are 'keys' similar to those of the familiar Sycamore. A characteristic mix of Alders and Willows 28 grows along the river's edge.

Turn right up Emlyn Lane 29.

A **Liquidambar**, or **Sweet Gum Tree** grows, at the point where the road narrows down into a path 29. It has beautiful foliage, which changes from rich green in summer to a fiery red in autumn. A little further along is a **Norway Maple** 30, with attractive spring foliage and a spectacular autumn display. A native **Hornbeam** grows next to it. This is a beautiful tree and its extremely hard wood was formerly coppiced for charcoal and also used for the teeth cogwheels in mills. In the past the River Mole supported a large number of mills.

At the end of the path, turn right into Station Road and North Street, where our trail began.

