

The Lakes of Walton Heronry



<http://www.theaa.com/walks/the-lakes-of-walton-heronry-421275>

A short walk around a country park and the home of a visionary naturalist.

Distance 3.5 miles (5.7km)

Minimum time 2hrs

Ascent/gradient 98ft (30m)

Level of difficulty Easy

Paths Good paths and tracks throughout, canal tow path, 4 stiles

Landscape Country park, lakes, woodland and canal

Suggested map aqua3 OS explorer 278 Sheffield & Barnsley

Start/finish SE 375153

Dog friendliness Good, but care should be taken when near wildfowl

Parking Walton Heronry and Anglers Country Park on Haw Park Lane, between Crofton and Ryehill

Public toilets At visitor centre, at start of walk

Few houses are situated as delightfully as Walton Hall, built in 1767 on its own little island, surrounded by a lake, with just a cast iron bridge to link it to the 'mainland'. Walton Hall was the home of a man who deserves to be better known. Charles Waterton was a man ahead of his time. He was viewed, during his lifetime, as an eccentric figure, though his interest in environmental issues would put him in the vanguard of 'green' thinking if he were alive today.

Born in 1782, Charles Waterton was a keen naturalist, whose interest flourished with visits to Guyana and Brazil. He returned to Walton Hall with many exotic specimens (now displayed in Wakefield Museum) and created, on his estate, what was probably the world's first nature reserve. He prohibited shooting and built hides.

For the next 40 years he planted trees, conserved the wildlife and made nesting boxes for birds (another world's first, apparently). He built a high wall around the estate, to keep the poachers out and the wildlife in. He funded this unusual project, he said from 'the wine I do not drink'. When he died, in 1865, he was buried in the woods he loved. Ironically, his son, Edmund, subsequently hosted shooting parties in the estate, to help to pay off his debts. You can cross the iron bridge to the Georgian hall, though it has been converted to become the Waterton Park Hotel. You can enjoy a drink or meal on the lawn, with the lake as a backdrop.

The Heronry is the name which Wakefield Countryside Service has given to a fascinating collection of lakes, woods and open parkland, including Anglers Country Park, Winterset Reservoir and Walton Hall. As is often the case in the south east of the county, some of these lakes were originally dug for opencast mining. Part of the walk accompanies the Barnsley Canal, opened in 1799 and mainly used for the transport of coal. Once the railway had come, the canal was abandoned. Charles Waterton would approve of the way it is

'going back to nature'. The visitor centre, next to the car park, has toilets, a café and an interactive exhibition about Squire Waterton's life and work.

1 From the car park, take the track past the visitor centre towards the main lake. Bear left, at a fork of tracks, to walk near the water's edge. Having left the lake behind, look out for a stile in the fence to your left. Notice the waymarked sign - 'Waterton Trail' - here and at many other points on the walk.

2 Join a field path, keeping a fence to your right. Cross two fields in the same direction towards a golf course. After you take a pair of stiles and a tiny footbridge in quick succession, bear half right across the next field. As you leave this field via a stile, bear sharp left to follow a grassy track along the fringe of the golf course. Pass a small pond, and enter woodland. The obvious path stays close to the edge of the wood and soon follows a lake on your left. Leave woodland on a stony track with views over the lake and Walton Hall Hotel on its island. As you approach another golf hole you will have to make some minor detours (follow the signs) as you approach the hotel complex.

3 Keep right along a track, towards woodland, but then go immediately left on a grassy track. When you meet a more substantial track, follow it left, for 75yds (68m). Bear left after a fence on a grassy path uphill through scrubland. Go through a gap in a brick wall, turning left to follow the wall. Meet the hotel's access road and go right. At the top of the hill, just before the golfers' clubhouse, bear left to join the tow path of the Barnsley Canal.

4 When the path forks, go right, uphill, to cross a bridge over the canal. Bear right to follow a good track, still following the canal. When the track forks again, keep left. Follow the boundary wall of the Walton Estate into woodland. Keep left by an information panel and leave the woodland through a gate. Walk uphill on a stony track which soon becomes a metalled access road. Follow it back to the Heronry car park.