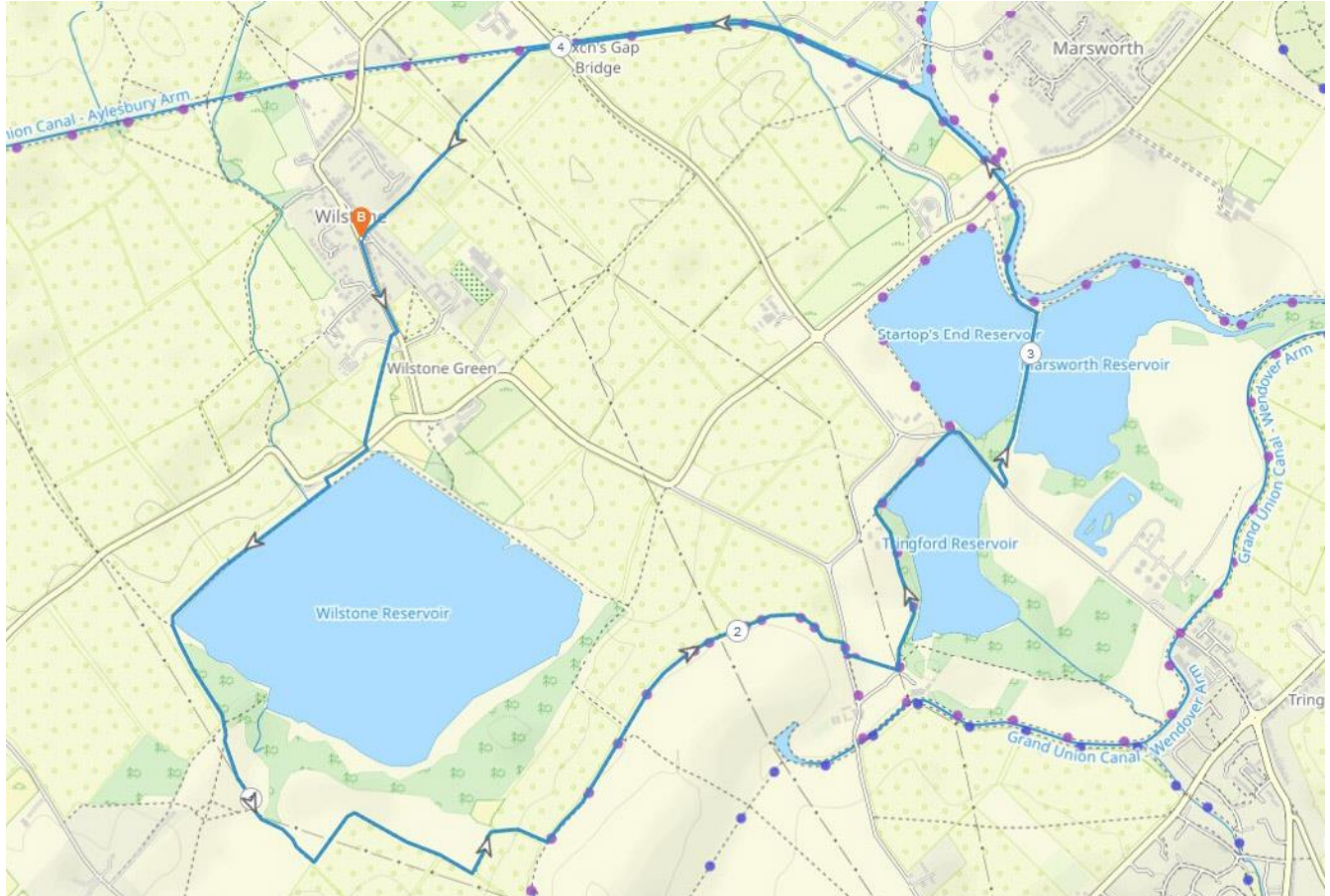




The countryside charity
Hertfordshire

Tring Reservoirs



This circular walking route explores the four Tring Reservoirs and the adjacent canal system, all built in the 19th century. The reservoirs are a Site of Special Scientific Interest and an important bird habitat, making this walk ideal for bird-watching although there is much else to see and discover.

Distance: 4.4 miles / 7.1 km

Ascent: 118 feet / 36 metres

Duration: 2 hours

Difficulty: Easy, but there is one steep flight of steps to climb

Start / Finish: Wilstone village, Dacorum Borough

Refreshments: The Waters Edge cafe and The Anglers Retreat pub in Marsworth, and the Half Moon pub in Wilstone

The Tring Reservoirs lie in the flat clay vale beyond the Chilterns scarp, to the north west of Tring. The four reservoirs were built to supply water to the adjacent canal system which was completed in the early 19th century. There is much to see and discover in this delightful area at any time of year.

This circular walk of just under 4½ miles starts and finishes in Wilstone village, two miles north west of Tring in Dacorum Borough. The route takes in all four reservoirs, the Grand Union canal and its Wendover and Aylesbury arms.

Much of the route has a good surface along reservoir banks and canal towpaths, but some sections can become muddy after wet weather and in the winter. As well as a long flight of steps up to Wilstone reservoir there are steps in other places along the route.

The reservoirs, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, are owned by the Canal and River Trust and managed as a nature reserve by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. They are an important bird habitat with 250 species recorded, including bittern, and osprey on passage. There are several hides on or near the route.

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Park on the roadside in the centre of Wilstone village. Before the canal era this was a small farming community. Houses were built in the early 19th century for canal workers or 'navvies'.

Head south along the village street with the church of St Cross on your right. About 70 yards beyond the end of the pavement turn right off the road through a rickety metal kissing gate. Go over the footbridge and across a gravel drive.

Continue straight ahead and through a gate, and walk diagonally over the field to the far corner. Leave the field by a kissing gate, then cross the road and go through the gap in the hedge opposite. ***Before crossing the road, look and listen for fast-moving traffic.***

On the far side of the hedge turn right to follow the level path to reach a flight of steps. Climb the steps to the top of the bank.

This is Wilstone reservoir, the largest of the four, first built in 1802 and expanded twice. It is fed by springs rising nearby. The lines of trees in the middle mark the old banks. There are fine views from here towards the Chiltern hills.

Turn right and walk along the bank towards the trees at the far end of the water.

Resident birds here include coots, moorhens, great crested grebes, mute swans, little egrets and tufted ducks. If the water is low there may be waders feeding on the mud.



At the end of the bank cross the footbridge and turn left, following the path through the trees.

By the nature reserve sign you can turn left to visit the hide. The route continues from here along the path that veers just to the right of the sign (*not* sharp right), then cross a footbridge and go through the kissing gate and slightly to the right, into a field.

Take the left-hand path across the field, keeping the remnant of a hedge to your left and the overhead wires to your right. You will be heading southeast.

Go through the gap in the hedgerow and follow the path around the field edge with the hedge to your left. At the top of a slight rise turn left to keep alongside the hedge, then go around the corner of the field still keeping the hedge on your left.

Where the broad grassy path narrows turn left through the gap in the hedge. Ahead is a native black poplar tree (see right): this species is rare nationally but common in this area - in autumn the leaves turn a distinctive bright yellow.

Follow the field edge around the corner to the right, and head up the slope onto the towpath of the Wendover arm.

Turn left and walk along the towpath.

This contour canal was built without locks to carry water from springs along the chalk scarp near Wendover to feed the main canal, originally called the Grand Junction canal. Water from Wilstone reservoir was also pumped up into the Wendover arm to supply the canal - and still is today.

The canal crosses the Chilterns via the Tring summit, the highest point on its 137-mile route from London to Birmingham. From the summit the canal goes downhill through locks in both directions. Each lock operation uses 50,000 gallons of water and on a busy day four million gallons can be lost from the summit. Finding an adequate water supply was a major challenge for the canal builders.

The section of the Wendover arm you have reached is gradually being restored. After it was built the arm was also used as a waterway allowing boats to reach Wendover. Unfortunately it always leaked badly and eventually the central section was abandoned and became dry. The section near Wendover still carries water, which flows by pipeline into Wilstone reservoir. From here water is pumped into the eastern end of the arm, which joins the main canal at Bulbourne.



Continue along the towpath for about half a mile, passing the sections still to be restored.

At the end of the towpath, veer left to reach the road. Turn right to go along the road, then almost immediately turn left to go through the gap in the hedge on the opposite side of the road. **Beware of traffic.**

Ahead is a short stretch of path running between fences; beyond is the brick-built Tringford pumping station, finished in 1817.



The Grand Junction canal builders wanted to expand their network far beyond what was eventually completed, but continuing problems with water supplies at Tring frustrated many of their ambitions. In 1814 Thomas Telford was appointed chief engineer by the Grand Junction company. He installed a powerful steam engine in the pumping station at Tringford to lift water up into the Wendover arm from the reservoirs, to feed the main canal. The station is still operating although now powered by electricity.

At the end of the path cross a small open area and take the left-hand path to enter woodland, which borders Tringford reservoir, built by Telford between 1814 and 1818 to increase the water supply for the canal system.

Follow the path through the wood, emerging onto the bank alongside the water. Follow the path along the bank and across the spillway, and continue along the bank to the road. (Photo is looking back the way you've come.)



When you reach the road, turn right to walk along the pavement. At the end of the pavement, carefully cross the road, turn back on yourself and go down the track by the notice board.

This leads to the last two of the four reservoirs, Marsworth (built in 1806) and Startop's End (built by Telford at the same time as Tringford). Both are spring-fed.



When Wilstone reservoir was expanded in 1836 and again in 1839, the reservoirs had a combined capacity of over 420 million gallons, but even then water shortages in dry periods meant that a borehole was sunk into the chalk in 1848 to augment supplies.

Follow the path onto the bank between the two reservoirs. On your right you will have a view of Marsworth reservoir across the reedbeds towards the distant Chiltern scarp.

On your left is Startop's End reservoir. Continue along the path enjoying the views.



At the end of the bank bear left to keep alongside Startop's End reservoir. To the right there is a view of the main Grand Union canal, and one of the flight of seven locks at Marsworth which lower the canal from the Tring summit down towards the clay vale.

The path drops down to join the Grand Union Canal towpath, where boats are usually moored. Turn left to walk along the towpath with the canal on your right.



Soon you will pass a lock with a double-arched bridge just beyond. On the left just before this lock is the Waters Edge café where you might like to stop for refreshments.

Otherwise, carefully cross the road and stay on the left of the canal to resume the walk along the towpath.



You will soon reach the junction of the Grand Union Canal (heading off to the north) and the Aylesbury arm (continuing in a westerly direction).

Continue on the towpath alongside the Aylesbury arm. The Aylesbury arm was completed in 1815 and runs for just over six miles in total.



The walk continues on the towpath passing several more locks. There is a pretty garden (private) on the far side of the canal at Lock 4, where the view opens out.



Just beyond Lock 6, go under a bridge (Dixon's Gap Bridge). About 50 yards beyond the bridge, turn left off the towpath and go through a gap in the hedge.

Follow the footpath across the field and around the left-hand edge of a second field. It then runs past allotments and along a green lane back into Wilstone village where you began the walk.



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This route last walked by CPRE in May 2024.

If you have enjoyed this walk, please consider supporting CPRE Hertfordshire in our efforts to protect and promote the Hertfordshire countryside for everyone. For more information on our work, or to sign up for our newsletter, make a donation, or volunteer with us, please visit www.cpreherts.org.uk

CPRE Hertfordshire is a registered charity no. 1162419, address: 31a Church Street, Welwyn, AL6 9LW, tel 01438 717587.

Note: all walkers do so at their own risk. Suitable footwear and clothing are recommended.