

Visit the canalrivertrust.org.uk for this walk.

Hertfordshire and Essex along the River Stort.

The flat, meandering 5-mile (8km) trail between Bishops Stortford to Sawbridgeworth, along the Stort River, promised to be gentle, accessible, and a haven for nature. It's a navigable tributary of the River Lee, which itself runs down to London, and historically it was an important waterway, where timber and grain and coal were transported in slow-moving barges.

I live in South West London, so getting anywhere near the river means a bus, a train, a tube, and another train. It's a serious commitment. The sun, though weak and pale, was at least trying to put in an appearance for us as we arrived at our start point: **Bishops Stortford**.

We decide to fuel up in the town centre before starting our walk. Tucked away at the end of the Market Square, about a ten-minute walk from the station, is the **Rosy Lea**, a cosy and friendly tearoom. It's a peaceful oasis, and after warming bowls of soup and tea, served in what looked like vintage teapots (nice touch!), we head down Bridge Street to meet the river at Castle Gardens. At the centre of the park is a mysterious earth mound, which at one time may have been a **Celtic barrow or a Saxon Fort**. On top of it are stubby bits of wall, remnants of **Waytemore Castle**.

The Stort rises just north of Langley before journeying south. In **Castle Gardens**, it's more of a stream and we cross a busy main road to join the **Stort Navigation towpath**. A nesting swan and a large number of mallards aside, this is urban territory. After we cross the London Road and rejoin the towpath, the new-build apartments

soon peter out, and as we reach the **Bishops Stortford Canoe Club**, where kayakers obligingly paddling past for a photo. After that, we walk past the **South Mill Lock**, the first of many locks.

Soon, the river takes on a more gentle, rural, almost bayou-like flavour, the trees on the sloping riverbanks poetically framing the water. I spot a heron, one of my favourite birds, take flight – a good omen.

Up ahead is **Rushy Mead Nature Reserve** on the Essex side of the river, which you explore via a boardwalk. It's a wetland habitat and the grassland, reed beds and meadows are a magnet for birds, the sedges and reeds providing habitat for snipe and water rails in the winter, as well as sedge and reed warblers in the summer. Apparently wildflowers bloom amidst the ash and willow woodland here and along the riverbank in the summer months, and in my mind's eye, I picture a kaleidoscopic carpet underfoot, a nice excuse for a return visit.

Further on, by **Twyford Lock**, we spot a livery, which means an obligatory detour so that I might practice my fledgling animal communication skills – acquired, or so I like to think, on a recent retreat on that very theme. One of the horses, blithely unaware of my efforts, carries on eating grass, although another pricks up his ears and turns to give me a good long look. Buoyed, we carry on.

A couple of kilometres on is **Spellbrook Lock**. On high land, hidden away in the trees, is the site of an Iron Age Fort, **Wallbury Camp**. We sit by the river for a few moments, and watch as a conga of cheery-looking walkers, no doubt emerging from the **Three Horseshoes** pub nearby, pass us on the road we've just crossed.

Further on we spot more boats, painted with pretty flourishes. Most are moored silently, but one slowly glides past. A woman, perched on the deck, waves as they pass. It's a cheering sight and I can imagine how appealing this walk must be on a gorgeously hot summer's day. We pass the slumbering **Hallingbury Marina**, whilst on our side of the river a shaggy-coated red bull with magnificent horns (safely in a field behind a fence), flatters us with his profile.

The scenery begins to open out too, the woodland giving way to beautiful views of the countryside. As we near **Sawbridgeworth**, I begin to fade, and with the light dimming and crows gathering in the treetops, we eschew the delights of the town for the station, happily a five-minute walk and left turn off the towpath. Should you have the energy there's an antiques centre on the station road and a few cafés hidden away there, which are closed on Sunday – all the more reason to bring a flask so you can spend more time on this unassuming, modest, but perfectly delightful river walk.

The quiet River Stort runs past watermills and country houses, mills and maltings, through the pretty Hertfordshire countryside. You can read more about its history by visiting our [River Stort webpage](#).