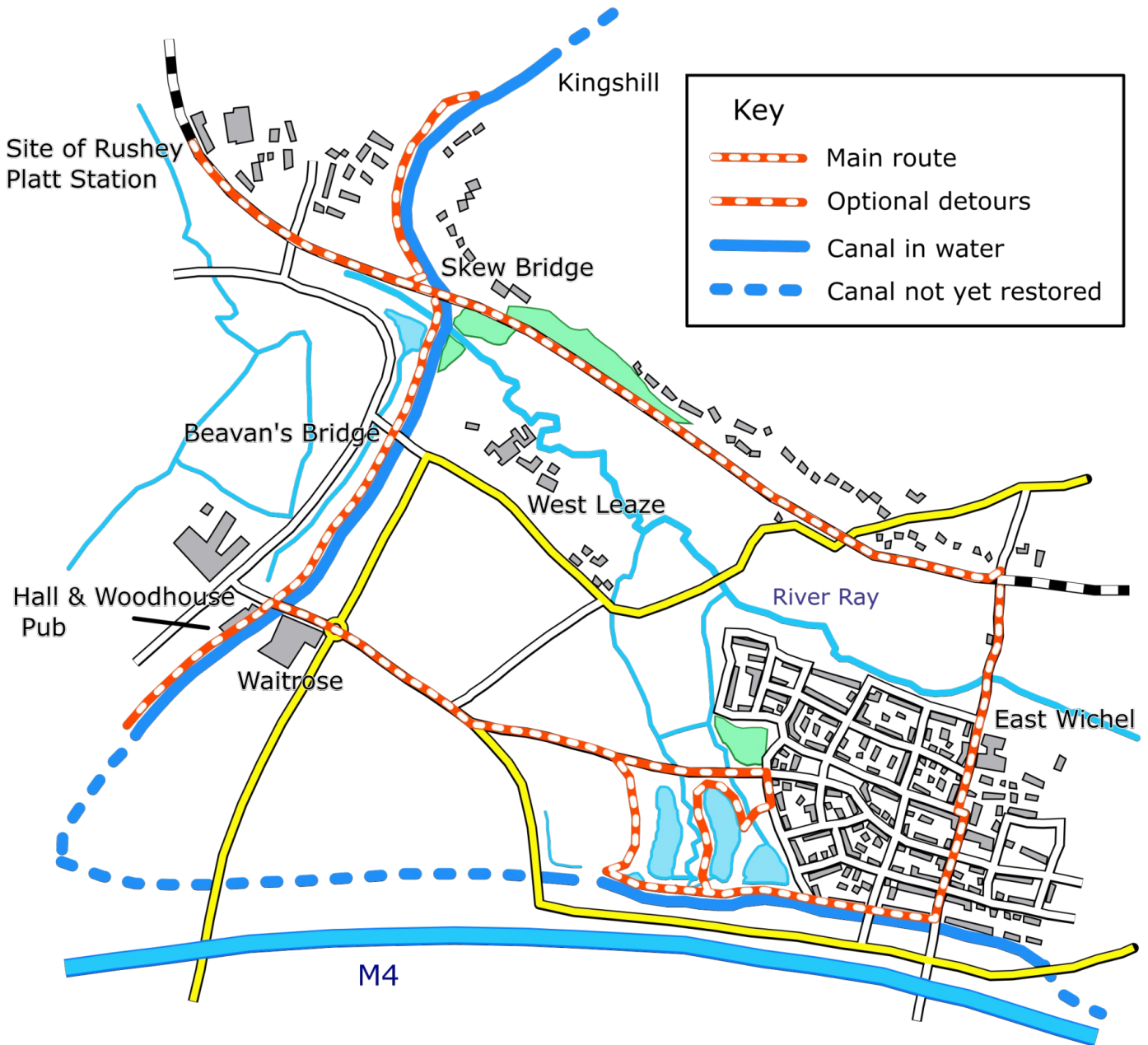


# Canal-based walk at Wichelstowe, South Swindon



Duration: 1 – 1½ hours

Footwear: stout shoes; boots advisable in wet weather

Begin at the Hall & Woodhouse pub in Peglars Way, Swindon SN1 7DA (GR SU134829). If your car is electric, the car park at Waitrose, opposite, has charging points; its postcode is SN1 7BX. Waitrose and the pub are connected by an attractive footbridge over the canal and its towpath. A short walk in a south-westerly direction takes you to the terminus of this stretch of canal, where much construction work is going on that will take the canal to the M4, then under the motorway and beyond to Royal Wootton Bassett, eventually linking up with the Kennet & Avon canal at Semington. Walk back to the pub, passing under the footbridge. Look across under the bridge to the far abutment, where three bat boxes have been installed.

Waitrose is opposite you, with the Trust's trip boat Dragonfly at its landing stage. Continue under the road bridge (geocache enthusiasts note the box under the bridge), then along past houses and open ground to Beavan's Bridge. If the towpath is muddy, there is a well-surfaced diversion down to the left that brings you back to the bridge. This was blown up in WW2 by our own artillery for target practice! It was rebuilt by Trust volunteers as a Millennium project, from the original stones where possible. It has the year recorded in projecting stonework

on its NE face; a plaque and information board are also there.

Continue along the towpath; at the point where the surface changes to tarmac, you are crossing an aqueduct over the River Ray; go down the steps on the left to see the rather primitive-looking arches that have, however, stood the test of time.



Bat boxes installed under the bridge at the Hall & Woodhouse. Credit: Chris Barry





**Passing under Beavan's Bridge. Credit: Chris Barry**

Continue a short distance to Skew Bridge (GR 136835). It has a splendid Victorian brick arch (so no keystone), built on the skew. Take a close look at the railings – the blacksmith who put them there in the 1980s added his signature in the form of a mouse and three snails! Thanks to a passenger on Dragonfly, we learnt who he was – her father, Mick Couling; he lived in Wroughton but died some years ago; his signature lives on.

From here, the walk goes up onto the bridge; best to use the path on the northern side after you've passed the railings, but an optional excursion takes you along the canal to its present terminus in Swindon, at the bottom of Kingshill (GR 138838). This takes you past some large houses with splendid gardens that come down to the canal



**The River Ray aqueduct. Credit: Chris Barry**

opposite; they make an attractive sight, as do the several small boats moored near the end of the canal. Retracing your steps, note the small spillway that takes any overflow down to the River Ray below; the railing there also has a mouse on it. A children's play area below this part of the canal is canal-themed; there is also a rare Neolithic ring barrow, preserved and revealed by the large circular gap in the relatively new houses there. Plans are in place to restore the canal through Swindon to join the Thames & Severn canal near Cricklade, and thus on to the River Thames.



**Mick's mouse awaiting the passage of Dragonfly at Skew Bridge. Credit: Chris Barry**

Skew Bridge once carried the Midland & South Western Junction Railway, but is now part of the Sustrans Cycle Route 45. If you are interested, turn westwards along it, cross over a road, then fork slightly right and you will find the remains of the Rushey Platt railway station platform at GR 133837. Return westwards to Skew Bridge and continue along the cycle path for about ½ mile, enjoying views across to the Marlborough Downs on the right and crossing a small road, Mill Lane. Soon after, look out for another small road, more of a track, that passes beneath at GR 146830. Drop down a few steps to it, go down steeply passing some WW2 tank traps on the right and two semi-derelict cottages with two even more derelict Citroen 2CVs outside, down to the new development at East Wichel. Cross the stream at the bottom and go straight on along Stonehenge Road, which becomes Eyam Road and takes you to a different section of canal at GR145824. It was built as part of the East Wichel development; eventually it will be extended eastwards to join the River Thames at Abingdon. Further development now under way will link this section to the one by the Hall & Woodhouse where the walk starts.



**Skew Bridge. Credit: Chris Barry**

The canal ends (at present) to the east of Eyam Road bridge, so turn right (west) and follow the towpath past the end of the houses to find some attractive lakes below on the right. From here there are two options – in reasonable weather, walk right along to the lock, where you will find a signposted bridleway at GR 140825 leading off to the right; follow it until you reach the road, then turn left (west) and follow it back to Waitrose; at the mini-roundabout turn left (south) and walk round the store to its front entrance, where you will see the footbridge that takes you to your starting point. If the weather is wet, it is better to turn off to the right slightly earlier at GR 142825, following a well-surfaced track between the lakes; there are two places where you can take a short cut to the road; otherwise follow the track as it doubles back to a small car park by the houses; turn left at its exit, then left again onto the road leading to Waitrose.

**Chris Barry**