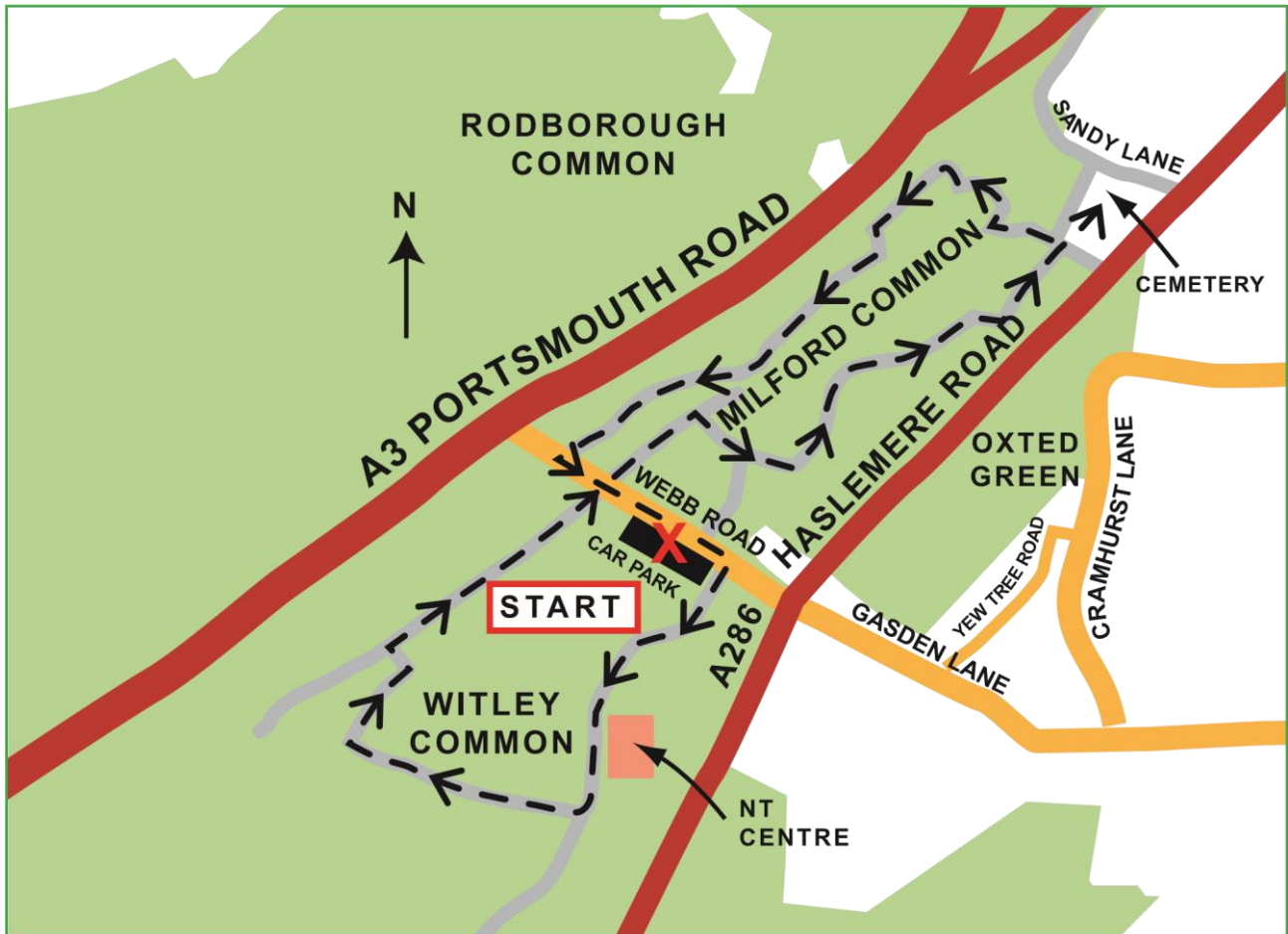


Walk 11

The Commons at War



-  ROADS
-  FOOTPATHS & TRACKS
-  ROUTE OF WALK
-  THE COMMONS AND OTHER WOODED AREAS

Map: OS Explorer Map 145 – Guildford & Farnham

Start: National Trust car park, Webb Road, Witley.

Grid Ref: SU934408.

Distance: Approx. 2 miles, easy terrain.

Please note the map is a guide only. The commons are criss-crossed by many small paths.



Walk 11

The Commons at War

Directions

From the car park walk back towards the road and turn right onto a well made track by a NT Witley Common sign. After passing several wooden posts, with animal carvings and 'Heathland Hike' (HH) markers on them, and keeping left at a junction of paths, you emerge into a clearing previously used as a car park but now being restored to nature. Remain on the track passing further wooden posts to reach a T junction behind the NT building. Turn right to carefully follow the green route, marked 'Nature Trail', through the woods.

Note the surface of the paths as you walk: some have evidence of a rough stone surface: these were the old troop and vehicle roads.

The path eventually emerges into a more or less open clearing and on the left is a seat and a gate to an enclosed area.

This was a parade ground during the Second World War and is host to many wild flowers in summer, with their associated insects and butterflies. Look out for thistles, speedwell, clover, bird's foot trefoil, lady's slipper, agrimony which is a medicinal plant used against snake venom, and many sorts of grasses.

In the enclosed area you may see Highland cattle. This is part of a widespread initiative to restore the lowland heathland habitat on this and adjoining commons.

Continue to follow the green signs round two sides of the parade ground. At the crossroads where the green route is directed back across the parade ground, turn left onto the crossing path, with pink HH marker. At the next junction turn right following pink route onto what was a metalled road and continue to a junction with Webb Road.

Shortly before this junction, there is what could be a lay-by to the left of the path. There are trees there now but these have mostly grown up since 1945. It is not too difficult to imagine army vehicles passing each other or parking at this point.

There is evidence of serial trenches above the clearing and possibly the remains of a vehicle track.

You are now leaving Witley common and entering Milford common. Cross the road and (slightly to the left) continue straight ahead, following pink HH signs, on a continuation of the metalled road, although the surface is even less obviously metalled. Ignore the left turn with the blue 'Permissive Bridleway' (PB) sign and watch carefully for an unmarked narrow crossing path. Turn right, off the pink route, onto the narrow path and pass hawthorn that has been layered to encourage nightingales to nest.

The extensive hawthorn planting on this common was done by the Polish contingent of troops stationed on the common as a reminder of their homeland.

At another crossing path continue straight ahead down steps and arrive at semi open heath to the left. Continue straight ahead, with car park on your right, and at the T junction turn left.

The open heath was an army exercise area.

At the first fork take the right hand route, with pink HH sign, and follow the path round to the right at a T-junction, passing a post with PB/HH on it and enter a wooded area. Continue following the PB/HH, bearing left at the next post to reach a clearing which was another parade ground.

This area requires continuous maintenance by the NT and their volunteers to remain an open area.

Leave the area still following the PB/HH route and pass a white Esso marker on the left which denotes where the oil pipeline crosses the common. The path opens up into a small grassy area and at the far side is a junction of paths and the PB/HH bears to the right.

Note there has been extensive layering of the hawthorn in this area.

Continue to follow the PB/HH and after another open area enter a wooded area. As soon as you emerge from the wood leave the PB/HH and turn left up a gentle incline. Follow this path, ignoring the crossing path (marked HH to left) to reach the car park adjoining Milford cemetery. A small gate leads into the cemetery.

The area of common opposite the cemetery, on the other side of the road, stretching south to Gasden Lane was partly used as a riding school, veterinary quarters and hospital.

The cemetery contains a war memorial dedicated to the soldiers and sailors of the First World War buried in the cemetery. There are rows of graves of Canadian and British soldiers, sailors and airmen from both world wars that are maintained by the War Graves Commission. A corner of the cemetery is devoted to East European emigres who arrived in Milford during the Second World War and whose families still live here.

On leaving the cemetery by the side gate back into the car park, turn right on the path that runs parallel to the cemetery and to the right of the metal gate. At the rear of the cemetery keep straight on this path, ignoring paths off and crossing paths, until you reach a T junction. Turn left and immediately right by a PB/HH post (this may be partly obliterated by nettles in summer). At a crossing path continue straight on and at a T junction by another PB post turn left. The A3 traffic will be clearly visible in winter. At the next T junction by yet another PB post turn right and head straight towards the A3 to arrive at an open clearing by the A3. There is what appears to be, a large manhole cover with a water pipe emerging from it in the clearing to the right.

You are now by Rodborough Hill where a water pumping station was installed to service the troop camps. One of the benefits to local residents of the army occupation of an extensive area of the commons during the First World War was the necessary improvements to the water and sewage services to cope with the additional numbers. Between 30 and 50,000 passed through the camp during the Great War, with 30,000 stationed there waiting for demobilisation. The commons then looked very different from the way they do now as there was much less tree cover due to intensive grazing. Much of the area used during the First World War was used for grazing the army's horses.

Now turn left onto the old troop road that runs parallel to the A3. After some distance the path goes steeply downhill for a short while. At the first fork take the right hand option and at the second fork leave the PB and go right gently uphill. After the brow of the hill arrive at Webb road. Turn left and return to the car park.

