

Walks Around Witton-le-Wear

Walk information

Distance: 7.5 km (4.7 miles)

Time: Allow 2 hours

Map: OS Explorer Sheet 305 'Bishop Auckland'

Parking: On-street parking throughout Witton-le-Wear

Refreshments: Pubs at Witton-le-Wear and Witton Park

Terrain: After an initial short stretch of road walking, a clear track skirts around Witton Castle to reach Witton Park. The road is then followed through the village before clear paths lead back across fields and through dense woodland alongside the River Wear.

How to get there: Witton-le-Wear lies just off the A68 to the west of Bishop Auckland.

Please note: Take care walking along the roads. Some sections of footpath are overgrown. The riverside path is slippery and uneven, with boulders and fallen trees; take care on this section. Do not attempt this walk after heavy rain as the riverside path may be impassable.

Points of interest

WITTON-LE-WEAR is a lovely village, standing high above the wide wooded valley of the River Wear. First settled in pre-Conquest days, the village retains its original medieval layout with old houses looking out across a sloping village green. Witton-le-Wear originally formed part of the vast estates of the Bishop of Durham, held by various Lords of the Manor including the Eures family who built nearby Witton Castle in the late 14th Century. Much of the castle was rebuilt during the 18th Century following a fire and the castle now forms part of a large caravan and leisure site. In the village itself stands Witton Tower,

a medieval pele tower built in response to the threat from the Scots during the Border Troubles.

A track skirts around Witton Castle then across Witton Park to reach the village of the same name. Our walk then heads across fields and through dense woodland, with fine views across the valley as well as the old viaduct that once carried the Bishop Auckland to Crook Railway across the river, to join the wooded banks of the River Wear. The riverside path is interesting to follow, with slippery boulders and fallen trees.

The walk

1 From the sloping village green in the centre of Witton-le-Wear follow the road (opposite the old water pump on the green) quite steeply down out of the village then on (take care) to reach Witton Bridge across the River Wear. After the bridge, take the lane to the left through the ornate gates passing North Lodge and follow this gravel

lane on through woodland then curving round to the left and over a bridge across a stream. After the bridge the track emerges from the woods - continue on along the gravel track (with a low stone wall on your right) for 400 metres to reach a 'crossroads' of tracks where the clearer track bends sharply to the left down towards Witton Castle Lakes (the ramparts and turrets of Witton Castle just visible up to your right).

2 Head straight on at this 'crossroads' to quickly reach a choice of two parallel paths - take the left-hand grassy path gently climbing up through the trees (with the stone wall to your right) then levelling out. Continue along this enclosed track with the wall / woodland on your right and open fields on your left. Continue along the track gently rising up passing a caravan park on your right then, after about 800 metres (where the wall ends on your right) the track becomes enclosed by woodland on your left - carry straight on along the track for 225 metres then, where

this woodland ends on your left, turn left over a stile beside a red metal gate, beside a large oak tree (waymarker).

3 Head straight on across the field keeping close to the wall on your right up to reach a stile to your right in the top corner of the field, after which turn left and head on with the stone wall now on your left all the way to reach a metalised lane across your path (East Park Farm just across to your left). At this lane, head straight on over the stile and continue on alongside the wall (now on your right) across fields to reach the road between the houses at Witton Park.

4 Turn left along the road and follow it (pavement) down through the village passing the Rose & Crown pub and then a woodyard on your left to reach a T-junction. Follow the road to the left (road-sign 'Howden, Crook') for 275 metres then, just after the road bends slightly to the left, take the footpath to the left over a stile beside a gate (signpost).

Follow the grassy track straight on gently rising up to reach a stile / gate across your path, after which continue straight on across the hillside (grassy track becomes a narrow grassy path) to reach another gate / stile at the other side of the field just above the woodland on your right. Follow the clear tree-shaded track straight on (with woodland on your right) then after a short distance the track opens out from the woodland and bends up to the left - walk straight on bearing slightly to the right on to reach a stile in the bottom corner of the field.

5 Cross the stile and follow the clear, narrow path through dense woodland then down to reach the banks of the River Wear. After a short section of boulder-hopping you cross a small bridge (another plank of wood) across a side-stream just after which follow the clear path to the left (away from the river) back into dense woodland (waymarker). Follow the clear path through the woods (ignore path to the right to a gate) to soon emerge with a small stream immediately on your left and a fence (and open fields) on your right - follow the rather overgrown path alongside this fence for 500 metres to re-join the gravel track just below Witton Castle. Turn right along the track and follow it straight on back to reach the road beside North Lodge, where you turn right over Witton Bridge then back up into Witton-le-Wear.

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Birdwatch By Ian Kerr

OUR birds of prey are under constant threat from illegal persecution by shooting, trapping and poisoning and, sadly, the North-East is one of the black-spots. Two young hen harriers, satellite-tagged at nests in Northumberland, have suddenly gone off the map in highly suspicious circumstance, one in the Yorkshire Dales, the other in west Northumberland. The fear is they have been killed and their trackers destroyed.

As if that wasn't bad enough, a new report highlights an additional threat with birds of prey, particularly red kites, becoming victims of secondary poisoning. This is where

scavengers such as kites pick up and eat rats and mice which have been affected by second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs). These are much more powerful poisons which were introduced after rodents gradually built up resistance and even immunity to earlier poisons used in farming and other businesses.

The report is from the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme, a long-term national programme which examines contaminants affecting birds, their eggs, the wider environment and ultimately any implications for humans. Its study details the post-mortem findings on 26 red kites found dead in

England and Wales during 2015. All contained detectable residues of one or more rodenticides and they were directly responsible for nine of the deaths. The others contained sub-lethal quantities. Data for Scotland showed that exposure of kites to rodenticides there was lower, perhaps reflecting less use of these substances.

Our own north east red kites are still struggling hard to build up their population in the face of several problems, including illegal poisonings and shooting. The last thing they need is a yet another threat, even though it involves accidental rather than deliberate actions.

Birders throughout the region are on the lookout for a prized northern species, parrot crossbills, after groups of them began to turn up in East Anglia and Berkshire. These close relatives of our own crossbills breed in the vast conifer forests of Scandinavia and Russia. They get their name from their much heavier, thicker bills. Occasionally, probably because of food shortages, they irrupt from their native forests and spread across the continent, sometimes reaching Britain. The last time a substantial invasion occurred was in 1990 when flocks appeared in Durham with a highly mobile group of 27 in Chopwell Woods

and smaller parties in Castle Eden Dene. I can recall spending many patient hours in Chopwell Woods to catch a glimpse of those very impressive birds. So far none have been reported in the region, but every group of common crossbills is being carefully scrutinised for any hefty strangers.

