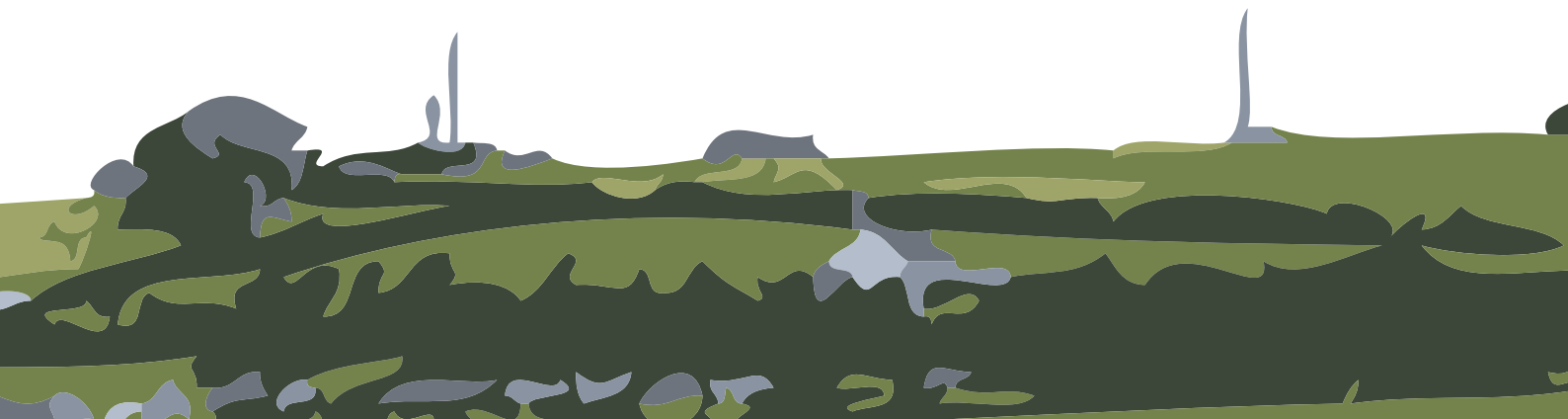


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Thames Valley

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Thames Valley

Britain's grandest river is an obvious candidate for a cycling break from London – and the Thames Valley route doesn't disappoint.

You can't cycle along the river all the way to Oxford. Instead, this is a varied route that mixes up rural lanes, riverside paths, little-known bridleways and purpose-built cycle tracks to make a relaxing route to the great university city.

So is this the Thames Path?

No. The Thames Path is solely a walking route from the source of the river in Gloucestershire to the Thames Barrier. Most of it is classified as 'public footpath' – bikes aren't allowed, it's grass or mud, and there are (lots of) stiles. (Unlike canals, the riverbanks are privately owned, and most of the rich Thames landowners aren't exactly bike-friendly.)

So unfortunately, you can't cycle the Thames from source to sea. That said, you can cycle along the riverside most of the way from Putney to Staines, and in Reading and Oxford.

Is this a good route from London to Oxford?

It is, but not a fast one. As part of the National Cycle Network, it's cleverly pieced together from riverside paths, country lanes, residential streets and rural tracks. Inevitably that means a fair amount of turning hither and thither – it's not the sort of route where you can just put your head down and go for it.

If you want to cycle from London to Oxford in a day, this isn't the route for you. (We'd suggest this route instead, which at 66 miles we think is a good compromise between speed and relaxation.)

But if you've got a weekend or longer, the Thames Valley route is greatly enjoyable. Since you're never far from a railway station that will take you back to Paddington, Londoners won't need to book accommodation along the way. The 95, largely flat, miles should take most cyclists two or three days.

What sort of bike?

Much of the route is within the reach of a road bike with sturdy tyres, or any hybrid or MTB. Cooper's Hill, by Runnymede, and Knowl Hill, near Wargrave, are both a little rough: alternative road routes are possible in both cases. Peep'o'Day Lane, north of Sutton Courtenay (near Didcot), can also be rough and road bikers would be better advised to take a longish detour onto the other bank, via Culham.

Is it suitable for a first-timer?

It's pretty flat. Only the Reading–Wallingford section across the Chilterns really taxes the muscles: we think this picturesque length is well worth the exertion, but it's perhaps not ideal for a novice cyclist on a heavy bike.

But if you're looking for a flat waterside ride for your first cycling holiday, check out the Kennet & Avon Canal instead.

How do I get there?

There are railway stations at regular intervals. From central London to Staines they're suburban services, heading into Waterloo. From Maidenhead onwards, they're on the Paddington–Oxford line, where you can just stash your bike in the vestibules of the local trains. (Bikes aren't permitted in the weekday rush-hour.) There are GWR expresses from Reading and Oxford, too, but you need to book bike spaces on them.

Between Oxford and London, there are also regular fast

coaches (the Oxford Tube and the X90) which take a limited number of bikes at no extra charge.

Is it signposted?

Yes: it's National Cycle Network route 4 from London to Reading, and route 5 from there to Oxford. (Route 4 continues along the Kennet & Avon Canal to Bath, then on to Bristol and South Wales.)

Where in London does it start?

NCN 4 officially starts at the Greenwich Foot Tunnel, then threads its way along the South Bank to Lambeth Bridge, where it crosses to Pimlico and Chelsea – here's the route. It's a practical way to get through the city, but if you have the choice, we'd recommend starting at Putney. This is where the route gets leafy and (largely) leaves the busier roads behind, and it's where our detailed guide begins...

Putney to Staines

Getting out of London by bike is rarely easy, but this route manages it with aplomb – by the simple tactic of staying next to the river. You'll see all the best of the Thames: lithe rowers, glorious houseboats, grand mansions, and the locks, weirs and bridges that keep the river in order. It's an enormously enjoyable route, and a great afternoon ride in its own right.

But just one mile upstream of **Putney Bridge**, you'll find yourself heading away from the river and towards Barnes. What gives? Well, although you can follow the Thames to Teddington if you like, the signposted route takes you through **Richmond Park** – one of London's cycling meccas. The broad tarmac paths across this green expanse are a joy to cycle. But don't get carried away: this is one of few places in Britain with a formal cycle speed limit, 20mph.

The route rejoins the Thames at **Teddington Lock**, the tidal limit of the river, a scene of great boating interest, and the location for Monty Python's Fish Slapping Dance. From here, it follows the river for more or less the next 16 miles, flitting from one bank to the other. The magnificent **Hampton Court Palace** is the first landmark, and you cycle right past on the historic Barge Walk.

The path has a firm surface throughout, though it's unsurprisingly busy with pedestrians, so don't expect to make fast progress. At times the path is shielded from the river by trees, colonised by parakeets – yes, really. Thousands of the bright green birds have settled along the river, particularly between Kingston and Walton. The Weir pub, by **Sunbury Lock**, is popular with cyclists.

The route crosses onto the north bank at **Weybridge**. You can follow a shared-use pavement route if you like, but it's much more enjoyable to cross on the little Shepperton Ferry, which operates until 5.30pm every day and welcomes cyclists. It runs every quarter-hour, costs just £3, and you summon it with a bell. From here, a short road section takes you back to the river for the run into **Staines**.

Staines to Reading

That's it for the Thames, pretty much. You'll meet the river again before Oxford, but there are few long riverside paths of the sort enjoyed downstream of Staines: it's definitely the Thames Valley route from here, not the Thames Path. That means occasional hills, true, but also a more varied cycling experience.

Staines is soon dispensed with via some forgettable roadside paths, before the sharp climb up Cooper's Hill on an unsurfaced lane. There's a reason for the off-road diversion: this is **Runnymede**, where Magna Carta was sealed, where memorials commemorate the Commonwealth air forces and John F Kennedy, and where, in 1852, the last duel in England took place.

Enjoyable quiet lanes take you through **Windsor Great Park**, passing the quaint gatehouses and post office. A gravelled path runs alongside the cavalry exercise ground, leading into the thoroughly touristy town of **Windsor**. It's not always tasteful – some rather cruelly characterise it as Skegness-on-Thames. But lift your eyes above the crowds and you'll see much to admire: the mighty riverside castle, the Georgian frontages, and the fine road and rail bridges.

Still, it's no offence to say that the best thing about Windsor is the road out. This is a particularly lovely stretch of route, running across meadows to little Boveney and its 12th century church. Eton College's colossal rowing lake leads to the frightfully well-to-do **Bray**, location of Heston Blumenthal's famous Fat Duck restaurant.

The winding route through **Maidenhead** is less distinguished, but after three miles you're back out in open countryside. From here, the route gently ambles to the Thameside village of **Wargrave** along country lanes, cycleways and unsurfaced paths. It has a surprisingly remote, agricultural air for the heart of prosperous Berkshire.

A utilitarian roadside cycleway runs for four miles to the edge of **Reading** where, finally, we rejoin the Thames. The confluence with the Kennet, underneath the clatter of the railway bridge, is a landmark on the National Cycle Network. Turn left for Bristol, Cardiff and St David's, or straight on for Birmingham, Chester, Holyhead... and, first of all, Oxford.

Reading to Wallingford

Reading's riverside doesn't have the big-money allure of Walton or Shepperton, but Caversham Lock and the buzz of boats back and forth provide a pleasant way to get reacquainted with the Thames. Briefly, that is – you won't see the river for another 14 miles.

From Reading to Wallingford, the route goes over the Chiltern Hills on country lanes. All winding single-track roads with trees encroaching on either side, this is great cycling country. As well as NCN 5 taking a slightly indirect course, there's a signposted Chiltern Cycleway, plus designated 'Quiet Lanes' where cyclists and walkers have priority.

The route climbs from 50m at Reading to 200m near **Checkendon**, then back down again to the Thames at Wallingford. You'll work up a thirst on the ascent, but happily, this is an exemplary route for pub-goers: the Reformation at Gallowstree Common, the Cherry Tree at **Stoke Row**, and the Black Tree at Checkendon, run by the same family for 110 years. Just off the route is the secluded King William IV at **Ipsden** – reason enough to limit your mileage this day!

Wallingford to Oxford

Wallingford is a charming and prosperous Thames town, well-heeled enough to have its own Waitrose, but still supporting independent shops on the High Street along which you'll ride. The old Great Western branch line to the town is now a preserved steam railway, though if you do need to get to nearby Cholsey station you'll find it easier to cycle the three miles.

There are precious few quiet lanes in this stretch of the Thames Valley, and the route is chosen to make best use of them – even if that does mean climbing the marvellously named Wittenham Clumps, landmark chalk hills with fine views of the Thames and the abbey town of Dorchester. Poor old **Didcot**, four miles on, can't match these scenic heights, but you can shortcut the two-mile route via Didcot Parkway station by crossing the railway footbridge just after the road underpass.

From here to the outskirts of Oxford, the route is a clever patchwork of cycleways, unpaved paths and residential roads. The surface is passable on a road bike, but more comfortable on a hybrid or similar. The first bumpy path delivers you past Didcot power station, where just three of the six cooling towers are left standing following detonation in 2014.

Abingdon is a likeable market town, formerly the capital of Berkshire until this part of the county was annexed by Oxfordshire. You'll pass the Thames on a bridge marked 'Wilts & Berks Canal', remembering the old canal that once ran to Swindon and on towards Bath. The town centre is a little traffic-clogged, but Abbey Close and the riverside park are the ideal place for a coffee and cake stop.

A winding path through a riverside nature reserve leads you out of the town. At **Kennington**, three miles on, a volunteer-constructed path by the mainline railway brings you to the edge of Oxford safe from the over-busy roads above.

There are two routes into **Oxford**. The official route follows tidy residential streets through the south of the city, but if you're not in a hurry, follow the riverside path for the best views of the dreaming spires. The Iffley Farmhouse, by Iffley Lock, is a splendidly dishevelled pub from which to watch river life. After Folly Bridge (the old one with the island), cross on the narrow footbridge to rejoin the main route which takes you into the city centre.

Oxford is one of Britain's cycling cities, with cyclists everywhere, plentiful bike parking, cycle cafés, and bike lanes of admittedly variable quality. Our detailed guide has more info on the best routes through town.

