

Gloucester Cathedral Ramblers Walk - Saturday 17 May 2025 - Report Stroudwater Canal - Stonehouse to Stroud

Saturday 17 May dawned cloudy and bright, albeit the north wind made it feel somewhat chilly. The forecast was for the cloud to break and for the weather to become warmer: sunny with some high-level cloud; a temperature of 17°C at the start of our walk, rising to 21°C by lunch-time, with a humidity of 57%; and a light north-north-easterly breeze at 5 to 10 mph.

Nine of us - Geoff, Gill, Ginny, Jacqui, Jon, Margaret, Martin, Michael and me - met at Gloucester Bus Station shortly before 09.00. It was especially good to welcome the return to the Ramblers of Gill and Martin. We caught the 09.00 No 65 Stagecoach service bus to Dursley, alighting at the stop before Stonehouse Court Hotel. A short walk along Church Lane took us to St Cyr's Church. There has been a church on the site since the 13th Century. The current tower dates from the 14th Century, but the remainder of the church was demolished and the chancel and nave rebuilt in 1854; aisles were added in 1884.

After looking around St Cyr's Church, we walked west a few hundred metres to look at the Ocean Jubilee Railway Bridge, built at a cost of £8 million over Christmas and new year 2021/2022. There is a useful information board by the bridge giving a brief history of the work. The original railway bridge was built in 1842/1843 to carry the Bristol to Gloucester main line over the canal, and trains started running over the bridge in 1844. Following the closure of the canal, the bridge was replaced in 1968 by an embankment with two small tunnels: a small tunnel for the water in the canal, albeit non-navigable, and the other for pedestrians. The project in 2021/2022 required a short section of the railway line to be removed while the new bridge was installed. A ceremony was held in May 2022 to mark the re-opening of the canal to navigation. Last Saturday, this part of the canal was ablaze with a spectacular display of bright yellow buttercups, flag irises and water lilies. We also saw coots, moorhens and mallards, with several families of ducklings.

From the Ocean Bridge, we walked east alongside the canal for 3.5 km to Ebley Wharf. There was a lot of glorious purple comfrey by the water's edge and a veritable sea of umbellifers. East of Ryeford, we came to Ryeford Double Lock, which has two chambers sharing a middle pair of gates. It was restored in 2012 and is the only double lock on the Stroudwater Canal. Each chamber has a rise of 2.5m. Built beside the lock in 1784, the lock-keepers cottage stood as a proud testament to the canal's past contribution to the industrial wealth of the Stroud valleys; the cottage garden had a beautiful mixture of irises, alliums and roses, with a heady fragrance. On this stretch of the canal, the gardens on the opposite bank stretched down to the canal, each with a differently designed seating area.

At Ebley Wharf, we had a short break for refreshments in the coffee shop. By now, Ginny's knee was causing her discomfort and so Ginny and Jon left the walk at this point, rejoining us in Stroud for lunch. The remaining seven of us returned to the canal towpath for a further 2.5 km to Wallbridge, where we left the canal and walked a few hundred metres to the 'Sorrento' restaurant in Russell Street for lunch. Of interest, the Upper Lock Café at Wallbridge, where we had eaten on previous walks, sadly closed some time ago; however, we discovered that it was being refitted and will reopen shortly as a community enterprise board-games café.

After lunch, all nine of us caught the 14.10 No 62 Stagecoach service bus from Stroud Merrywalks, arriving in Gloucester at about 14.40.

It was a most enjoyable walk. The weather was ideal; the flora, fauna, and the countryside around the canal showed the beauty of God's creation; everyone on the walk proved to be excellent company; and the conversations ranged far and wide. The information boards on this section of the canal added an extra dimension by providing fascinating insights into the canal - more correctly the 'Stroudwater Navigation' - and local history.

Peter Barrett
19 May 2025