

# Walk Colchester

## Nature Trail by Ted Benton

(Hilly Fields and Cymbeline Meadows)

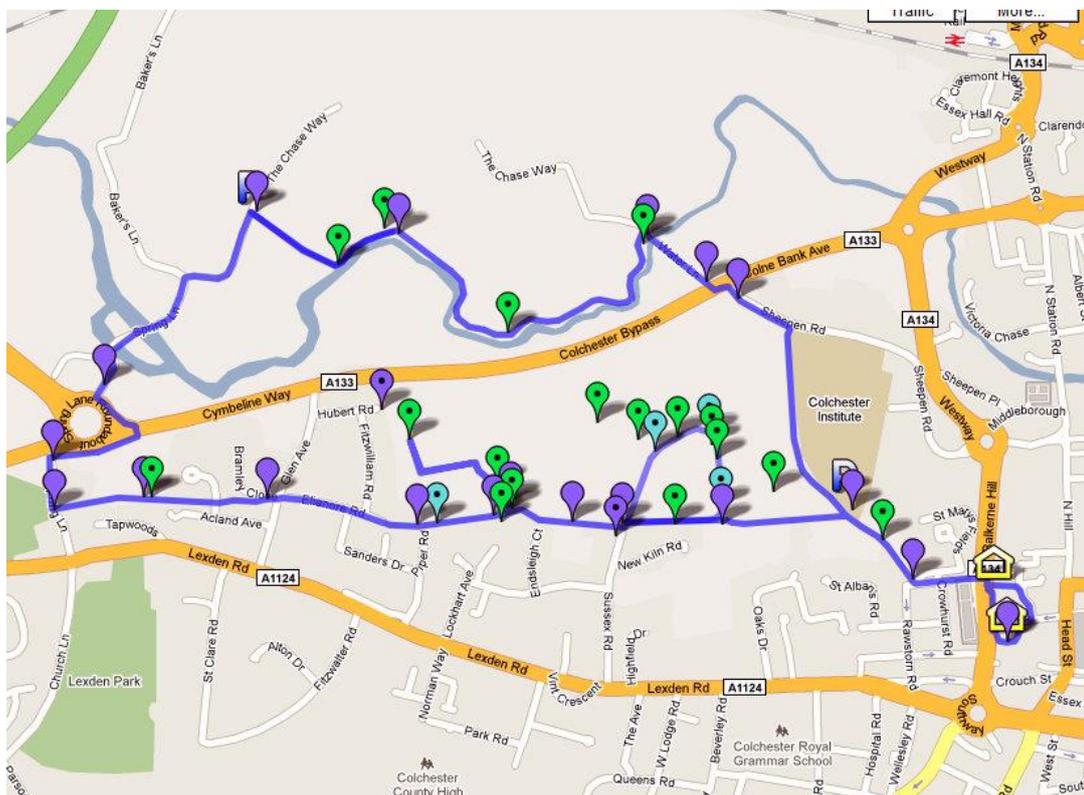
**A** **Length:** approx. 3.6 miles (easy access circuit 0.4 miles)  
**Public transport:** the walk starts within easy reach of Colchester town centre (Head St and High St bus stops), and is therefore well-served by all bus routes).

**Surfaces:** the major sections of the walk entail mixed off-road terrain, including grassy single-track footpaths. Two sections, one on Hilly Fields (Sussex Road) and one on Cymbeline Meadows (Spring Lane), are designated 'easy access', constructed of hoggin and firm-going in dry weather.

**Gradients:** the walk entails some steep gradients over extended sections (details are given against individual sections as relevant)

**Alternative start places** a) the car park at Colchester Institute, avoiding the steep and rough route down from Balkerne Heights, b) the easy access circuits at Sussex Road entrance, or c) Cymbeline Meadows in Spring Lane.

### A map of the route



## 1. St Mary's Arts Centre

**A** From the Arts Centre, access via either i) steps down on to Balkerne Hill (see image) and bear right, or ii) **step-free route** following the road around from St Mary's to the Mercury Theatre and Balkerne Gate.

**Surfaces** paved until (2); **Gradients** level with the exception of Balkerne Hill footbridge.

**1a St Mary's Art Centre**



**1b wild flowers on wall**



**1c Balkerne Hill bridge**



The walk starts at **St Mary's Arts Centre** (1a), and heads for Hilly Fields via the pedestrian walkway over Balkerne Hill (1c). The church graveyard is a secluded haven for wildlife. Look out for **bumblebees** and **flower bees** at crocus in spring, and other flowers in summer; also, common birds such as **wren, robin, blackbird, blue-tit**, some nesting here. Trees include evergreen **oak, lime, horse chestnut** and **yew**.

By The Hole in the Wall pub sits **Balkerne Gate** (the best preserved Roman gate in Britain) within the Roman wall, unique despite its ambience being more than a little destroyed by adjacent dual carriageway. Look out for **wild flowers on the wall** (1b), some of them rare in Essex. If you do the full circular walk, this is a fine place to finish with a beer!

## 2 Balkerne Heights (and meadow beyond)

**A** **Access via** steep and gullied descending unmade track across rough meadow ground leads down from Balkerne Heights to Hilly Fields entrance.

**Gradients** very steep (av. 1:10; max. 1:7)

Entrance to meadow beyond Balkerne Heights

2a



2b



2c

A steep descending path through a meadow leads down from Balkerne Heights (2a-c) to an entrance to Hilly Fields. Deadnettle in spring here attract wild bees, including the rare 'red-shanked carder bee' (2d). In summer look for **butterflies on the buddleias** and the **marsh thistles**.

2d red-shanked carder



2e comma



2f comma uns



2g garden bumblebee



2h red admiral



### 3. Entrance to Hilly Fields from the east

**A** Main entrance to Hilly Fields, and alternative starting point at Colchester Institute.

**Access via** steeply ascending stony earth footpath (eroded and gullied), initially narrow but widening, along the edge of open heathland.

**Gradients** steep (av.1:14) to very steep in places (max.1:6)

**3a notice-board at hilly fields entrance**



**3b small copper**



**3c beefly**



**3d bee on apple**



**3e minotaur beetle**



**3f crab apples**



An ascending path here takes you along the edge of open heathland with hawthorn scrub on the right. This is grazed by **rabbits**, and abundant **sheep's sorrel** gives it a red tint in summer. Many **grasshoppers** and **butterflies** are here, including the **Small Copper Butterfly** (3b), and the uncommon **minotaur beetle** (3e) makes its burrows in the sandy soil. **Crab apple blossom** (3d) in spring attracts **queen bumblebees**. At the top of the slope, at Hilly Fields' highest point, the nature trail joins the east side of the easy access section (5).

**3g stag beetle**



To the left is a **stream valley** with **scrub** and **willow trees**. Species of warbler such as **chiff-chaff** and **willow warbler** nest here, and **nightingales** can be heard in spring.

## 4-5 Accessible trail (Sussex Road)

**A Accessible trail (0.4 miles)** the circuit which begins here, at Sussex Road, and runs around the former sports field, is a designated **easy access route**, suitable for independent chair users.

**Surface** a level circuit constructed of hoggin, firm and easy-going in dry weather; suitable for independent wheelchair access.

**Restpoints** 3 benches around the circuit (none on east side?)

**Parking** available at the end of Sussex Road. Although there are no designated spaces, the area is quiet and space generally ample.

4-5a



Accessible trail  
4-5b



4-5c



**Circuiting anti-clockwise:** the long-grass border on the southern edge of the easy access trail has **butterflies**, **wild-flowers** and **Roesel's bush cricket** (d).

4-5d roesel's bush cricket



4-5e bird's foot



4-5f fenugreek



**Along the east side**, an information board tells the story of **Colchester's siege in the civil war**. There were two forts at Hilly Fields (Ewer and Ingolsby), named after the officers who commanded them, housing the parliamentarians who were camped out around the town to prevent the royalists loyal to King Charles I escaping. The old map shows Hilly Fields as 'broom heath'. Sadly the **broom bushes** are now restricted to a small area further on.

There are lovely eastward **views** here back towards town across the heathland, with Jumbo reliably on the horizon. Among the close-grazed grasses near where the accessible trail crosses the cycle track can be found several very small and uncommon wild flowers, **spring vetch** (g, flowering in April and May) found with **bird's foot** (e) and **fenugreek** (f), and **subterranean clover** (h). Intensive

agriculture, 'development' and the loss of wild flower meadows has led to the loss of most habitats for these small flowers.

**4-5g spring vetch**



**4-5h subterranean clover**



An information Board at this junction tells of the **pre-roman coinage mint** that existed here. Before the Roman invasion, Hilly Fields was an industrial centre where kings minted their coins. Coins made here can be seen in the Castle Museum.

**4-5i green hairstreak**



**4-5j purple hairstreak**



**4-5k tawny mining bee**



**Along the north-west side/s**, beautiful views here out over the **Colne valley**, and a bench to ponder them from! Patches of broom scrub on the slopes in this area are the habitat of a small, secretive spring butterfly – the jewel-like **green hairstreak** (i). It is usually seen only when it flies, as it is perfectly camouflaged when settled among the broom twigs. **Bumblebees** collect pollen by forcing open the broom flowers.

The slopes to the west are criss-crossed with paths and open grassy glades. Look out for the small **purple hairstreak butterflies** (j) that live in the **oak trees**. They can be seen in July, and often come down to the lower branches in sunshine between 5 and 7 pm. **Speckled wood butterflies** take up territories in dappled sunlight. The **tawny mining bee** makes its burrows along the path-sides in Spring, and numerous bird species, including **green woodpecker**, **jay** and **long-tailed tit** abound here.

## 6. Towards Buntings Meadow

**A** **Access via** narrow rough footpath (but with plentiful grassy space to either side), over slight to medium slopes, running along the hedgerow and leading to the boundary with Buntings Meadow.

**Gradients** (down) medium (av.1:19)

The walk continues (6a & 6b) along the rough path to the left, along the hedge. This leads to the boundary with Buntings Meadow (6c). A gap among tall oaks here gives fine views over the slopes of the meadow and the Colne Valley in the distance. The **rabbit grazed turf** has interesting **wild-flowers and grasses**, and

**spring butterflies** bask on the sunny bank to your left. There is a seat a little way down the slope.

6a



6b



6c



## 7. Butterfly Walk (Buntings Meadow)

**A** **Access via** long sloping meadowland, steeper gradients with rough ground in places. Note: a kissing gate at the bottom of this trail (Hubert Road) prevents chair access out of Hilly Fields at that point.

**Surface** grassy field, beaten path, poorly defined, muddy in wet weather; bridge of wooden planks and wire-mesh.

**Gradients** generally very steep (av.1:10). **Bench** on right bank near top

A diversion from the main line of the walk, across the sloping meadow into grassland below takes us onto the '**butterfly walk**'.

7a gatekeeper



7b essex skipper



7c orange tip



Common grassland butterflies such as **meadow brown**, **gatekeeper** (7a), **large, small and Essex skippers** (7b) and others can be seen in this area. In Spring the **sallow bushes** attract bumblebees and butterflies such as the **peacock butterfly** to their catkins. The pond (fenced off) also harbours several species of **dragonfly**.

In the lower section of Butterfly Walk, a dry, stony area that was once a car park has interesting wild flowers, including **bird's-foot trefoil**, and the (so-called!) **common blue butterfly** (7d). **Bush crickets** (7h) and **lesser marsh, common field** and **meadow grasshoppers** live here, too, and their songs can be heard from late June onwards into the Autumn.

7d common blue



7e common blue female



7f bn argus



7g common lizard



7h longed-winged conehead



## 8. Buntings Meadow (the northern boundary)

**A** Access via grassy undulating meadow and footpath.  
Gradients medium (av.1:30).

8a pear tree



8b buntings meadow



8c looking backwards



Back now up to the top of **Buntings Meadow** (8b). On our right in the hedgerow as we begin along the southern boundary of Bunting's meadow that borders the public footpath, is a single and rare mature **wild pear tree** (8a), notable for its blossom in spring, and small fruit in summer.

The hedgerow and strip of long grass that runs along this boundary is home to the uncommon **Rose Chafer Beetle**. It has many **wild flowers**, and attracts numerous **butterflies**, **bees** and other insects through Spring and Summer.

We continue along to an information board with views at this point over the meadow and **Colne valley**. The board tells of the former Bunting's seed farm that used to occupy the site, and the childhood of **Colchester naturalist Joe Firmin**, whose father managed the farm. Joe's superb memoirs, **Nature Boy in the Flower Fields** can be obtained from Colchester Natural History Museum.

## 9-11 Elianore Road to Lexden Springs Nature Reserve

**A** **Access via** paved surfaces (Elianore Road and Glen Avenue); then narrow, unmade footpath through residential areas (Bramley Close and Humard Drive). Slight gradients.

At Lexden Springs Nature Reserve, access via sloping grassland path, **gradients** steep (1:12-14) with some **rest-points** (9g-h)

### 9 Looking backwards at junction with Elianore Road



At this point (9), the walk continues along the paved surfaces of Elianore Road, crossing Glen Avenue.

It then picks up a narrow unmade footpath to the left of Bramley Close (10a), and crosses Humard Drive (10b) before opening into Lexden Springs local nature reserve (11a-c).

### Footpath through residential area to Lexden Springs

10a

10b

10c



There is another fine view from here (11e-f), and the steeply sloping grassland has some uncommon wild flowers – **harebell**, **pignut** and, in flower late in the summer, **devil's-bit scabious** (11d). There is a small **spring-fed pond** at the bottom of the slope, and a seat at the top (9g) overlooking the reserve and countryside beyond.

11a



11b



11c



11d (devil's-bit scabious)



11e (comma butterfly)



11f (solitary bee)



## 12-14 Spring Lane

**A** **Access via** initially footpath from Lexden Springs to Spring Lane (note potential access barrier here at gate, 12b); then on paved surfaces across busy road junction (at A12 roundabout); finally, on Cymbeline Meadows side of Spring Lane (towards Baker Lane, 14a-c).

**CAUTION!** This section of the trail is dangerous in places, especially the second half of Spring lane (NO pedestrian pavement and often fast traffic).

The latter section (having turned right on The Chase Way) is via rough but hard surface track (open to vehicles), sloping gently upwards.

12a fern on wall



12b towards spring lane



12c footpath



## Spring lane junction with A12 roundabout

13a



13b



Continue along footpath to Spring Lane (12a-c) and turn right down the lane to the major road and round-about (13a-c). Care is needed here to cross the road into the continuation of Spring Lane on the opposite side of the road (13c, 14a). Spring Lane on the far side is very narrow and dangerous as it crosses the **River Colne** (14b) but soon we turn off to the right into The Chase Way. Note the ancient **Lexden Dyke** on your left.

13c A12 roundabout crossing



13d flowers in verge



13e cuckoo bee



14a spring lane



14b colne river at spring lane



14c spring lane (caution!)



## 15-16 Cymbeline Meadows (easy access trail)

**A** Access via 'easy access' section of the trail, leading from the car-parking area (by the tennis courts) to the picnic area.

**Distance:** 0.5 miles (return) **Surface:** concrete **Width:** (1300mm);  
**Gradients:** slight-medium (max. 1:30)  
**Rest-points:** regular benches and picnic tables

**Parking:** for x2 Blue Badge holders (NB. there is no obvious signposting, but the notice-board indicates they are intended for disabled drivers.

**Note:** this section is not circular, and chair access beyond the picnic spot is prohibited by kissing gates.

### Easy access trail at Cymbeline Meadows

**15a restpoint**



**15b picnic spot**



**15c bridge over Colne**



This second half of the Nature Trail begins at the tennis courts, where parking and a notice-board mark commencement of the easy access trail. This track leads along the line of a hedgerow to the river (15a-c). From the river's edge can be seen the brilliant courtship displays of the **many banded demoiselle damselflies** (15d-e) that abound here from late May onwards. Also look out for the **scarce chaser dragonfly** (15f-g) and the interesting mix of **river-edge plants**.

**15d banded demoiselle**



**15e banded demoiselle, female**



**15f scarce chaser**



**15g scarce chaser**



The easy access trail terminates at a picnic spot (16a-b) on the river. The path divides here and you can continue north or, via a bridge (16c) and further picnic spot, south of the river.

**End of easy access trail - picnic area and bridge to south side of river**

**16a**



**16b**



**16c**



**17 Cymbeline Meadows (eastwards)**

**A** **Access via** either side of the river, grassy meadow; path is trampled grass/soil with no defined edges, often muddy. Kissing gates make this section inaccessible to chair users.

**Gradients:** level

**Beyond easy access trail – kissing gates (north and south of river)**

**17a (N)**



**17b (N)**



**17c (S)**



The footpath continues through Cymbeline meadows. In spring and summer the meadows have a fine display of **wild flowers**, including **ox-eye daisy**, and many of the **grassland butterflies** that also occur on Buntings meadow.

**17d**



**River and meadows**

**17e**



**17f**



**17g painted lady**



**17h g v white**



**17i white tld bumblebee**



## 18 Sheepen Bridge

**A** **Access via** bridge and gravelly concrete path (>1000mm).  
**Bridge:** wheelchair accessible (>1000mm); wood/wire mesh surface  
**Obstacles:** Kissing gates make this section inaccessible to chair users.  
**Gradients:** level

### Sheepen bridge

18a



18b



Cymbeline meadows lead to Sheepen Bridge, over the River Colne. A good place to spot **dragonflies** and **water-edge plants** in the spring and summer.

18c dogs mercury



18d bridge path



Continue up the path to the main road, between high hedges. Note the **dog's mercury** plants here - an ancient woodland indicator. In summer and autumn **migrant hawker dragonflies** are often seen here.

## 19-20 Remembrance Avenue and Sheepen Road

**A** **Access (to road) via** paved surfaces, but a very busy road here without a controlled crossing point makes this section dangerous – be advised! Just to the left of the exit from the footpath an island offers a slightly safer crossing (but no drop-kerb).

**Far side of road:** tarmac cycle path or footpath (beaten earth, 900mm)  
**Gradients:** slight-medium (max. 1:30) at Sheepen Road end, increasing to steep (av. 1:13, max. 1:6)

**Obstacles:** Kissing gate (query accessibility?); no drop-kerb on island at road crossing (19).

The walk is nearly complete at this point, but Sheepen Road is unfortunately a very busy place to be finishing up! Just to the left of the exit from the footpath there is an island in the road (20a), giving a slightly safer crossing.

Continue along Sheepen Road until a track leads off to the right (20b) just before the Colchester Institute, also on the right. Follow on up until the track branches (20c). Here you can follow the cycle track or cut across the grassland, or continue

on the public footpath along the edge of the Hilly Fields. This takes you back to the bottom of the sloping meadow (2) and to your starting point - either at Colchester Institute itself on Sheepen Road (3) or onwards to the town centre (1).

**Caution! The Sheepen Road crossing...**

**19**



**20a**



**20b**



**...and the end of your nature trail!**

Grateful thanks also to Don Manhire for his access auditing work on this trail!