



Skipwith Common NNR

Waymarked Trails

Bombs and Lizards

A flat, level route taking you around part of this National Nature Reserve, following the red markers around the old tarmac runway and to the bomb stores. Some sections have a ridged concrete surface. The route includes accessible viewing platforms and you can find benches and resting points along the old runways and on the bomb bay loops. The route is just over 2 miles (3.3 km) taking 1 ½ hours plus stops. If you only want a short trip around the Bomb Bays Loop, taking around half an hour disabled visitors can park by the Bomb bay loop, keeping the kissing gate clear.

From King Ridding Lane car park, this route takes you around many of the features of Second World War RAF Riccall. Officially opened on November 1st 1942, the base was in use until 1945, but remained a storage depot for the Royal Air Force until they sold it in 1960. The base served as a 'conversion unit' retrained pilots to fly the four-

engined Handley Page Halifax bomber. Training time was eight to twelve weeks and at its height the base had 50 officers and 900 non-commissioned officers permanently attached to the site.

The route starts at the back of the car park, out of the kissing gate and then follows the length of the old runways, where you may be treated to a view of our Exmoor Ponies, Longhorn Cattle or Hebridean Sheep who graze the site for us. During the site's use as RAF Riccall, the trees in this area would have been removed to allow planes to take off and land with ease, but now young silver birch and hawthorn are pushing up through the tarmac and recolonising the site.

Where the track meets a significant cross roads, follow the markers and bend around to the right, back down past one of the site's air raid shelters and the Pillwort Pond to the mound of the Harmonisation Point. After the war, sections of runway tarmac were removed and sold off for road building projects, creating ponds and scrapes and funding improvement works on the site. In one pond, Pillwort, a rare water plant has been recorded. The Harmonisation Point is where the guns of the Handley Page Halifax's were tested. The guns were fired into the large earth mound and depending on where the bullets hit, the guns were adjusted so that they were all firing at the same point, thus bringing them into 'harmonisation' with each other.

From here the route travels left along the lane, to a point known as Five Lane Ends. Please be aware

this is also used by vehicles and has deep pot holes in places. You can pause mid way at the a viewing platform which gives you your first glimpse of the heathland.

Visitors then pass through a kissing gate and travel along the 'Bomb Bays Loop' which as the name suggests, is where the bombs would have been stored. Each bay has steep earthen side banks, to direct any accidental blast upwards and so not take out any other bays, and concrete ramps at the front, so the bomb deliveries could be rolled gently down into the bay. Despite the fact RAF Riccall was only a training base in wartime.

The warm, dry red brickwork of the old bomb bays is the perfect place for reptiles, such as the Common Lizard and Grass Snake, which are nearing the northerly extent of their range to bask in the sun. This is also a great location to see the red 'toadstool' of childrens' stories, Fly Agaric, is thought to be so called due to its use as an insecticide. It is poisonous unless treated with great care. The story that Vikings used the fungi to produce their beserker rages was first suggested in the late 18th century, but this is now considered legend rather than fact.

The accessible viewing platforms give views of different sections of the heathland. At the furthest point on the loop a boardwalk diverts off to the last view point. This raised boardwalk takes you past a Royal Fern, one of Europe's largest fern species, having fronds reaching over 2m in length. It became rare after the Victorian demand for garden specimens, but we have constructed a 'dead hedge' to keep our livestock and deer from nibbling at its leaves.

There is a passing point along this route if needed. Once you return to the loop remember which way you were heading to complete the circuit.

As you pass, take a moment to pause at the memorial and in late summer take a look behind you at the edge of the heath for the diminutive and rare Marsh Gentian which comes to the fore in late summer on the disturbed ground at the edge of the wet heathland, when for a short few weeks, it produces beautiful sky blue trumpet shaped flowers which appear like jewels.

The memorial propeller was commissioned by Escrick Park Estate, who own the Common, and Natural England, to commemorate all those aircrew and service personnel who served at RAF Riccall. It was dedicated by the chaplain of Elvington Air Museum. The propeller itself is the twin of one at Elvington, both of which are resin casts of a Halifax propeller pulled from the sea off the coast of Scotland.



Once you have come the full circuit of the Bomb Bay Loop, rejoin the main track and follow the red waymarkers, travelling left along the lane to the car park.

It is of note that while there are no toilets on the Common, the Drovers Arms in Skipwith village provides a welcome break for the weary! The nearest accessible toilets for those with a RADAR key can be found at the National Nature Reserve Office, Church Lane, Wheldrake.

Contact

National Nature Reserve Office, Bank Island, Carr Lane, Wheldrake, York YO19 6AS

Skipwith Common is owned by Escrick Park Estate and is managed in partnership with Natural England.

For more information about the history, wildlife and events on the site, please contact the Friends of Skipwith Common via <http://friendsofskipwithcommon.org.uk> or visit www.naturalengland.org.uk or by calling 0300 060 4348.