

## Directions

**1** From the car park turn left and go along road for about 50m, be aware of traffic. Turn left into woods where indicated by footpath signs (on post). Follow path up through woodland with bank and fields to your right.

The path that you are walking on is the Shire Rack, an ancient boundary route which marks the county boundary between Dorset (left) and Wiltshire (right).

**2** Continue along this path keeping fields and bank to your right, reaching a gate on your right. This is the site of Sessions Gate (see **C** overleaf). Continue along footpath as it bends round to the left passing the gate.

**3** In approximately 25 metres the footpath divides, follow path to the right keeping fence line on your right-hand side. Remain on this footpath with fence and fields to your right and woods to the left.

**4** Where the fields on the right end, stay straight ahead following the footpath down a gentle and then sharper slope until you reach a metalled road. This is the site of Shermel Gate (see **D** overleaf).

**5** Continue straight across the metalled road heading up footpath on the other side with a wooden fence to your right-hand side. Follow the track which still has woods to the left

and fields to the right - take a moment to look between the branches on your right for lovely views across the valley and beyond. Stay on the track until it descends to meet a forestry track at a crossroads.

**6** Turn left from the county boundary and follow the forest track. After approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a mile the track becomes a metalled road with cottages and houses to the left, follow this road to the T-junction. At the T-junction go straight ahead up a small, metalled lane.

**7** After approximately 20m, where the lane bends right, take the footpath to the side of the gate, straight ahead. Follow the footpath straight-ahead, keeping the hedge on your left, to a gap at the top of the field. Proceed through gap leaving straight ahead with the hedge now to your right.

**8** Continue along the track until it bends to the right, at the bend continue straight on leaving the track, a marker post (may be hidden) in hedge indicates the route, which is straight across the field in front of you.

**9** As you get nearer to the tree line you will note that a section of the wood juts out, go to the right-hand side of this, continuing straight on to a gate into the woodland. Go through the gate and continue ahead through the RSPB Reserve (woodland) passing a bench on your left, continuing straight on and down to return to the car park.

## The Historic Shire Rack

The public footpath, the **Shire Rack**, which runs west from Garston Wood car park, follows the boundary between Dorset and Wiltshire. Its 'accessibility' as an early routeway along the chalk ridge between the two counties is evident in its name; '**shire**' from the Old English (OE) word for a county; a 'shearing,' a 'division,' and '**rack**' is from the OE word *racu* 'reach,' a narrow path'. Shires (counties to the Normans) were territorial units of fiscal, legal – and military – status.

The first reference to the shiring of Wessex dates to the later seventh century, but the Shire Rack may already have been a well-established boundary. We find it 'registered' in Anglo-Saxon charters for the manors of both Chalke to the north and (Sixpenny) Handley to the south, which provide us with a list of boundary features found along its course in AD 955/6. Thus, to walk along this length is to follow in the footsteps of those tenth-century land surveyors.

To this day there is evidence of centuries of management, with large veteran tree stools and rows of formerly coppiced hazels - boundaries were once carefully managed as what we might describe as 'linear woodland.' Providing essential building and fencing material, in his 'Gallic Wars,' Julius Caesar noted the defensive potential of rows of coppiced hazels creating 'wall-like hedges' which impeded the Roman cavalry.



## Points of Interest on this route (see map overleaf for locations)

**A** **Garston Wood** comes from Old English (OE) *gaers tun*, 'grass enclosure' or 'paddock.' This was once a pulling-in area for livestock, mules and horse-drawn wagons. Cattle rustlers and highwaymen were an ever-present threat, and such areas were kept open, free of trees.

**B** A short distance along the Shire Rack look out for a **huge veteran ash tree**. The ash was sacred to the pagan god Woden, god of war, but also a protector, and this is just one of several ash stools along Dorset's boundary. Coppicing increases the life of a tree; the age of this ash stool remains unknown.



Marsh Tit



Look out for black caps and marsh tits, and in summer the elusive spotted flycatcher, in Garston Wood.

**C** Hidden in the overgrowth of **Mistleberry Wood** is a 'big fort' or 'big enclosure' from OE *micelan byrg*. Its function remains unknown, it may be an unfinished hillfort; a defensive element is certainly suggested here and could relate to a former market or trading area. The charters make no reference to nearby 'Sessions Gate' but this was clearly another 'point of entry.'

**D** In the bottom of a steep-sided valley **Shermel Gate** was a point of entry once overlooked by a tall wayside cross, in OE *scir* 'shire' *mael*, the signposts of an earlier world, many of which were ripped down following the Reformation. Both Chalke and Handley were ecclesiastical manors and a chapel existed in the nearby manor of Woodyates where the Roman Road crosses the Dorset/Wiltshire boundary. The Roman Church 'inherited' many of the secular roles of the old Roman world; the collection of border tolls, *portoria*, the provision of both accommodation and stock watering – and somewhere to say a prayer for a safe onward journey.

**E** The Middle Ages witnessed the founding of many new towns and 'New Town' will have been one of these. But, it must have been a development here which clearly failed. **Deanland** (pronounced Denland) takes its name from OE *denu* 'valley,' the path here runs east through open farmland to Garston Wood, open land which is duly confirmed by the name of Handley, OE *hean leah* 'high clearing'.

Garston Wood is a picture in spring with a carpet of bluebells, anemones and primroses.

Incorporating a section of the RSPB Garston Wood reserve, this lovely circular walk follows the historic boundary between Dorset and Wiltshire, known as the Shire Rack. Discover wonderful woodland birds and plants and historic boundary markers.



**Start Point:** RSPB Garston Wood car park.

W3W: clumped.orchids.plays | Grid Ref: SU 003 195.

**Parking:** RSPB Car Park at Garston Wood. This is a small car park, please park courteously. RSPB staff and volunteers working on site have priority.

**Terrain:** Woodland paths (can be uneven due to tree roots) field margins and grassy paths, gravel tracks and quiet country lanes. Some sections can be muddy after wet weather. Gentle inclines and one short steeper downhill section.

**Length:** Approximately 3.1 miles / 5 km.

**Approximate time:** 1.5 hours.

**Dogs:** Must be kept on leads in the RSPB reserve, please pick up after your dog(s) and take litter home.

**Refreshments:** No facilities on route. Shop nearby in Sixpenny Handley.

*The information is only intended as a general guide. Please check local arrangements.*

*With thanks to the Dorset Boundary Group for their help and advice when creating this walk.*

Share your pictures with us on social media

#chaseandchalke #cranbornechaseaonb

Created by the Chase & Chalke Landscape Partnership Scheme  
[cranbornechase.org.uk](http://cranbornechase.org.uk)



Respect everyone  
Protect the environment  
Enjoy the outdoors  
Follow advice and local signs



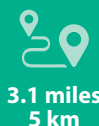
Cranborne Chase  
Area of Outstanding  
Natural Beauty



Made possible with

Heritage Fund

Illustrations by Sal Meedings



WALK #  
**W23**



**Shire Rack Round Walk**  
Circular route exploring the  
Shire Rack, along the County border

[cranbornechase.org.uk](http://cranbornechase.org.uk)