

HAUNCH BROOK AND CHINN BROOK PATHS (AREA 3)

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Birmingham is very fortunate in having so many paths along its rivers, brooks and canals. My eyes were opened to the paths on my doorstep during the lockdowns of 2020. During that period, we came to know the Haunch Brook and Chinn Brook pathways well, and saw nature change throughout the seasons.

My walk for the Grid Project took place on 18th January, after a light fall of snow overnight. Entering the area at the point where Holly Bank Road crosses the Haunch Brook we took the path straight ahead, which runs beside the Haunch Brook all the way to Haunch Lane. The path to the left would have taken us along the bottom of Billesley Common and rejoined the main path at a point further on. This 2 km circular route with surfaced paths was opened in 2015.

The air was very cold and the open scene before us was wintery-white. The low sun was casting a golden light on the tops of the tall trees. Crows and magpies were high up in the trees, blue tits and great tits flitting about lower down. We heard the drilling of a woodpecker in the nearby oak tree. It was so close that we were sure we should be able to see it, but no. We were pleased to see a greater spotted woodpecker later on in our walk.

Shortly after that, a willow tunnel to the left leads to a little bridge over the Haunch Brook, where we took a detour to look at the wetlands in case the heron was there. No luck this time, but the frozen ponds looked beautiful.

Retracing our steps back to the path, we continued through the open area until we reached the woodland where the perimeter path from the common rejoins the main path. From here there is a long, fairly straight path towards Haunch Lane. We were excited to see red wings and thrushes together high up in the trees, and stopped to look at them through the binoculars. The bonus of standing quietly for a few minutes meant that I also spotted a tree creeper on the tree trunk a few feet away!

On reaching Haunch Lane the sounds of the city assaulted our senses. Busy traffic was passing by, with double decker buses in both directions. We were also reminded of the impact of human beings in the regular cycle of the information boards. The Friends of Billesley Common supply boards on the history of the area, and the birds and butterflies that you might see, then anti-social people spray paint over them or destroy them completely. The boards are eventually replaced and the cycle begins again. Such is life in the big city.

We crossed the busy road and down the path marked out by a signpost reminding us that this is part of the Shire country park and we are now entering the Chinn Brook Nature Reserve. This 17-acre area was a BMX track when I moved into the area, but was converted into a Nature Reserve in 2010. The first part of the path, parallel to the Haunch brook, felt like walking through a tunnel due to the straight, multi-stemmed trees on either side of the path. We then crossed a bridge at the point where the Haunch brook joins the Chinn brook.

Taking the path to the right we came out into a wide-open meadow bordered by tall poplar trees, and walked up the slope to the Stratford upon Avon canal at the top, stopping to listen to a nuthatch singing in the bushes. In the early part of the 20th century, day trippers would get the tram down the Alcester Road to the end of the journey and walk along the canal or take a boat ride to this point. The area we now know as the Nature Reserve was called Happy Valley, a popular spot for picnics and country walks, and there would even be a funfair and other attractions. Nowadays, the canal is popular with walkers, runners and cyclists. The circular walk round the Nature Reserve took us a few hundred yards along the canal to a point just before a little house, with a narrow boat moored outside. Here we turned left, back into the woods and down the path through the trees. At the bottom we encountered an overflowing frozen pond, forming icy puddles on the path.

At this point walkers can exit on to Yardley Wood and continue through the Chinn Brook Meadows to Trittiford Mill Pool. We, however, retraced our steps back home, enjoying walking through these lovely areas for a second time.