

RIVER COLE PATH (AREA 3)

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We join the path by taking a bus to the junction of Windmill Road and Colebrook Road, from here the river Cole can be reached via Priory Road and Slade Lane. At Slade Lane a street sign with an exclamation mark warns of a hidden dip; it is almost completely swallowed by a thorny hedge. The road beyond is blocked to traffic. A pedestrian bridge rises over the ford, its sides tagged in cyan, orange and magenta spray-paint [a] but if you reach it from this direction, you have missed the finger post on your left to the river trail which heads North between two branches of the Cole.

The river is little more than a stream here as it winds through wood and bog [b]. A heron waits patiently in the reedbeds alongside the path to Scriber's Lane and a second ford. Here the bridge bids us to 'Stay Safe Near Water' before the trail opens into Trittiford Park with its circuit around the lake for joggers, cyclists and dog walkers.

Canada Geese line the edge of Trittiford Mill Pool [c]. The alder and hazel catkins add a burst of colour to the hedgerow separating the lake from the river. Almost hidden in the ditch alongside the path, the river leaves the pool and meanders under the traffic island on Highfield Road to enter The Dingles.

The traffic noise is quickly lost as the path gives way to ancient meadow, its ridge and furrow pattern still visible. Bright yellow fronds of willow trail at the water's edge [d]. The Chinn Brook, running parallel with us since Highfield Road, joins the Cole here and at its confluence a Little Egret flaps over the footbridge, its huge yellow feet trailing comically behind.

The path continues toward Coleside Avenue and Four Arches Bridge [e], recently restored to carry walkers back to Cole Valley Road. The Cole now continues north-east, passing under the A4040 where Brook Lane meets Robin Hood Lane; it runs beside the John Morris Jones Walkway until Sarehole Mill is reached. The Cole forms a gentle stream here, wagtails bob among the pebbles and a rare flash of turquoise blue announces a kingfisher [f].

The river passes underneath Cole Bank Road to Sarehole Mill [g]; the restored watermill that inspired Tolkein's depiction of The Shire. Beyond the mill, the river is crossed at a ford on Green Lane, a motorist stops to see the splash his wheels made on camera. The path enters woodland – stepping stones form a contemplative space [h] and a handy short cut for delivery bikers [i].

The path is again crossed by stepping stones before emerging in a field opposite Amaan's supermarket. Gulls call and wheel over the Stratford Road bridge [j], the former site of the 13th-century Greet Mill – of which not a ghost remains. Here our journey ends.

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