

Walking and Drinking in Romsey

Ray Massey

Thinking of walking in Romsey, I think of the Test, as rivers usually provide good routes for walking. But the Test is a very private river with little public access. Nonetheless these short walks manage to include three stretches of the river plus a length of the old Romsey Canal. First, a short walk through the town centre.

Romsey Town Centre Walk

This brief tour starts, very naturally, at the Market Place, lorded over by Lord Palmerston's statue; an excellent small market town square reminding me very much of Trumpton. Glancing north up Church Street you can just make out the sign of **The Abbey Hotel**, a very reliable drinking establishment. Courage Best and Directors plus Youngs Bitter are the beers available. You will get a much better view of the Hotel at the end of the first walk.

Start to walk east towards the Cornmarket and immediately on your left is **The White Horse**, Romsey's largest hotel. In the somewhat characterless bar at the rear of the building beers from Flack Manor and Andwell are offered. Previously the bar was in a small heavily timbered room at the front of the building: in my opinion one of the nicest spots in Romsey to have a drink.

Continuing down the Hundred, at the corner of Latimer Street is the **Tavern**; a pub aimed at the young and musical. In Romsey recently, I poked my nose inside to check that they still sold real ale. The welcoming landlord was cleaning the pipes at the time (early Saturday morning); and yes, the regular real ale was Deuchars IPA, and very nice it was too.



Leaving The Tavern, ahead of you is the tiny Love Lane. Don't miss it, it leads to probably the best run pub in Romsey – the thatched **Old House At Home** – a very welcoming Fullers' house; winner of several Fullers' awards, and serving very good quality beer and food, with occasional interesting guests as well. My only slight minus is that I can't get their Chiswick



Bitter. But then that's true, unfortunately, of many other local Fullers' pubs.

Back at The Tavern, the road on the left is Latimer Street. This leads immediately to the **Olive Tree**, a café/bistro that generally serves real ale, last time I looked it was Thwaites Original. Further up Latimer



Street is the **William IV**, mentioned later on another itinerary. Beyond that is the station.

Continuing ahead down The Hundred, you pass Bertie's, a well-regarded Romsey restaurant, previously a pub, the King's Head. Directly opposite, on the street corner, is another former pub, the Sceptre. This was the last pub to be built in Romsey in 1871. Closing in 1972, it just achieved its centenary. Continue down the Hundred until just beyond the traffic lights is the smartly painted and welcoming **Bishop Blaize**, a pub vastly improved in recent years. The beers here are Ringwood Best and a guest, often another Hampshire brewed one.



Further eastwards you reach the Plaza roundabout where you join the A3090, the main road to Winchester. Beyond two railway bridges is **The Sun**. This pub has gone through many changes of hands in recent years and has only just reopened.

Romsey River Walk

This time go south from the Market Place, down Bell Street. In a few yards, on the left, in a corner of the Cornmarket is the **Tudor Rose** a pub with as much history as any in Romsey. For years, this modest pub was a regular in *The Good Beer Guide*, then it lost its way for a few years. However the new licensees are improving things and their two beers Courage Best & Shepherd Neame Spitfire are usually excellent.



Further down Bell Street is **La Parisienne**, a French restaurant. This building was originally a pub – The Angel. Perhaps that's why real ales are still sold. Recently there were three – Ringwood Best, London Pride and the very local Double Drop.

Just after the shops end keep slightly right into Middlebridge Street, where a small stream follows the left side of the road. This street was originally the main route into Romsey from the southwest. The road continues to curve slightly right. At about the same time as you become aware of traffic ahead you will see the bay windows of the **Tree Tuns**. This pub has recently been bought by the owners of the Chesil Rectory in Winchester, who have certainly smartened the place up and got rid of the bareness of the previous regime. The four beers available are Bath Gem, Doom Bar, Ringwood Best and Summer Lightning.

Further down Middlebridge Street you soon merge with the western end of the Romsey by-pass (A3090 again). Fortunately a large cotoneaster hedge shields you from most of the traffic noise until you reach Mainstone Bridge where the road crosses the River Test. The river is a single stream here and very impressive it is too. Just beyond the bridge is the **Cromwell Arms**, a new incarnation of what has been first a pub, then a vets and a restaurant in the recent past. The pub has just earned itself a place in *The Good Beer Guide 2012*, it is a smart gastro-pub with two beers from local breweries, often Andwell and Flack Manor.



Romsey River Walk – a rural extension

Back to the river, turn left on a broad gravel track going upstream beside the flowing waters. This is part of the Test Way long distance footpath. Keep beside the river until the buildings of Saddler's Mill. Until recently the six arches of the sluice beneath you were covered by straw-filled sacks every autumn, to protect the salmon as they swam upstream. Nowadays it seems that there are no, or very few, salmon.

For a more rural second part to this walk, turn left before reaching the Abbey Hotel to walk up Church Street, past the Post Office. Just ahead of you, but out of sight around a sharp bend is **The Star**, a Wadworth pub serving a good range of their beers, this pub is located just outside the gates of the old Strongs brewery site.

Cross over the sluice and join a narrow tarmac path between a rough pasture field and a line of cottages. Cross over a small feeder stream onto a small road alongside a park (The Meads). Go past Romsey War Memorial Park entrance, and cross a larger stream to join a quiet residential road with a small ditch on its right edge. Soon, Romsey Abbey looms into sight on the left. At the junction of The Meads and The Abbey you have a choice: Either continue straight ahead, and go under an archway to emerge, surprisingly, back in the Market Place again. Alternatively, turn left and curve north around the bulk of Romsey Abbey. Ahead of you is the imposing frontage of the **Abbey Hotel**. Left out of the Abbey Hotel returns you in a few yards to the Market Place.



Turn right into Portersbridge Street, very soon you reach the **William IV**; a modest pub serving Flack Manor Double Drop when I visited. Turn left into Station Road towards the station. At the traffic lights continue on Station Road (*not* Station Approach), and head for a small tunnel, Cupernham Arch, underneath the railway and Romsey Station. This is Canal Walk, and after passing a Poundbury-like development on the left does indeed lead to the old canal.

Veer left alongside the canal with modern housing estates on both sides; the path is well sheltered by large hedges. The houses end just before Fishlake Meadows (a sort of northern Romsey by-pass) crosses over the path and canal. Note that the canal has a gentle flow due to the removal of small locks many years ago. Now the countryside becomes increasingly open, especially on the left hand side. This area is also known as Fishlake Meadows and is an important winter wetland used to hold excess river water.

After a good half mile of very quiet walking, you reach a path crossing, with a flat concrete bridge on the right. Turn left here on a narrow, well-defined but often muddy path. Although remote, this path is clearly well used. When you reach the trees be sure to use the footbridge and boardwalk provided. Soon you reach the river Test; turn left along the bank, there is no other option. After a short walk the path crosses from one bank to the other over a rather graceful modern footbridge. Continue along the path with the river now on your left. Soon the path leaves the river, along another often muddy section beside a high fence. The path then joins a private drive, where you turn right to reach the busy Greatbridge Road (A3057).

Turning right here, the next 300 yards are the worst part of the walk with the pavement very close to the traffic. Soon the road bends left over Great Bridge and the relief is immediate, with good river views both ways. At the end of the bridge is a very small path going upstream by the water's edge. This little path is a gem, though in places the slippery sloping surface does try to catapult you into the water. The river views just get better. Soon you have to leave the river and bend left and right around a small riverside house, past the car park of the next pub. Turn left along a

brown drive, and just before the road a useful gap in the hedge leads straight into the front garden of the **Duke's Head**. There are generally four beers available, when I visited recently I noted Old Hooky and Youngs Special; Ringwood Best, Double Drop and Doom Bar also often feature.

Upon leaving the pub you can either retrace your outward route or for a shorter walk come back along the main Greatbridge Road (there is a 36 bus but so infrequent as to be impractical). I shall describe this shorter option: unfortunately for the first 150 yards there is no footpath. But the road is straight, so at least you can easily be seen. Just before the road bends, a footpath starts on the left, and within a few strides you are back on Great Bridge again, to continue through the bad 300 yards outward section.

When you reach World of Water the pavement moves away from the road and progress is more comfortable. Surprisingly soon you reach the northern outskirts of Romsey again. Ahead is a notorious railway bridge, famous for getting lorries jammed under it. Immediately after is a roundabout where the left fork leads directly to the station and straight ahead leads, via Church Street, back to Romsey town centre. Parked cars along this stretch of narrow road slow the traffic considerably, and make it a bearable walk. Very soon the Abbey is visible over the roofs again, the road bends left and right past The Star, and you are back in the Market Place again.

Maps: Maps are not necessary for these walks but OS 1:25,000, Explorer 131, Romsey, Andover & Test Valley covers them.

Distances: The town centre walk is about a mile, as is the first river walk. The extra section is about 2½ miles out and 1½ miles back.

Photos: Thanks to Jack Massey for them.