

A Walk in Preston Crowmarsh

The walk starts from **Rivermead**, the field next to the marina. From here there is a good view downstream of both the lock and the weir. The area now used as a marina was once a wharf where coal from the Midlands was unloaded from river barges. It was then stored nearby and sold to local people. By 1934, the barge traffic had ceased and the area was used by the Benson Swimming Club, where many local children learned to swim. Eventually the site was sold and a modern slipway constructed, when it became the Cruiser Station.



The busy wharf in the days of the Benson Swimming club

Rivermead was originally the coal merchant's storage and stabling area. A ferry for horses once operated from this area and landed 300 metres above the lock. The Rivermead meadow was purchased for the village in the 1930s and transformed into a recreation area. The amenities for the pleasure ground were donated by local people. For eighty years, Salter's Steamers operated a twice daily passenger service from Oxford to Kingston throughout the summer months, and they still operate pleasure cruises from Rivermead to Abingdon during July and August.

Leave Rivermead by the far gate and turn right onto the Thames path. You are now on the road leading south through the hamlet of Preston Crowmarsh, also called Crowmarsh Battle, a name originating in the time when the estate was given by William the Conqueror to the monks of Battle Abbey, near Hastings. The name Preston Crowmarsh originated as Priest's Crowmarsh.

Before the construction of the A4074, this peaceful road was once the main route from Benson to Wallingford via Crowmarsh Gifford. The five modern houses with river frontage were built on an area once known as **Winchmead**, so named because it used to be the site of the winch to pull barges through the old flash lock. This existed from 1314 until it was replaced by the first pound lock in 1788. On your left is Millbrook Mead nature reserve.

Pause to look over the brick bridge parapet at the crystal clear stream flowing under the road towards the Thames. The Ewelme Brook originates from springs in Ewelme, where it flows through watercress beds and then alongside Brook Street through the village of Benson. For hundreds of years it powered the corn mill upstream, which produced flour in Mill Lane in the centre of Benson.



The lock keeper casting off from the public footpath c.1953

Just past no. 26, there is a footpath signed “to river only”. This was once the footpath to one of the ferries. In days gone by it was used to transfer people to the opposite bank, where the tow path continued to Wallingford. The next sign on the right is to the Thames Path and takes walkers across the weir. Follow the sign towards the lock.

Pause on the wooden footbridge and look to the left, where you will see an old corn mill now converted to a house. There was a mill here long before the Norman Conquest. This building has a date plaque of 1798, when it was rebuilt after the pound lock was constructed. Two mills at Bensington (the old name for Benson) are mentioned in the Domesday Book. The other one was probably in Mill Lane, Benson.



A view of the old flour mill from the opposite bank in 1880, when it employed 8-10 millers



The buildings of Preston Crowmarsh Mill about 1908

The old weirs were built with wooden posts supporting faggots (bundles of willow twigs and rushes) to stem the flow and raise the river level, before it entered the mill. The Littleboy family ran the mill for many years in the nineteenth century. About 1900, it was bought by the Crowmarsh Mill Wool Company, who used it for flock preparation until 1922. The Wallingford and District Electricity Supply Company then used it to produce electricity for Crowmarsh and Benson.

Continue over the weir to reach the lock. The Thames Conservancy lock keeper's cottage was rebuilt in 1913 after a fire. From the opposite bank the towpath leads to Wallingford, but for now return to Preston Crowmarsh by crossing the weir.



Photograph of Benson lock taken in 1868 by William Russell Sedgefield



The lock in Edwardian times

The artist, JMW Turner made a watercolour sketch in 1807 of Benson church from an islet near the lock. In 1906, a brochure for the Crown Inn extols the place as having the finest weir on the Thames.



Watercolour sketch by JMW Turner

Returning to the road, the **Old Swan** can be seen on the other side of the road. This cottage used to be the Swan Inn, where bargemen could buy their beer. Bargemen were considered “a rough lot” and therefore not welcome in Benson’s village pubs, so they used either the Swan or the nearby Ferryman’s Arms. The old pub sign supports a weather vane. In 1861, the innkeeper was also a coal merchant. Kelly’s Directory of Oxfordshire from 1924 to 1939 used to advertise, “The Swan Public House, good accommodation for boating men and fishermen”.



The Swan under flood water

The next house on the left is the seventeenth century Old Mill House, where the mill owners once lived.

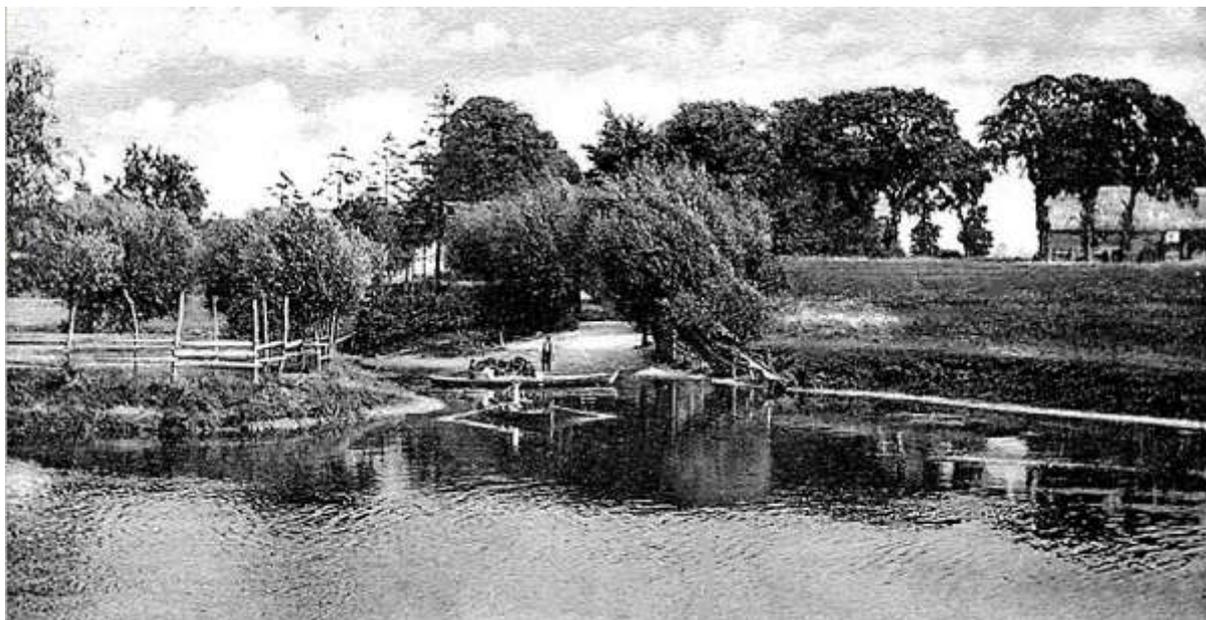


There are some attractive nineteenth century houses and cottages on the left, built in a vernacular style by Lord Wittenham, who once owned the Howbery Park estate. Preston House (below) used to house his farm bailiff.



On your right you will see a white building called **Ferry Cottage**, dating from the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century it was a pub called the Ferryman's Arms, where the innkeeper, Charles Argyle was recorded in 1861 and 1871 as a ferryman, basket maker and beer seller. This was one of the beer houses, which catered for the people who worked on the river.

Reeds, rushes and pollarded willows once grew on the riverbank in this area and were used to weave baskets. At the end of the Ferry Cottage garden was one of the ferries for foot passengers, who wanted to cross to the opposite bank, where a footpath across the fields took them to Wallingford. An alternative path was the towpath, which is now forms part of the Thames Path.



The old ferry at the downstream end of the lock island from the opposite bank.

A little further along the road, there is an imposing cream rendered house on your left called **Lower Farmhouse**, once the home of Admiral Miller, and later that of Selwyn Lloyd the Cabinet Minister. It used to be called Brixton Lodge, when it was part of a complex of farm buildings. The pretty front garden is behind iron railings and gates.



Lower Farmhouse

The road bears left then turns right and ahead is a pair of thatched farm cottages. Continue along the road towards Battle Farm, where the road turns left.

Crowmarsh Battle Farm was built in the eighteenth century on the site of a moated Tudor manor house. Iron Age pottery has been dug up here. A tenant of the manor called Bartholomew Symes built the octagonal brick dovecote behind the house in 1684.

In 1894, the Chamberlain family came to Crowmarsh Battle Farm, taking over from the Newton family who had been there for over 100 years, farming sheep and cattle. By 1909, all the livestock had been sold and the farm became entirely arable. They established the "Chamberlain System", as it was referred to in agricultural journals, whereby corn, particularly barley, was grown continuously over many years, undersown with a trefoil/ryegrass mix, with the land having only a few "rest periods" in between corn crops.

From the corner of the road, there is a permissive footpath across the field towards Howbery Park. Alternatively, retrace your steps to the marina.

Adapted from "Benson, a Century of Change" by Janet Burt and Peter Clarke