

The Great British

Walk

 National Trust



A secret walk at: Sheringham

Mark Rowe, our walking pro, has discovered this secret walk for you to explore. Now you can follow in his footsteps...

He fell in love with walking in the wilds of Hertfordshire, while growing up in the suburbs of north London.

Today, Mark has worked regularly for the Trust's Great British Walk and The Independent on Sunday. He is also a contributing editor to BBC Countryfile Magazine. He is however, still learning how to fold an OS map in a force eight gale.

A bit of background

Sparrow Dale is a wildlife gem that has evolved from unlikely origins. In the late 19th century it was reconfigured to accommodate shooting parties at Sheringham Park. The small valley threads between two hills from which pheasants would be released for the party to take pot-shots at, while they stood down in the valley. This was not considered challenging enough for expert marksmen, so trees were planted on the hills to force the birds upwards, making them more fleeting and difficult to hit. Those that were missed and landed on the opposite hill were flushed out to fly back and run the gauntlet again, and again.

THE SECRET



"Sparrow Dale", a hidden, tranquil dale, sunken into the dreamy woods of Sheringham Park, might typically conjure up visions of the Peak District or the Yorkshire Dales, but while much more modest in scale, there is an enchanting atmosphere to this hidden valley. At any time of year you might encounter a lingering mist, light enough to feel you could part it with your hands, like a net curtain. The irony is that the shooting party origins of the dale have inadvertently created a wonderful habitat.



"Sparrow Dale is basically two parallel lines of very old conifers - redwoods, firs, cedars and Cypresses. It's created a good place for birds of prey - such as goshawks."

- Keith Zealand, Head Ranger



Distance: 1 1/2 miles

The walk

Giant rhododendrons and Scot's Pine

We begin at the visitor centre and follow the main drive. I quickly realise that Sheringham is laid out in a way that could be described as 'ordered chaos'. There are giant rhododendrons, huge monster specimens that have long since metamorphosed from large shrubs to trees. Later, we pass a Scot's Pine, broad in the beam, and said to have the widest girth - 5.81m - of any Scot's Pine in England.



The viewing canopy



We shimmy up a wooden viewing tower. Soon we're 20ft tall high and just above the canopy of rhododendrons. There's still some fragments of sea mist, while the occasional Scots Pine punches up through the ultra-green ceiling: it's a little like being in a rainforest,

In days gone by, Sheringham's owners, the Upcher family took people up these towers during their rhododendron parties; it seems the height of style was to sip champagne, wearing a cocktail dresses or smoking jackets with Wellington boots.



THE SECRET Sparrow Dale



By a large veteran oak, we reach the turn for Sparrow Dale. But before we dip into the dale, we walk 20m further, "to the turn" as it was known in the park's heyday and here, at a bend in the path you can see the sea, as well as Sheringham Hall.

The dale is aesthetically very easy on the eye, with gorgeous redwoods and a hauntingly fetching Christmas tree-like Atlas cedar, its branches drooping like a wedding dress and the colour of the sort of half-light blue you get at dusk or dawn. Birds to spot include firecrests and crossbills. The floor of the dale is grassy and cool.

"It just feels as if the outside world is a long way away."
– Malcolm Fisher, Visitor Services Manager

At the bottom of the dale there is a wonderful spring-fed pond, fringed with reeds. There are no fish, so it's a haven for whirligig beetles and other insects, and in turn something of a banquet for dragonflies, damselflies and bats.

The handkerchief tree

We finish our walk by following the path past more of Sheringham's wonderful collection of specimen trees. My favourite is the pocket handkerchief tree, named because of the way its flower bracts flutter in the wind.



Plant hunter Ernest "Chinese" Wilson was dispatched to China to seek it out. On arrival in Hong Kong he was presented with a map covering 20,000 square miles on which was roughly marked the position of a single handkerchief tree. Incredibly, he found the spot, only to discover a stump with a wooden house next to it. Luckily Wilson did uncover other specimens.

This mixture of exotic trees with bizarre origins and an unexpected dell creates a visual freshness, the kind of sensation you usually experience while being on holiday, a long way from home.

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