

Easy Access in Epping Forest

Epping Forest, owned and managed by the Corporation of London, has been maintained as an open space for public enjoyment since the Epping Forest Act of 1878. It covers an area of just over 6,000 acres which has been ancient woodland since at least 3,000 BC. Then, the predominant trees would have been small-leaved lime whereas today's Forest is made up chiefly of beech, birch, hornbeam and oak. It contains many ponds, and several areas of heathland, whilst in the southern part there are extensive grasslands. Deer roam wild, although there is also a deer sanctuary, and there is an abundance of birds, small mammals, butterflies and insects, and over 600 species of wild flowers. Two-thirds of the Forest has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and candidate Special Area of Conservation.

Often the elderly, people with disabilities and families with young children may feel that Epping Forest is inaccessible to them but there are several sites which are attractive and accessible to those with limited mobility and include three purpose-built paths.

Three purpose-built easy-access paths are at High Beach, Connaught Water and Knighton Wood.

High Beach Path. High Beach has been a centre for public recreation for over 150 years and is still popular today. There are excellent views from some of its parking spots and the easy-access path starts near the Information Centre. This path is firm-surfaced and winds for half a mile through the trees, providing a splendid opportunity to view the woodland here. It has frequently placed seats. A descriptive leaflet gives features of interest to be seen from the path, and there is a 25-minute trail tape which may be hired from the Information Centre. There is level ground suitable for picnicking nearby, and there are refreshment and toilet facilities (including a disabled toilet) in the area.

Connaught Water and the Red Path. This large lake designed by the Conservators of Epping Forest as an amenity in 1881 and enlarged twelve years later because of its popularity. The surrounding trees shelter the lake from cold winds, and large numbers of duck and geese winter here. Swans, geese, great crested grebes and ducks all breed on this lake. Summer migrants, including the nightingale, may be heard in this area in May and June.

The lake is most easily accessed from a car park off of Rangers Road. In dry weather it is possible to progress all around the Water, and fishing can be carried out from a wheelchair. A good level all-weather path – called (because of its surface) 'The Red Path' – has been constructed running from the car park towards Fairmead. This path can also be reached by car from the far end of Fairmead Road. There is an area of grass near the car park, and wild flowers growing beside the path include wild violets in early spring and red campion.

Knighton Wood. This area was once part of the Buxton Estate and it is very apparent from the ornamental water areas, the variety of trees and a magnificent display of rhododendrons and spring bulbs that it was once a formal garden. In 1996

an easy-access path was constructed which winds around the lake and between these plants and specimen trees. There are seats at intervals and, although the total path takes in some inclines, shorter circuits on the flatter area can be chosen. Wildfowl are increasingly making their homes on the waters, following clearance work. The path can be most easily accessed from the car park on Knighton Lane.

Jubilee Pond Path. Wanstead Flats have been almost treeless since the 12th century when the Abbots of Stratford grazed large flocks of sheep there. At the end of the 19th century groups of trees were planted to provide features and some shelter.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Forest authorities took on unemployed local men to carry out the laborious task of landscaping these ponds. One such pond was lined with concrete and became known as the Model Yacht Pond. However, by the late 1980s interest in model boats had declined and a crack in the concrete liner led to falling water levels and the pond frequently dried up in the summer. In 1997 plans were drawn up to improve the pond and the surrounding area. At a public consultation exercise the majority of local residents indicated that they would prefer the pond to become a haven for wildlife.

Work began in the summer of 2002 and it was renamed the Jubilee Pond to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. An easy access path circles the pond where various aquatic plants and wildfowl such as Coot, Mallard and Moorhen combine to make this an attractive feature in this part of Epping Forest.

In addition to the above purpose built easy access paths, some paths in the following areas could be used by wheelchair-users and pram-pushers except after heavy rain, when the going becomes rather heavy. However, they are not purpose built routes and one is advised to use one's discretion as to individual suitability. There are parking facilities nearby each site.

Chingford Plain is an open grassy area with a surfaced horse-riding track running along the far side which provides access to short grassland spots suitable for picnicking.

The Stubbles is a relic of Victorian times when this area was enclosed and cleared for arable farming. The open glade which remains today is ideal for family outings. A firm-surfaced horse-ride leads across towards Epping New Road, on which walks can be taken through the woodland to the west to the field. A small car park is provided off Nursery Road, Loughton.

Fairmead is another area of open grassland recommended for family outings. The longer grass on the east side of the road makes it less suitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs – however, more flowers and butterflies are to be found there.

Honey Lane Plain towards Upshire provides an interesting picnic site on the north-west side of the Forest. It is accessible by car from the Waltham Abbey road or Claypit Hill road.

Theydon Bois Green is a true village green complete with pond, and there are benches on which to rest. Crossing the green is an avenue of oak trees, the older of which were planted around the time of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne. Theydon Bois (Central Line) underground station is nearby.

Wanstead Park was landscaped years ago as the parkland attached to Wnstead House, the home of the Tylney family. A system of lakes was constructed around the house and extensive tree planting was carried out. The grotto, now in ruins, was originally built as a boathouse in fantastic style. The house itself was completed in 1720 as a truly magnificent mansion, said to rival Hampton Court. It was demolished in 1824 and the site is now covered by Wanstead Golf Course. In 1881 The Corporation of London purchased part of the lands of Wanstead Park, and opened it to the public in 1882.

Today the Park is still maintained in a more formal style than the rest of Epping Forest. From the parking area in Warren Road a wide grassy track slopes to the central open area, from which a number of paths can be taken through the trees. Alternatively on your left there is a wide grassy glade with rhododendrons on both sides leading down to the Ornamental Water where herons can often be seen, a remnant of the famous heronry here at the turn on the century. This is a delightful area in the spring when bluebells are in flower and many of the migrant birds can be heard. In summer, the speckled wood butterfly is one of the species which add to the attraction of Wanstead Park. Fishing can be carried out from a wheelchair at some points in the Park.

If you have a severe handicap it is possible to obtain a special permit from The Warren to take a vehicle into Wanstead Park.

Other places to visit

Epping Forest Field Studies Centre. From 1928 until the early 1950s this area was the site of a speedway racing track. In 1970, the Corporation of London established a Field Centre (now the Field Studies Centre) at High Beach which runs a number of weekend and day courses covering a wide range of natural history subjects – a number of the courses are suitable for wheel-chair users. Please contact the Field Studies Centre directly to obtain a programme and discuss accessibility of the individual courses. Within the grounds of the Centre is an analemmatic sundial and raised beds containing examples of wild flowers.

Epping Forest Information Centre which was opened in 1993. Its single storey building was designed for ease of access and houses displays relating to the Forest's history and natural history which are of interest to all ages. A wheelchair is available from the Information Centre, for use on deposit. There is car parking adjacent to this building, and disabled toilet facilities are located within.

Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge This fine Tudor hunt standing was commissioned by Henry VIII and complete in 1543. Originally it stood within the enclosed Fairmead Deer Park, and organised hunts were viewed from its upper floors. Today this unique building is open to all visitors, who may examine the craftsmanship of the Tudor carpenters and see displays relating to its history and former use. A Scalamobil (please ask to use this) provides access to the upper floors and there are

toilets and baby changing facilities. Quiz sheets and large format information guides are available. Disabled car parking is adjacent and the building is surrounded by level grass with seats for those wishing to view its external appearance. There are refreshment and toilet (including disabled access) facilities nearby.