

The Captain Peel Walk - Sandy

Using the map and directions in this leaflet will enable you to follow the route with ease in a clockwise direction. (Please note that dogs are not allowed on the RSPB reserve, other than on a lead on the public bridleway leading from the Gatehouse to Stratford Road. This route is a total distance of 3.6 miles.

THE ROUTE

The Captain Peel Walk starts at :-

1. St Swithun's Church (High Street)

Enter the church by the south porch.

This medieval building was enlarged and restored in the mid 19th century and is built of local ironstone quarried from the quarry at The Lodge. In the South transept stands the fine marble statue of William Peel, carved by one of Queen Victoria's favourite sculptors, William Theed. The statue was erected by the Peel family in the church in 1861 and originally stood in the chancel. Peel is shown dressed in Captain's uniform drawing his sword. A similar statue can be seen at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. A third statue was erected in Eden Gardens, Calcutta and this depicts Peel in a different pose holding a telescope. In recent years, this statue has been moved to Barrackpore.

Other memorials to the Peel family (a stained glass window in the chancel and one in the Lady Chapel) can be found in the church. Leaving the church by the south porch, look across to the Georgian mansion of Sandye Place (now a school). This was one of Sandy's former manor houses and once the centre of a 1500 acre estate. When the estate was split up and sold in 1851 the 'Hill Estate' or 'Warren' was purchased by William Peel. The grave of William's younger brother, Arthur Wellesley (later created Viscount Peel) and members of his family can be found north- west of the tower.

Leave the churchyard by the large gates passing on your right the Rectory Rooms, the former coach house and the only remaining part of the fine George II rectory demolished in the 1960's. Opposite the church is a public house, once known as the 'Lord Nelson' and renamed the 'Sir William Peel' in recent years.

Turn right and proceed southwards along the High Street

2. High Street

This street contains a number of old and interesting buildings.

Just after crossing the Ivel Road junction, on your left can be seen the large half-timbered house called Green Gables and which dates from the fifteenth century. Number 99 was originally built as a school in the early 1840's by Lady Jane Pym of Hazells Hall, Sandy. The Pym family crest, a hind's head, can be seen above the doorway.

From the High Street turn right into Station and immediately cross over the road to the railway station.



3. Sandy Railway Station

The Great Northern Railway(GNR) arrived in Sandy in 1850 and the main station building dates from this period. At one time the GNR and the London and North Western Railway (LNWR) both had separate stations on this site and a number of the stations buildings were demolished some years ago and the lines altered when the route through Sandy was electrified.

After living in Sandy for some years, Peel decided to build his own railway between Sandy and Pottun. Unlike most of the lines which ran through the county it did not require an Act of Parliament. An engine was built and cost £800 and was named 'Shannon' after Peel's ship. The line was opened in June 1857 and great celebrations were held in Sandy and Pottun – the former station having banners and evergreens and the latter silk flags. Peel's railway ran on successfully until 1862 when the line was taken over by the Bedford to Cambridge Railway and later the LNWR. The line closed in 1967. Today, Peel's engine 'Shannon' can be seen at the Didcot Railway Centre.

From the railway station return to the High Street and cross the railway bridge and proceed along the Pottun Road.

4. Pottun Road

On your left can be seen the tree covered Iron Age hill fort of Caesar's Camp and the road leading to Everton called Swaden, named after a medieval landowner. On your right is the Cemetery, with its small ironstone chapel and which was opened by 'a solemn dedication service' in 1891 on the site of a 16th century farmhouse, called 'Cabbage Hall'. The Roman town of Sandy was situated in the vicinity of the cemetery and the surrounding area.

Caesar's Camp, now forms the grounds of a private country residence, with the same name. The house was built in 1861 and it was for a number years the home of Sir Frederick Liddell, the brother of Alice Liddell, and on whom Lewis Carroll based his character of Alice in Alice in Wonderland. During excavations for the Sandy to Pottun line in 1857 a Roman sword was found at the base of Caesar's Camp. This was presented to William Peel and he commissioned Wilkinson's, the sword makers to make a copy which he later used in action. This sword and other Peel relics, including his Victoria Cross and telescope can be found in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

Many Roman and pre-Roman relics have been found over the centuries in the area of the cemetery and railway station. Between 1988 and 1991 important excavations were carried out in the cemetery and the presence of Roman buildings was confirmed. A wealth of finds was uncovered and many of these items can be seen, together with an exhibition in the offices of Sandy Town Council (10 Cambridge Road, Sandy).

Continue along the Pottun Road and shortly after the start of the woodlands on your right hand side, proceed through a wooden hand gate. There is a sign welcoming you to the RSPB reserve.

5. The Lodge – RSPB Reserve

This area of the reserve (part of Sandy Warren) was purchased by the Society in 2003. It was previously mostly conifer plantation and after public consultation consent was given to remove much of the dense tracts of forest and restore the land to heath land. This new landscape will create a home for birds such as nightjars and Dartford warblers. Native broadleaved woodland is being improved for the wildlife and dead wood is being kept as a home for fungi, bats and beetles.

Entering the reserve (no dogs please) you ascend the hillside called Redstone Hill. After the next gate, look back and there is a distant view of Sandy church seen through the trees. Follow the pathway and note the heath land restoration work being carried out by the RSPB and the distant views, long unseen opening up before you. Look out for the handsome, multi horned and buff coated Manx Loghtan sheep which help to maintain the grass and existing heath land and are ideally suited to the rough grazing at The Lodge.

After a while the pathway turns sharply left before running parallel to the old estate brick wall on the Pottun Road and in due time reaches the RSPB Gatehouse.



Shannon

6. The RSPB Gatehouse

This house was built in the then fashionable Swiss style by Peel in 1851 and was called 'The Swiss Cottage'. It was probably here, in the following year that he wrote his book 'A Ride through the Nubian Desert'. This tells the story of his exploration of the interior of Africa. After learning Arabic, Peel with one companion sailed up the Nile, crossed the desert to Khartoum and then to El Obeidi, where he contracted a fever which nearly ended his life. When William Peel died in 1858 the house and estate passed to his mother and then to his younger brother, Arthur Wellesley, who resided here with his family.

In 1870 Arthur built a large house on the edge of the escarpment in the Elizabethan style and named it The Lodge. The Swiss Cottage was converted into two estate cottages. A Crimean War cannon was placed in the gardens of The Lodge, together with two trophies of cannon balls and a Crimean gun muzzle suspended on an axle. According to local legend the cannon was drawn into its position by members of the Shannon's Naval Brigade. These items remained at The Lodge until 1960 when the contents of the house and garden furniture were sold by the Stewart family, who had bought The Lodge from the Peel's in 1934.

In 1961 the RSPB moved its national headquarters from London to Sandy and created a beautiful nature reserve.

From the Gatehouse turn clockwise and go along the main driveway (bridleway) and at the fork in the driveway bear left and continue along the beautiful wooded path. Exit the reserve by the ironstone pillared gateway (called the 'Hunting Gate') and enter Stratford Road turning right to Sandy. This particular road follows the route of a Roman road and by returning to the town this way you will see the former Peel estate farms and cottages (many of which are in a Swiss style) and the main railway line, a part of which was once the route of Captain Peel's Sandy to Potton Railway.



The Swiss Cottage, c1900

Captain Sir William Peel, R.N. – K.C.B., V.C of Sandy 1824-1858

William Peel lived at the Swiss Cottage on the Potton Road, Sandy (now the Gatehouse to The Lodge – the RSPB's national headquarters). He was one of the most remarkable men to serve in the Royal Navy and was one of the first recipients of the Victoria Cross.

William was the third son of Sir Robert Peel, the famous Prime Minister and founder of the modern police force. He joined the navy at the age of 13 as a Midshipman and rose through the ranks to Lieutenant, Commander and then in 1849 Captain. During the Crimean War, in command of the frigate 'Diamond', Peel led a famous Naval Brigade and was involved in a number of heroic events.

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for three separate acts of bravery (this was very unusual as the Cross is normally awarded for one single act of gallantry and where there should be a 90% chance of death). The first act took place during the Siege of Sebastopol (1854) when he and a party of his men were involved with the movement of ammunition. A Russian 42-pounder shell landed in amongst some powder cases with its fuse still burning. Peel quickly picked it up, carried it and threw it over the parapet, where it exploded almost as soon as it left his hands, causing no injury. The second act took place in the same year at the Battle of Inkerman where he joined and assisted a party of Grenadier Guards in the defence of their Colours. Lastly, in the following year at the assault of the mighty Redan fortress, Peel led the first ladder party to the very foot of the walls and was severely wounded in the arm.

On his return to England he turned his attention to his hobby of railways and decided to build a line between Sandy and Potton. He was able to achieve this relatively easily by buying up parcels of land in the area over which the line would run. The railway was opened in June 1857 amidst great local celebrations. Peel never saw his railway completed, as at the opening he was at sea in command of HMS Shannon en route to China. He subsequently received orders to divert to India where the Mutiny had broken out. At Calcutta Peel formed and led a Naval Brigade of 454 men who dragged 68 pounder guns from the ships over fourteen hundred miles across land and by river to Lucknow. He was created a KCB for his actions.

At the Second Relief of Lucknow whilst directing his guns, he was severely wounded by a musket ball in his thigh. Peel refused to be taken to hospital in an officer's carriage preferring to travel in a dhoolie (cart) as his men would have done. Unfortunately, the previous occupant of the dhoolie had suffered smallpox and within days Peel had caught the disease. He died a few days later at Cawnpore on 27th April 1858, at the early age of 33.

Marble statues of Peel carved by William Theed were erected in Sandy Church, Greenwich and in India.



Crimean War cannon
in the grounds of
the Lodge c1900
The cannon
was sold in 1960

Peel Walk Planning your Walk

Public Transport:

The walk can be accessed by train at Sandy. A Monday to Saturday bus service operates in Sandy and the surrounding areas, please phone for further details. There is a Sunday and Bank Holiday service (route M3).

For bus times:

Bedfordshire Bus Information Line 01234 228337 (office hours)
Traveline 0871 200 22 33

For train times:

National Rail Enquiries 08457 484950

Parking and Toilets:

Car parking is available in the town centre and the railway station. There are toilets next to car park in the town centre and at the RSPB, please see the map.

For further details on local accommodation, please contact Sandy Tourist Information Centre, 01767 682728



Sandy Tourist
Information
Centre



a million
voices for
nature



Serving communities
across Bedfordshire
and Luton



Illustrations are produced by courtesy of Barry Groom,
the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, the RSPB and
the Great Western Society / Didcot Railway Centre
Text by Barry Groom.

The Captain Peel Walk



Captain Sir William Peel
1824-1858

A walk round Sandy to commemorate
the 150th Anniversary of Peel's Death