

Lower Stour Valley

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The Lower Stour Valley, south east of Canterbury, follows the River Stour from Fordwich on its final journey to the sea: here it enters the Strait of Dover between Shellness (beyond Sandwich) and Pegwell Bay. It's a characterful landscape where much has happened.

Wildlife and walks

Wherever you go, you will encounter open, low and gently undulating landscapes. There are extensive areas of nationally and internationally protected marsh and wetlands, the Sandwich Bay beaches and Special Protection Areas for wildlife. Inland, shelterbelts of poplars or alders enclose orchards, soft fruits and horticultural crops, reinforcing Kent's reputation as the Garden of England – and providing lots of luscious fare.

At the heart of a country break to the Valley you can enjoy some of the most important sites for wildlife in England. Soak up the thrilling sights of Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve and the Sandwich Bay and Pegwell National Nature Reserve. Both are connected to the River Stour and link to the surrounding villages, Canterbury and Sandwich by the long-distance walking trail, the Stour Valley Walk. Ramble some or all of this lovely route – it's the best way of exploring on foot.

River highway

Discover how in Roman and medieval times the River Stour was an important highway connecting Canterbury with the Continent – until the Wantsum Channel, which once separated the Isle of Thanet from the mainland, silted up and was eventually drained to provide fertile farmland.

Fordwich was then the goods port for Canterbury. Visit today and you will find Britain's smallest town, with reputedly the oldest and smallest Town Hall still in use. Learn, too, how Fordwich became a 'corporate limb' to the **Cinque Port of Sandwich**, now Britain's best-preserved medieval town.

Drop into the Church of St Mary the Virgin in Fordwich and you will see craftsmanship spanning 900 years, including the Royal Arms and Commandments painted on plaster in 1688. Earlier features include the 12th-century font of Bethersden marble, saints in 14th-century glass, and the mysterious Fordwich Stone: this was carved c. 1100 as a shrine for a saint's relics, possibly even those of St Augustine. It all points to a once-bustling and important settlement.

Continue on from Fordwich and at the hamlet of **Plucks Gutter** the Little Stour enters the Great Stour, and together they become the River Stour.

Water mills and church crawling

First, tour **Ickham, Wickhambreaux** and **Littlebourne**: known for their distinctive water mills, some with water wheels still in action, and their lovely water meadows. Ickham and Wickhambreaux were trading settlements and the old mills were built in the early 1800s to ensure a supply of beer and bread to surrounding army encampments, based here in anticipation of the expected Napoleonic invasion – which never materialised.

You will find interesting features in the churches of all three villages. St Andrew's in Wickhambreaux is noted for its swirling Art Nouveau east window: the first window of American glass in Europe, it depicts The Annunciation. At the Church of St John the Evangelist in Ickham it's the tomb of Thomas de Baa, who died in 1339, which draws attention. Meanwhile Littlebourne's Church of St Vincent and Saragossa, set back from the road beside a 14th-century thatched barn, contains some fine Victorian windows.

On the trail of Saxon horses

What's in a name? Intriguing clues to the past! **Stodmarsh**, by the Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve, takes its title from the Saxon word *stode*, signifying a mare, and *merse*, a marsh. It is thought that Augustinian monks drained this area and kept their mares in foal here. These days you will see Konik ponies roaming through the Nature Reserve, as they play their environmentally friendly part in its landscape management.

Complete your look around with a peek at the Church of St Mary, a charming little building of Norman origin with a medieval timbered bell turret.

Duck pond, cricket and an upturned boat on the church?

Have your camera ready in picturesque **Worth**, whose historic conservation area features several fine period houses, including Barton House by the duck pond. The Church of St Peter and St Paul is of Norman origins and has unusual wooden shingles on the tower – and a roof reminiscent of an upturned boat.

View the oldest and largest *Quercus ilex* (holm oak) in the area from the footpath adjacent to Ilex Cottage behind the churchyard. And if you love a slice of traditional English life, come when village cricket games are in full flow in summer. The RSPB has recently acquired new nature reserves in the parish, adding to the wonderful sense of a cherished rural corner.

Hop gardens, tax havens and a vanished palace!

Now we come to **Wingham, Preston and Elmstone**, snug in an area of orchards and hop gardens. Ever wondered why the term 'gardens' was used in place of 'fields' in Kent? Because tax used to be levied on fields! A wily ploy, you'll agree.

Wingham is a busy village that retains many of its shops and services. It once boasted three railway stations and a wander quickly reveals its historical importance: displayed in the diverse architecture of houses, from timbered Tudor to modern, and with Flemish influences peculiar to East Kent. A College of Secular Canons was founded here in 1286 and although none of the college buildings remain, some of the canons' houses are still here – look in particular on Canon's Row. You'll also come across no fewer than four Wealden Hall Houses.

And do visit St Mary the Virgin, if only to hear of its cautionary tale. The present church dates from the early 1200s and in the 12th century a local brewer ran off with the rebuilding funds for the nave; hence there are now wooden columns instead of stone ones!

The dedication of the small Norman church at **Elmstone** has never been known, though its origins from around 1100 make it a venerable gem. Then stand beside the Church of St Mildred at **Preston**, half close your eyes and imagine: right opposite once stood the Palace of Juliana, known as The Infanta of Kent. The foundations of the palace are said to be under the ponds that you can see in the grounds of what is now Preston Court.

Manors, medieval effigies and old drove ways

You will find **Ash**, also known as **Ash-Next-Sandwich**, on the Roman road from Sandwich to Canterbury. The village retains 11 of its 12 original manor houses, but the dominating landmark is the Church of St Nicholas with its very tall tower and needle-like spire – once used as navigation aids. It is also renowned for its numerous medieval monumental effigies and brasses.

The Ash Level extends to the River Stour, crossed only by old drove ways, and it is here that you will discover the isolated village of **Westmarsh**. The River Stour divides the Ash Level from the Minster Level and the exhilarating Saxon Shore Way passes along this section of the river.

Church secrets

Meander along to the twin villages of **East and West Stourmouth**, which mark – as their name suggests – the original point where the River Stour entered the Wantsum Channel. The small Church of All Saints at West Stourmouth is one of the oldest churches in Kent and is cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust. Probably Saxon in origin, it also bears traces of most centuries since – offering a jigsaw of historical secrets to piece together.