

Wraxall and the Yeo Valley



*Car-free*  
**COUNTRY**

ON TWO FEET



# WALKING

Steve Melia discovers the special places that can be discovered around North Somerset and Bristol on two feet rather than four wheels

PHOTOS: Steve Melia

## ON TWO FEET

**A**round 14 years ago we moved from a village on Dartmoor to Bristol city centre, for several reasons. Giving up the car was one of them. I had some misgivings; country walking was an important part of my life, but after moving I made two wonderful discoveries.

From the centre of Bristol, you can walk out of the city in less than an hour and spend the rest of the day walking through countryside; and using public transport I have walked across much of Somerset and much of southwest England. I describe just one example below, combining a short walk from Bristol to Abbots Leigh with a longer one returning by train.

Whenever I mention this to people they look dubious. They say things like: 'Isn't it really inconvenient?' or 'Aren't you limited to boring places near towns?'

My answer is: 'no' to both, once you know how to go about it. The big advantage of walking by public transport is that you don't have to finish in the same place, so you can walk further from your starting point, through a wider range of scenery.

When I am planning my walks I follow three steps:

1. Look for places with frequent public transport where you can finish.

2. Look for potential starting places. You don't need frequent transport to get there: one bus or train in the morning may be enough.

3. Look on a map for different combinations and different routes between them.

In between 1 and 2 you will find lots of remote and beautiful places. If you can stay overnight, the options multiply. I have walked the whole of the South West Coast Path a few days at a time, starting and finishing at places with public transport.

Step 3 is part of the fun for me, poring over good old-fashioned paper maps, but if you find that daunting, you can look online for walks that people have already done. Two recent inventions have made all this much easier: public transport apps and mapping apps, such as Outdooractive, OS and Komoot. You can find the walks >

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**right:** Steve opposite the SS *Great Britain*  
below: Ashton Court's Greville Smyth Sculpture







described below, and a few more, on my website in gpx format, which you can import into any of those apps: I explain how in a short video.

I have also listed 100 different combinations of starting and finishing points: places I have walked between with easy connections by train or bus to Bristol. They go north into Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, east into Wiltshire, west into Wales, and south or southwest into Somerset. My favourite short walks include: Keynsham to Pensford, Yatton to Backwell and Shepton Mallet to Wells. Longer ones include: Castle Cary to Glastonbury, Frome to Freshford and Bridgwater to Taunton over the Quantocks.

The Firstbus app now shows the location of buses as they move, so you can often wait in a pub or café until one is about to arrive. You might have encountered unreliable public transport information in the past – on bus stops or websites for example – but if you see a bus moving on that app, you can be sure that it definitely exists.

Where I live, between Temple Meads and Bristol bus station, offers the widest range of choices, but anyone who lives near a railway station and a bus stop can do this.

I began my walk on a magical spring morning, beside the river in Castle Park, with the trees in blossom around

the old church. It reminded me of a poem I meant to look up later. You can follow the river out of Bristol in either direction; the walk along the harbourside to Ashton Court is the more scenic route.

People who didn't know Bristol before the 1990s are often astonished to learn that a dual carriageway once smashed through the Georgian splendour of Queen Square. That morning a group of school children were playing around the statue of King William III at its centre, where lorries used to thunder past.

On the harbourside, opposite the cranes of the old docks, a film crew had made its base: filming for TV or cinema has become a familiar sight here in recent years. Around



**above:** Gordano round views towards Wales

**right:** Abbots pool ducklings



Canon's Marsh, and on the other side by the *SS Great Britain*, the buildings of the old port have been converted into smart new flats, a sign of the money that has poured into the city in recent years, for better and for worse.

Ashton Court country park is Bristol's gateway to the countryside. As you climb the hill towards the mansion, Clifton and the suspension bridge rise up behind you. In the café courtyard a sign on a sculpture says: climb at your own risk. I was glad to see kids climbing all over it.

I had to detour around an area cordoned to protect nesting skylarks and orchids. Scolding cries from above and a carpet of purple below suggested the strategy was working. Leaving the park through a gap in the perimeter wall, I crossed Beggar Bush Lane onto a bridleway, which runs between woodland and a farm. Grazing cattle confirm that you are in real countryside from now on.

The track descends to Abbots Pool, a woodland nature reserve with a lake and a resident cormorant. It lies on the edge of Abbots Leigh, where I stopped at the Bike Shed Café. The shorter walk ends here, after six miles, with a half-hourly bus service back to Bristol.

I retraced my steps to join the Gordano Round long-distance footpath with views over the Severn Estuary towards the Welsh hills. Walking through a field near Failand I noticed some unusual poultry, pecking around trees in blossom. As I took out my camera, their owner, Pippa Stables, appeared with feed. She explained how

the different breeds lay different coloured eggs. Then she showed me their Iron Age pigs, crossed with wild boars. She hopes their special meat will appeal to Michelin-starred restaurants, but in the meantime, she continues to work as a doctor 'to pay the bills.'

I crossed Clevedon Road by the Failand Inn, which offers a good lunch stop. You then have to follow the grass verge for a few hundred metres, until you reach a footpath into the National Trust's Tyntesfield Estate. You can't see the house from the footpath but it does give some impressive views over the grounds and across the Yeo Valley towards the hills beyond Backwell. I walked along the edge of a wood, fringed by herb robert, celandines and alkanet, before descending towards Wraxhall.

The flat open grassland separating Wraxhall from Nailsea and Backwell is criss-crossed by streams and footpaths, which offer different routes towards the station. I chose one which stayed on fields and off the roads. My tracker showed 15 miles when I reached the station; I have done shorter versions.

The train back to Bristol offers one final treat, rising above the surrounding land, passing places I had walked through that day and before. On my phone I found the poem I had half-remembered that morning: *April Rise* by Laurie Lee. I saw that he composed it on a railway station and I remembered the last line: '*If ever world were blessed, now it is*'. ● [greentravelwriter.co.uk/bristol](http://greentravelwriter.co.uk/bristol)