

Walk Twenty-One: Stoke Park and Purdown

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A great counterpart to Walk Twenty 'Stapleton and Frome Valley', Walk Twenty-One explores the prominent green ridge on the other side of the M32 Motorway. Stoke Park, with its yellow Dower House, and Purdown, with its iconic telecommunications tower, are visible from a great many vantage points throughout the city.

Taking place almost entirely in parkland and wild spaces, this walk sheds light on a part of the urban landscape that is glimpsed by almost all Bristolians but explored by relatively few.

The best time of year to do this walk is in mid spring, when the woodland flowers are at their best, but the panoramic views it offers are good at any time.

Useful Information

Terrain: Hilly.

Ground: Largely unpaved. Some areas include steps and may be soft underfoot. Unfortunately there is no accessible alternative route available.

Key Attractions: Barn Wood, Stoke Park Sculpture Trail, Purdown anti-aircraft battery, Stoke Park parkland, Dower House & clock tower.

Refreshments: Not provided, but Stoke Park is ideally suited for a picnic.

Starting point: Jellicoe Avenue, Stoke Gifford

Getting there: Jellicoe Avenue is within a modern housing estate that is a short walk from Stoke Lane, which is accessible by local buses including the MetroBus m3 service from Bristol City Centre. Limited on-street car parking available in Parnell Road and surrounding streets.

Approx. Time: 2 hours

Approx. Distance: 3.4 miles

The Route

Our route starts at the upper entrance to Stoke Park Estate at the junction of Jellicoe

Avenue and Parnell Road. The main cycle path leading into the parkland zig-zags down the hill between young trees. Behind you, the well-kept housing is typical of late C20/early C21 development, modern but with an element of village inspiration.



The cycle path touches down at the top of Stoke Park Estate

Enter the Stoke Park estate through the gate at the top of the cycle path and then immediately turn right, so that you go through a smaller gate (1) and enter Barn Wood.

You will enter **Barn Wood** through a tunnel of holly, sycamore and laurel. Before long, the path opens out into an area of woodland that is lighter and airier.

The main attraction of Barn Wood is the woodland flowers that you can find there in early to mid-spring, but there are a number of existing manmade features too.

As you follow the earthen path through the woods, look out for a smaller path heading off to the left to a stone monument.



Stone tomb in Barn Wood

The stone monument in the woods appears to be a tomb; the Latin inscription doesn't really give a lot away.

Rejoin the main path you were on before. When you reach a crossing of paths, go straight on.

If you are on the correct path, you will soon arrive at a collection pond surrounded by old stone walls (2).

Leave the main path at this point, bearing left onto a route that heads down the hill. You will quickly reach a stone tunnel (3). Do not go through the tunnel. Instead, bear right, climbing to above tunnel level. Continue off to the right onto another path, passing under a fine beech tree.



Bear right at the tunnel

The next section of path traverses the hillside, at first going slightly downhill. Look out for bluebells if walking in the spring. After a short while, it climbs back up again. You will find yourself quite close to the open parkland to the south. Look out for a gate on the left leading out into an open area. Take a detour through the gate (4).

You will find yourself on a ridge with a panoramic view of Stoke Park Estate, east Bristol and, of course, the M32 Motorway. On the ridge you will find a monument to Elizabeth Somerset, the Duchess of Beaufort. The story goes that, in 1760, she fell from her horse on Stoke Park estate and died, and that her spirit now haunts the grounds.

Look south, towards Bristol City Centre, and you will see the graceful spire of Holy Trinity Church, Stapleton (see Walk Twenty

'Stapleton and the Frome Valley'). Look east and you will have your first proper view of the yellow Dower House, the imposing property that dominates Stoke Park in views from the M32.



View of the Dower House from the Elizabeth Somerset memorial

When you have finished admiring the view, return to the same gate to re-enter Barn Wood (4).

Avoid the lowest path, which runs along the fence towards the other gates. Also avoid the steepest path that goes straight up the hill. Take the middle path, which ascends through the woods at a slightly gentler gradient.

The middle path will offer you a less strenuous climb while giving you the best of the woodland flowers. If you are walking in early to mid-spring, you can expect to see wild bluebells, bright yellow celandines, fragrant wild garlic and delicate white wood anemones.



Take the middle path, shown left in this photo

If you end up on the wrong path it isn't a disaster, as they will all converge on the same open area shortly.

Climb the middle path until you emerge from Barn Wood at a gate (5).

You will emerge into a large, flat grassy area surrounded by woodlands. Long Wood and Hermitage Wood (opposite) are home to the **Stoke Park Sculpture Trail**, consisting of several wooden sculptures hidden throughout the woodlands. They aren't included in this walking circuit, but more information is available online via the Friends of Stoke Park.

For now, turn left, heading along a trodden path through the undulating grassy field with the houses of Lockleaze visible in the distance.



Follow the trodden path through the open grassy area

As you make your way through the grassy area, the land drops away to the left, allowing the view to open back out again over east Bristol. On the other side, look out for a small mound close to the boundary with the Lockleaze adventure playground. This is, apparently, a long barrow.

At the end of the open area you will reach a hedge line. Take the most-trodden path through the largest gap in the hedge (6).

You will enter a roughly triangular field with the iconic Purdown BT tower dead ahead of you. The main path follows the longer side of the field, keeping the hedge line to the right.

At the far end of the roughly triangular field, go through the gate on the left hand side (7).

You will enter the first of two roughly square fields which are full of buttercups in the summer. The ground rises ahead of you to the crest of the Purdown ridge.

Turn right and walk along the bottom of the first square field. Go straight on through the gap in the next hedge/tree line to enter the second square field, then strike out diagonally across the field towards a gate at the top of the hill (8), keeping the BT tower to your right.



Cross the second square field on the diagonal path

Passing through the gate, you will find yourself among the remains of 'Purdown Percy', a **heavy anti-aircraft battery** from the Second World War. The concrete bunkers, magazines and gun mounts still survive, overlooking a panoramic view of east Bristol. It's an evocative site, where you can start to imagine what it must have been like to serve up here during the Bristol Blitz, watching the city burn.



View from Purdown anti-aircraft battery

Follow the winding track through the historical site and then step through a gate to

emerge on Sir John's Lane, passing very close to the BT tower.

The dead-straight **Sir John's Lane** runs along the very top of Purdown, providing road access to the BT tower. The track itself is an attractive rural-feeling lane bordered, for most of its length, by a stone wall. From time to time it offers interesting views in both directions: on the left, the now familiar panorama of east Bristol, and on the right a more local view of Lockleaze and Horfield. The imposing modern buildings of Southmead Hospital can be seen on the Horfield skyline, while the Memorial Stadium and County Cricket Ground can also be seen nestled among the houses.



View of Holy Trinity Church and Colston's Collegiate School from Sir John's Lane

Follow Sir John's Lane. When you reach the stone wall, go straight on, keeping the wall to your left, until you eventually reach a car parking area just off Lindsay Road.

At the parking area, step through the gate in a gap in the stone wall to enter a newly planted orchard at the southern end of Purdown (9).

The new orchard provides an attractive return to more open spaces.

Follow the path along the top of the field, once again keeping the stone wall to your left. Shortly after the stone wall comes to an end, go through the gap in a second stone wall that crosses the field ahead of you (10).

You will enter a scrubby meadow where Bristol City Council has been carrying out a process of landscape restoration. The

meadow is full of attractive wildflowers in the spring.



The scrubby meadow below the BT tower

Make your way along the top of the meadow. When you have passed the BT tower, keep to the left so that you walk just below the anti-aircraft battery fence (11).

After you have passed the anti-aircraft battery you will return to a more well-kept part of Stoke Park Estate. Walking just below a hedge line of sorts (more like line of mounded earth) you will traverse the top of a hill that offers good views of the Dower House ahead of you.

Before you pass the tree line in the adjoining field to the left, be sure to cross back over the mounded hedge line so that you pass to the left of the next section of woodland (12).

Begin heading down the hill, keeping the woodland to your right.

At the bottom of the field, Barn Wood converges from the left. At the gap between the two woodlands (13), you will be treated to a most impressive view of the rolling **Stoke Park parkland**. The Dower House dominates the view in the distance, but you can also see the Duchess Pond, nestled among trees at the bottom of the hill. You may spot the Elizabeth Somerset memorial that you visited earlier, perched on top of a ridge to the left.



View of the Stoke Park parkland

The ground at the bottom of this section can get a little boggy. To avoid getting your feet wet, take the broad grassy path that makes a sweeping descent to the left. Make your way to a gate in the next hedge line (14).

Stepping through the gate, you will enter the main grassy area of Stoke Park Estate that occupies the slopes below the Dower House. Enjoy the way the long grasses ripple in the breeze.

Follow the trodden path across the grassy slopes, eventually bearing right to a point below the Dower House where the trodden path crosses the main paved cycle path up from the Frome Valley (15).



The trodden path crosses the cycle path below the Dower House

The **Dower House** certainly makes the most of its view-commanding position within Stoke Park Estate. These days the Dower House is home to luxury flats, having previously seen use as a mental hospital. In those days it was a grey, forbidding sight from the M32.

Follow the trodden path around the base of the hill. After you have passed the Dower House, bear left and follow the path as it enters the tree line, reaching a gate (16).

This final, enigmatic area of Stoke Park Estate has the feel of an abandoned garden gone to woodland.

Passing through the gate, you will find yourself on a paved woodland footpath climbing the hill below the modern housing at the top.



Climbing through the woodland

After climbing for some time, the path ends abruptly at a flight of steps that goes back down to the right (17).

Follow the steps back down the hill. At the foot of the steps, turn left onto a path that heads back up through the woodlands next to Stoke Lane.

This last section of path is lined with overgrown shrubs mixed in with more typical native trees and plants.

When the path comes to a second abrupt end, turn left and climb more steeply to reach a gate back to civilisation (18). Step through onto Wren Close.

You are now back among the modern houses and flats of Stoke Gifford.

Follow Wren Close around to the left, reaching Parnell Road at an open area.



Dower House and the clock tower from Wren Close

You have reached the grand approach to the Dower House, where the modern houses have been designed along more classical lines to blend in with their distinguished neighbour. An imposing clock tower in grey stone dominates the Parnell Road end of the space.

Turn right onto Parnell Road, following it gently downhill through modern housing with colourful front yard planting to return to Jellicoe Avenue and complete Walk Twenty-One.

Coming Up

Walk Twenty-Two 'Henleaze and Westbury-on-Trym' will take us to the more centrally located suburb of Henleaze. From there, we will take a wander through Badocks Wood, following the Trym Valley, and will eventually reach the historic village centre of Westbury-on-Trym, experiencing a distinctive mixture of affluent suburban housing and narrow, leafy lanes.

Mike's Bristol Walks
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