

6 *Blackburn and Witton Country Park*

Explore the countryside surrounding Blackburn and the town itself on this varied and memorable walk

START: Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, Blackburn (GPS waypoint SD 681 283)

DISTANCE: 7 miles (11km)

DIFFICULTY: 🏃🏻 **HEIGHT GAIN:** 🏔️

APPROX. TIME: Allow 3 hours

PARKING: Pay and display car park behind the museum

ROUTE TERRAIN: Road, pavement, gravel track, woodland and field pathways, canal towpath

FACILITIES: Available throughout

SUITABILITY: Not suitable for prams or wheelchairs throughout whole route, dogs allowed but must be kept under control around livestock

OS MAPS: Landranger 103 (Blackburn and Burnley), Explorer 287 (West Pennine Moors)



A varied walk starting in the heart of Blackburn, before heading out to the countryside of Witton Country Park via the Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

There's so much to see in terms of architecture and historical sights on this route, but there's also wildlife to be seen, with kingfisher and an array of waterfowl spotted during the canalside sections.

The whole of this walk may be classed as inaccessible, but the city centre sections are suitable for wheelchairs and prams, and parts of Witton Country Park are accessible.

Blackburn is a large town in Lancashire, north of the West Pennine Moors, and on the southern edge of the Ribble Valley. It is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 as 'Blacheborne'. The origins of the name are uncertain, but some believe that it is Old English and means 'black stream'. Blackburn grew around the crossing of a Roman military road and the River Blakewater. The Roman road passed close to the site of Blackburn Cathedral

and linked Ribchester (known as Bremetennacum Veteranorum) and Mamucium (a fort at Castlefield in Manchester).

There is a record of a 'church of Blagbourne' around the year 596 AD. The town became important in Anglo-Saxon times when the 'Blackburnshire Hundred' came into existence as a division of the kingdom of Northumbria, covering an area similar to modern East Lancashire. During the 12th century, the town's importance declined somewhat, as the nearby market town of Clitheroe became the regional centre.

Blackburn is a former mill town, and textile production has been a key industry since the 13th century - then a small scale domestic system with weavers working the wool in their own homes. It grew into a cottage industry, but it was the Industrial Revolution that changed Blackburn into a boomtown of the textile industry. The growth led Blackburn's population to rise from less than 5,000 to more than 130,000 during the mid 18th to the early 20th century.

However, by the mid 20th century the textile industry was in decline, and the closure of the mills led to economic and social problems for the town. Blackburn has since received significant investment and redevelopment through government funding and the European Regional Development Fund.

The town is also significant in the brewing industry. In 1807, the Daniel Thwaites and Co brewery was established here, and still operates from its original town centre site today. The company has more than 350 pubs in the North of England and the Midlands.

There has been a church on the site of Blackburn's grade II listed cathedral for more than 1,000 years. The cathedral itself was built in 1820 and features an impressive lantern tower with 56 panes of coloured glass.

The town's centre is currently undergoing a multi-million pound redevelopment, and Blackburn with Darwen Council has already completed renovation work on some key public places, notably the Church Street area, with its grade II listed art deco Waterloo Pavilions.

Getting there

The museum is situated on the corner of Richmond Terrace and Museum Street. If travelling to

the area by car, Blackburn can be reached by the M65 via the M6 or M61. If you are travelling from Preston, Blackburn can be reached on the A677, from Bolton on the A666 and from Chorley on the A674.

If you're travelling by public transport, Blackburn train station is right in the city centre, with lines linking you to Clitheroe, Blackpool, Manchester, Colne and York. From the station, it's around a 10 minute walk to the museum and the beginning of this route.

Where to visit

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery

Museum Street, Blackburn, Lancashire, BB1 7AJ

Ideally located at the start of this walk, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery is the perfect place to pop into after you've completed this route.

It's one of the first purpose built free museums to open outside of London and houses a rich and fascinating collection, covering fine art, decorative art, Egyptology, coins, manuscripts, natural history, social history and South Asia.

With more than 1,000 Japanese prints, 5,000 examples of coins and money, 500 books and manuscripts, and the largest icon collection outside London - plus a dedicated Egyptology space which is home to the most sought after item in the whole museum, the Mummy - you certainly won't be short of things to see.

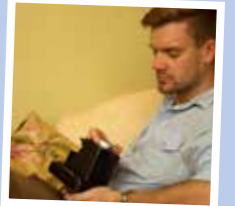


As well as the fixed exhibits, there's an ever-changing programme of events to suit everyone, from coffee mornings to music events, alongside unique learning sessions to inspire and motivate young children.

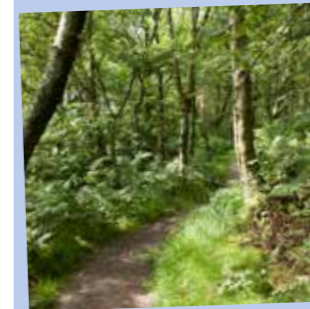
Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery is free to visit and is open Wednesday to Saturday from 12pm until 4.45pm. For more information, detailed event schedules and to plan your visit further, visit www.blackburnmuseum.org.uk

The walker's view

Christian Thompson discovers the sights and sounds of Blackburn



If you like variety in your walks, then this is definitely the route for you. There's so much to keep you entertained, so take a deep breath, as the following list is a long one.



There's the stunning beauty of the woodland at Witton Country Park, the iconic mill town terraced houses and contemporary design in architecture, muscling in on the territory of buildings established in centuries past. The impressive and attractive architectural treats begin as you start your route at the ornate and decorative Museum and Art Gallery building.

There's more: famous local business structures such as the Thwaites tower, the canalside relics of the disused, low-speed highway and the inevitable wildlife adorning the water's edge. I loved it and I think you would too!

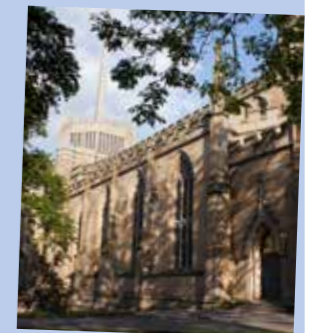
This seven-mile route packs in so much to enjoy. Witton Country Park provides the serenity and peacefulness, while at any opportunity, the industrial and commercial landmarks can be seen from high on the countryside hills. The gaps in the trees provide a frame for the industrial and commercial picture, from the countryside's perspective.

In the town, the stunning cathedral, among the numerous architectural masterpieces, towers proudly, as modern structures continue to add to the character of the once mill town, creating a forward-reaching outlook to 21st century life.

The canal issues haunting memories of the once vibrant and bustling waterway. Lining the canal are the stone warehouses, which were built to stand the test of time; the weak, shattered glass the only chink in the armour of these stalwart, stubborn and trustworthy structures.

As ever, my eyes for signs of wildlife were firmly open, a kingfisher being the undoubted highlight along the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. Closely following behind in the excitement stakes were grey wagtail, Canada geese, coots and moorhens, and a pair of mute swans, with three grey-coated teenagers in tow.

Town and countryside walks are definitely for me, and I'm sure they'll be for you too.



While you are there!

Blackburn Cathedral

Cathedral Close, Blackburn, BB1 5AA

Blackburn's stunning Anglican Cathedral is one of England's newest cathedrals and offers visitors a green oasis of calm in the bustling town centre. As well as stunning architecture, the cathedral contains a fantastic religious art collection, including the 35ft sculpture, 'Healing of the Nation' on its exterior, described as one of the most innovative pieces of modern sculpture at any English cathedral.

A regular programme of major musical events and recitals keeps music lovers happy, while the Café in the Crypt serves wonderful lunches and snacks focusing on Fair Trade and organic produce.

For details of what's on, visit www.blackburncathedral.com



Nature reserves and country parks

There's plenty of outdoor space to enjoy in Blackburn, with Witton Country Park offering 480 acres of mixed woodland, parkland, grassland and farmland, and Pleasington Old Hall Woods nature reserve just outside of the town centre.

The reserve has mixed woodland and a pretty Victorian walled garden, which has been converted into a wildlife area. The walled garden had previously fallen into ruin, but was restored and redesigned in the late 1980s. Flowering plants were introduced to encourage wildlife, and species such as water soldier, greater spearwort and water lily were planted in the pond to create an area for aquatic insects and amphibians to breed in. The open water at the reserve also benefits many species of bird, including nuthatches, garden and willow warblers, mallards and moorhens.

Then there's Witton Country Park, which is a 480 acre space west of the town, made up of mixed woodland, parkland, farmland and rough grassland. A network of paths and nature trails wind through the park past picnic spots, a childrens play area and visitor centre, making it an ideal day out for the family.

The estate was once owned by the Feilden family, who built and lived in Witton House, creating the park at the same time. The house and estate were used by the army during World Wars I and II, as was the case with many manor houses and stately properties throughout the county. Sadly, the house was demolished in 1952, after being bought by the Blackburn Corporation some years earlier. The outbuildings did survive however and the former stables and coach houses were renovated in the late 1970s.

Wildlife watch

While this walk starts right in the centre of Blackburn, there are still plenty of wildlife spotting opportunities not to be missed. While walking along the banks of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, look for kingfisher and grey wagtail alongside some of the more common species, such as coot and moorhen. When you reach Witton Country Park, make sure to keep an eye out for jay, long-tailed tits, buzzard and Mediterranean gulls in particular.

There's even a chance to spot some species around the town centre; watch for waxwings, lesser black-backed, herring and common gull.



Cut out this page and take with you...

6 Blackburn

MUSEUM STREET, BLACKBURN, LANCASHIRE, BB1 7AJ

A varied and memorable walk from the heart of the town out into the countryside, taking in many of Blackburn's notable landmarks.

This is not a fully accessible walk, however parts of Witton Country Park and the city centre are suitable for prams and wheelchair users.



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6 Your walk, step-by-step

START Stand in the entrance of Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery and face outwards. Turn left and walk across the point where Exchange Street and King William Street meet, at the pelican crossing. Pass the black-windowed Blackburn council office building on your left, heading towards Debenhams at the end of the mall walkway.

Turn right at Debenhams, and take the next left under the flyover, where you will see the sign for Higher Church Street on the buildings straight ahead. Turn left and then slight right towards the unmissable cathedral and, after having enjoyed a good look around, keep to the left hand side of the cathedral, where you take the next available left onto the town centre concourse.

Turn right, then shortly after cross Railway Road, keeping to the right to head onto Salford and then onto Eanam. Pass Cicely Lane on the right and just after passing the Thwaites Brewery Tower, take the next right, walking into the car park. Walk straight ahead towards the green iron gate surrounded by trees, passing through the gap and up the brick steps onto the canal. Turn right onto the Leeds and Liverpool Canal **A** and follow the towpath, heading in the direction of Liverpool.

"As you follow the towpath, the industrial reminders of Blackburn's economic past line the route, when all of a sudden the landscape ahead changes, becoming much more rural in outlook. Be on the lookout for a kingfisher at this point, as I was lucky enough to see one here."

After bridge 95 look out for the blue sign for 'green route to Witton Park' which you take **B**. After crossing the railway bridge into the playing field, head for the exit of the field to the left, then turn right up St Francis Road. At the end, turn right at Preston Old Road and you will soon arrive at the entrance to Witton Country Park. Use the crossing point opposite the park entrance to negotiate the busy road.

Enter the park **C** and make your way into the vast open green space, past the contemporary gym building on your right hand side, the style of which has become extremely popular with architects in the last decade.

Continue along the wide tarmac path, and just after the café, which is on your right, take the path to the right where the paths fork. This takes you towards Myerscough College. Almost immediately, turn right to follow the path marked Witton Weavers Way, into the gardens through the ornately decorated iron gates with the Lancastrian rose symbol.



Enjoy the path through the gardens, which brings you to an elegantly designed, lily-rich pond. Continue along the right edge of the pond and soon out of the garden through the opening in the stone wall.

Turn left to walk away from the café, following the wide gravel path, flanked by trees on either side. Within 100 metres you will arrive at a sign for 'Big Cover Wood Adventure' and you take this path to the left, into the woods.

Continue past the owl and the buzzard carvings, past the children's play area and slide on your right hand side, until you come to a small footbridge, which you cross. Take the steps up towards the woods, passing the otter carving on your left hand side. Continue up the steep steps and it seems that you will be matching every stride with a sighting of a grey squirrel darting for cover as you enter their territory.

Continue past the sign for Buncer Wood, still heading upwards, eventually to exit Big Cover Wood, into an open field through the metal kissing gate and along a well-trodden path across the field. Views open out to the left of Darwen Tower, the Rivington television mast and as you near the next kissing gate at the other end of the field, Ewood Park, the home of Blackburn Rovers comes into view. Look to the right for the iconic Thwaites Brewery tower and the unmistakable Blackburn council



office building with its black glass frontage.

Pass through the kissing gate to a short brick and stone path embedded into the ground, heading for the woods at the opposite end of the field, then pass through the kissing gate which takes you onto a country lane. Straight ahead, enter Billinge Wood through the gap in the wall and take the footpath immediately to the right, always following the right-most path, which eventually brings you out of the woods to Billinge End Road. Turn right **D** and after 200m, look to your right for a public footpath which leads you out to Billinge Avenue.

Straight ahead, look for Manor Road leading to Irving Place. Turn right when you reach Saunders Road and take the fourth left onto Downham Street. Continue along Johnston Street until you reach Montague Street **E**, which is the main road. Turn right, passing the white university centre building and use the pelican crossing adjacent the Beacon Centre to cross the main road.

Pass the Beacon Centre on your left hand side via the wide concourse, before passing Waves swimming baths on your right, until you reach the statue of the four-time British Prime Minister, Gladstone. Turn left onto Northgate to pass Blakeys pub on your left hand side, cross King William Street before turning right at Richmond Terrace and finally onto Museum Street, where the journey began.

