

A good walk - Marston Vale, Bedfordshire

All through the 20th century, Marston Vale was still a waste landscape, albeit of an industrial nature. Its sticky clay expanses encompassed the world's most active brickfields, and thousands of acres were stripped and dug for the raw material of brickmaking. Since the 2008 closure of the Stewartby brickworks, though, a green transformation has been wrought in these unpromising flatlands.

We set off from Marston Vale Forest Centre, at 9am already lively with youngsters gathering for a mucky day out. The centre is the hub of the Forest of Marston Vale, a community forest that has already seen a million trees planted across the old brickmaking wasteland. There are lakes, ponds, trails and woods where the clay was dug, and fantastic enthusiasm for their use among local people.

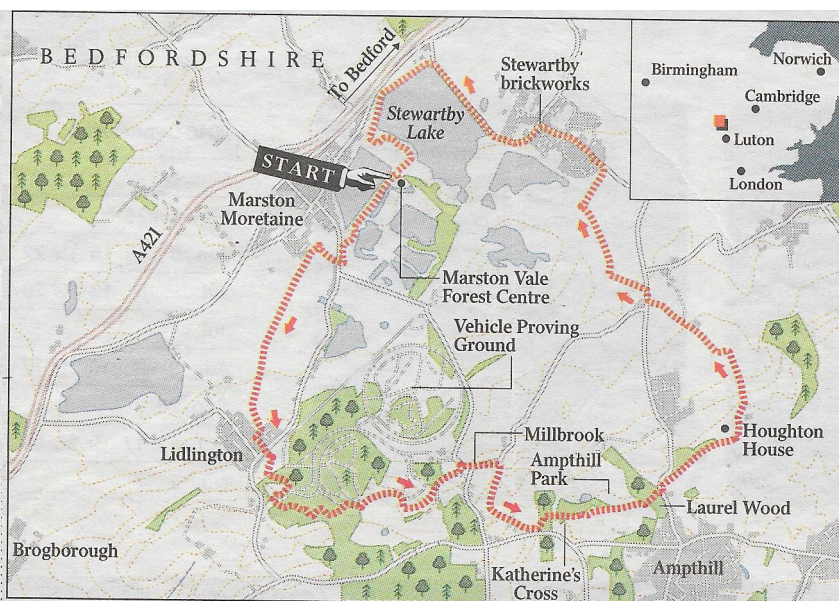
The 13-mile Marston Vale Timberland Trail leads across enormous cornfields towards an undulating greensand ridge. The path switchbacks through the woods on the ridge slope.

Up on the open heights of Ampthill Park stands a memorial cross to Katherine of Aragon, wronged wife of King Henry VIII — she was incarcerated here while Henry wrangled to divorce her. We stood looking out north across many sunlit miles of the Bedfordshire plain, before skirting the tall and haunted ruin of Houghton House. From here the cornfield paths returned us to the model village of Stewartby, flagged by the four mighty chimneys that remain of its redundant brickworks.

In their 1930s heyday the works produced 500 million bricks a year for the London Brick Company. Now the grey brickfields are turning green once more, and Stewartby's chimneys stand smokeless and gaunt over a beautiful lake, where the giant clay pits once lay in all their desolation.

Start Marston Vale Forest Centre, Marston Moretaine, Beds MK43 0PR (OS ref TL 004418)

Getting there Train to Millbrook or Stewartby (1 mile on foot). Bus 68 from Bedford. Road M1 Jct 13; A421 towards Bedford. In 5 miles, Marston Moretaine, Sports Centre signed to right. At T-junction in Marston, left; right at Co-op and follow Forest Centre.



Walk (12½ miles, easy but long; OS Explorers 192, 193, 208. For online maps, advice and more walks go to christophersomerville.co.uk) Outside Forest Centre, fingerpost points to Marston Vale Timberland Trail (TT). Follow excellently waymarked TT for 5½ miles to Katherine's Cross, Ampthill Park (025384). To visit Ampthill village, continue on TT. To bypass village — 250m past cross, fork left off TT by dog bin (028385). Follow Greensand Ridge Way through Laurel Wood to B530 (032387). Left for 100m; right (cross with care) on farm track, passing top of drive to Houghton House ruin (040393). Continue to gates of Houghton Park House; right over stile; footpath down 3

fields to plank footbridge (039401). Don't cross; turn left on TT and follow it for 4¼ miles back to Forest Centre. NB: Sticky clay underfoot — mucky after rain.

Lunch Picnic; café at Forest Centre.

Accommodation Black Horse, Ireland, Shefford, Beds SG17 5QL (01462 811398; blackhorseireland.com): excellent restaurant with rooms.

More information Forest Centre, Marston Moretaine (01234 767037; marstonvale.org); experiencebedfordshire.co.uk; visitengland.com; satmap.com; ramblers.org.uk

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