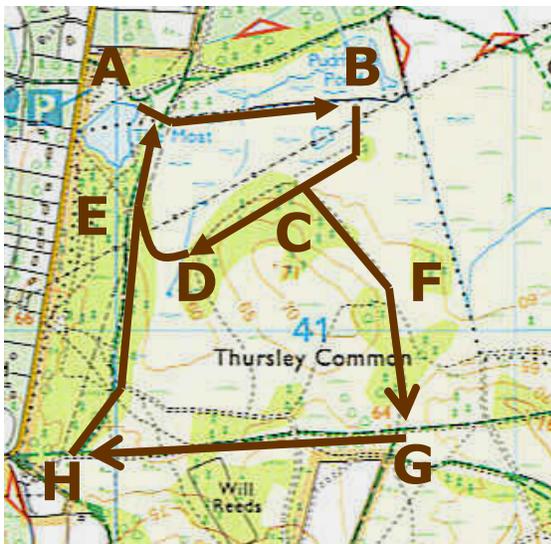


A walk near Godalming to view plants and habitats



Heath walk on Thursley Common

Greening Godalming is a local community group campaigning to make Godalming a greener town by helping people reduce their carbon footprints.



Location: The starting point is Moat Car Park, Thursley Common. Take the Elstead road from Godalming and branch off left after the Pack Inn towards Churt and Thursley. The car park is a little distance after the last of the houses on the left (but poorly sign-posted). Map reference: SU899415.

Short and Long Walks: The short walk (see map) is A, B, C, D, E, then back to A. The long walk includes the circuit F, G, H, and back to E and A. The short walk will take about one hour and the longer about two hours. The longer walk is worth taking to get a feel for the atmosphere of heath.

FROM A TO B: From the car park, go left around the lake until you come to a path on the left signposted by Natural England 'Heath Trail'. Turn left along the path and onto a boardwalk. Walk along the boardwalk to B, where you turn right onto a side boardwalk. Take time over this stretch to identify the many interesting types of wetland species that can be seen. Note the various types of bog moss (*Sphagnum*) present, as well as the large dark-leaved moss *Polytrichum*. Other plants present include heather (especially cross-leaved heather *Erica tetralix*), various members of the sedge family (Cyperaceae), including common cotton grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), deer grass (*Triphorum cespitosum*) and black bog rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), rushes (especially soft rush *Juncus effusus*), bog asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), early marsh orchid (*Dactylorhiza incarnata*) marsh pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), marsh St John's wort (*Hypericum elodes*) and purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*). Three types of carnivorous plants occur, two sundews (especially *Drosera rotundifolia* with round leaves) and bladderwort (*Utricularia*), which lives mostly underwater. The presence of carnivorous plants is an indication of the paucity of nutrients in the substrate of this environment. The floating leaves of pondweed (*Potamogeton*) can be

seen in some pools. The trees along the boardwalk are mostly silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and grey willow (*Salix cinerea*).

FROM B TO C: The boardwalk leads to a little island in the bog with Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), silver birch, gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and broom (*Cytisus scoparius*). Pine and birch are two characteristic trees of heathy areas and ready invaders of heath, which they soon transform to woodland unless controlled. Look out for invading birch and pine during the rest of the walk and note the measures taken for control (including burning). The grass with very narrow leaves and sprays of tiny silvery-coloured flowers is wavy hair-grass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*), a characteristic plant of heath. The path continues over another boardwalk up to C, where you must choose between the short walk (turn right) or long walk (turn left).

THE SHORT WALK (turning right at C): The first part of the walk takes you through typical heath on dry sandy soils. Notice that there are few types of plant species present compared with the bog. The most prominent species is ling heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), with bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) more local. Ling can grow to a height of over 80 cm, becoming rather straggly. Patches of even-sized ling indicate that there has been burning in the past, the height of the ling giving an idea of how recently. The small reddish-coloured plant that may be seen along the side of the path is sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*). At point D turn right onto a boardwalk. This is the way back to the car park.

THE LONG WALK (turning left at C): To follow this route, turn left at C and proceed around the side of a small hill (on the right), ignoring a small path ascending the hill, and then branch right where the track splits into two near a sign labelled 'Natural England'. Continue along this track until the path meets a large track labelled 'Public Bridleway' (G), where you turn right and then, after some distance (at H), right again along another large track. Watch out for patches of the purple moor grass (appearing yellowish in autumn). This grass is spreading on heathland in the British Isles as a result of fertilisation by dissolved forms of nitrogen in rainfall coming originally from the exhausts and the burning of fossil fuel.

A note on the heathland habitat

Heath near Godalming is found mainly on the Lower Greensand. Contrasting with upland heath (found on peaty mountain substrates in the north and west of the British Isles), lowland heath on mineral soils is a rare type of vegetation in our country and, indeed, in Europe as a whole. It is largely restricted to a narrow zone with a mild oceanic-type climate stretching from northern Spain to Sweden. The most characteristic plant of heath is heather. Three species occur, the commonest being ling (*Calluna vulgaris*, characterised by scale-like leaves) and the other two being bell heather (*Erica cinerea*, with red-purple flowers) growing in dry places and cross-leaved heather (*Erica tetralix*, with pink flowers) in wetter habitats. Heathland has a characteristic fauna, including the adder, smooth snake and sand lizard (the last two being national rarities).

Surrey's heath is considered a priority habitat by conservationists. This is partly because of the rarity of this habitat in national and global contexts and also because so much heath has

been lost. Eighty-five percent of heath present in Surrey in 1762 has disappeared. Historically, the main cause of loss was reclamation for the 'new agriculture' developed in Britain from the 18th century onwards, a time when heath was seen as unproductive and worthless. A principal current threat is colonisation by trees, especially birch and pine. Heathland managers need to control the spread of trees, often achieved through a mixture of periodic burning and physical clearance.

The heathland on Thursley Common has a boggy area, considered to be the best example of acidic bogland in southeast England. Among the locally rare plants present are three types of carnivorous plants, that is two species of sundew (*Drosera*) and one of bladderwort (*Utricularia*). Worldwide, carnivorous plants are typically confined to acidic environments, such as this, the carnivorous habit being a way of acquiring scarce nutrients (from insects) in a nutrient-deficient environment. The fauna of the bogland includes twenty-six species of dragonflies, a very high number for the British Isles.