

Walk no 1 – 24 April 2026

The upper Churn Valley, walking from Rendcomb, hosted jointly with Cotswolds National Landscape

Oh to be in England, now that April's there!

Robert Browning might have been listening as we gathered at Rendcomb Village Hall on a glorious Friday morning in late April. Spring was literally springing as we set off, led by our walks leader Anne, with fresh green leaves unfurling, bluebells and primroses flowering and lambs bounding in the fields.



But it's dry, and after a wet early spring, almost shockingly so.

The theme of our walk was *Rivers, landscapes and people*, and among with us were people and organisations concerned with both low flows and flooding (particularly affecting Cirencester) and working on how good management of the upper Churn catchment could help both.

We began by crossing the stepping stones over what's known locally as Shawswell Brook, then walking up the hill past Green Meadow Farm and its beautiful old barns, some now being prepared for conversion into housing.

At the top of the hill we joined the Monarch's Way and walked through idyllic woodland, teeming with bluebells and wild garlic, then downhill to join the bubbling river Churn.





There we stopped and heard about the work being done by the Environment Agency, Cirencester and Churn Waterways and Environment Partnership and the Cotswold Rivers Trust, much of it in partnership with Cotswold National Landscape, to work with landowners, farmers and local communities to slow the flow of water, hold it in the soil, and prevent run-off. We heard about the countless volunteers in Gloucestershire (though more are always needed!) working as citizen scientists and data collectors to help us understand and better manage the water systems we live among. We know there are huge problems in the water system, but there's a lot of exciting work going on to address them.



We returned to Rendcomb along the old carriageway drive and either picnicked or took advantage of the delicious paninis in the Village Shop before reassembling at the Village Hall for the afternoon walk. This took us back up the valley to Shawswell, where (along with rescuing a lamb stuck on the wrong side of a fence) we reflected on both the beauty of this quiet valley and some of the challenges we face when managing water to meet society's wider needs.



One of our number reminded us that we are all 80% water, and we should be able to find a more sustainable way of managing it for the future. Another, who works with communities across the county facing flooding and other emergencies, inspired us with the many ways local people are already involved as flood wardens and volunteers, seeking solutions for their communities and those around them.

Returning to the Village Hall we were welcomed by cold drinks, tea and a spectacular cake, thanks to Cotswolds National Landscape, whose 60th birthday we celebrated as we quenched our thirst.



We were then treated to an inspiring talk by Alex Robinson, a local (Woodmancote) landowner who is a leading light in the Cirencester and Churn Waterways and Environment Partnership.

He is changing the management of his own farm to improve the organic content of his soil, whether it's used for arable or grazing and planting tens of thousands of trees to stabilise the soil and slow the flow of water.



In discussion, we heard how many people are working together across the Upper Thames Catchment: ‘joining the dots’ as Bex, the CEO of Cotswolds National Landscape put it, to improve the management and quality of water as it flows into Cirencester and – of course, beyond as it flows into the Thames and ultimately to London. If ever there was an illustration that what we do locally affects the whole country, this is it. We also heard how work is going on in Cirencester to address blocks in the system, improve water quality and mitigate the impacts of the flooding we all see – especially around the Tesco roundabout – each winter.

We heard that local people are worried about new housing being built in the wrong place, about the risks to their own housing and wellbeing from raw sewage discharges; and that even if there are other overriding worries for Parish Councils (such as there are in Rendcomb at present, with the closure of Rendcomb College) these issues are important to local people, and people must be part of any solution. Parish Councils don’t have many powers but they can draw people together and do practical things – allotments and biodiversity improvements were quoted.

We closed on a high with a sense that, working together, there are things we can do to seek and implement holistic solutions that benefit people, make more sense economically than our current disjointed policies, and are environmentally sustainable.