



Manningtree Circular walk

River Stour - Constable country



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Length 17.3km (10.7 miles), 5 hours. For the whole outing, including trains, sights and meals, allow at least 9 hours 30 minutes.

Toughness 4 out of 10.

OS Maps Explorer 196 or Landrangers 168 & 155. Manningtree, map reference TM 094 323, is in **Essex**, 10km north-east of Colchester. East Bergholt, in the second half of the walk, is in **Suffolk**, 3km north-west of Manningtree.

Features This is a walk through the Stour valley that Constable loved, passing by the settings of some of his most famous paintings, a landscape now protected as the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Lunch is in the beautiful village of Dedham. In the afternoon the route goes past Dedham Lock and Mill, and from Essex into Suffolk, along the River Stour to Stratford St Mary and its church; and from there to East Bergholt, Constable's birthplace, which has a church with an unusual bell cage and an old friary that is now an organic farming community. Tea is by Flatford Mill and more Constable connections.

After prolonged heavy rain, the river may overflow and you may have to make a detour to avoid flooded water meadows.

Walk Options

There are bus services connecting Stratford St Mary, East Bergholt and Dedham with Manningtree and Colchester. Or you could get a taxi from any of these villages.

You can shorten the walk by 4km by not going to Stratford St Mary after lunch. Directions for the short cut are given in the text.

History

John Constable was born in 1776 in East Bergholt and his successful corn merchant father owned Flatford Mill and eventually Dedham Mill. Though supposed to take over the family business, Constable became a landscape painter and much of his work reflects his attachment to Suffolk scenes. The love of his life, Maria Bicknell, was the granddaughter of the rector of East Bergholt known to him from childhood but he had to overcome opposition due to their social class differences before they could marry. When Maria died of tuberculosis in 1828, Constable had to bring up their seven children alone. He died in 1837, at the age of 61. Constable never went abroad, concentrating on painting landscapes in Suffolk, Hampstead, Salisbury and Brighton (they moved south for the sake of Maria's health). The walk passes the buildings in Dedham where Constable was a grammar school pupil and the scenes for many of his paintings, including *The Hay Wain*, *The Cornfield*, *Dedham Vale*, *Dedham Mill*, *Flatford Mill* and *The Valley of the Stour*.

St Mary's Church, Lawford, has long views over the River Stour and its estuary. It was probably built by Sir Benet de Cokefield, Lord of the (Lawford) Manor, in about 1340. It has a fine chancel in the Decorated Gothic style and a timber roof typical of the area. The discovery of treasonable correspondence led to the church's forfeiture by the Crown during the Reformation.

The village of **Dedham** prospered with the wool trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Work started on the **Parish Church of St Mary**, Dedham, in 1492. Constable attended services at this church, and its tower is a feature in his paintings. The church was renowned for its preaching and contains a seventeenth-century monument depicting a preacher known as 'Roaring Rogers' with a book in his hands.

Stratford St Mary contains a henge, a circular sanctuary dated around 4,000 BC but it can only be detected from the air. The church, a fine example of Decorated Gothic, is far larger than needed by the village, which had a peak population of 673 - it was built as big as their prosperity from agriculture could afford, to honour God. The letters of the alphabet are depicted around the exterior, to remind passers-by that all the sacred scriptures can be composed from these letters. Inside, note the variety of

embroidered church kneelers in the pews. The oldest house in the village dates from 1334 and the timber-framed **Priest's House** has solid oak beams, four to five inches thick.

The **Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, East Bergholt**, contains a possibly fifteenth-century inscription that reads: 'What ere thou art, here reader see, in this pale glass what thou shalt be, despised wormes and putrid slime, then dust forgot and lost in time.' In its churchyard is the tomb of Constable's parents. The tower was never completed, it is said because of the death in 1530 of the church's benefactor, Cardinal Wolsey. The bells were therefore 'temporarily' housed in a **bell cage**, built in 1531 - one that is still used and is unique, in that the bells are rung, not by wheel and rope, but by force of hand.

Old Hall, East Bergholt, has had many incarnations: a country house (painted by Constable), a nunnery and then a friary. In 1972, it was set up as a commune by a group who advertised in the *Guardian* for middle-class Greens, and has matured into a stable community.

Travel

Take the train nearest to **9.30 am** from **Liverpool Street** Station to **Manningtree**. Journey time about 1 hour. Trains back from Manningtree run two or three times an hour.

Lunch

A pub lunch with Italian inspiration is available at the **Sun Inn**, Dedham (tel [01206 323 351](tel:01206323351)), some 6 km into the walk, serving lunch daily from 12 noon to 2.30 pm Monday to Friday, until 3 pm on Saturday and until 4 pm on Sunday. This is the suggested lunch stop on this walk.

The **Dedham Centre Tearoom** (tel [01206 322 666](tel:01206322666)) in the Arts & Crafts Centre serves tearoom fayre (sandwiches, jacket potatoes, soup, salads and daily specials, plus homemade cakes and scones) between 10 am and 5 pm. (groups of more than eight should phone to book)

The **Essex Rose Tea room** (tel [01206 323 101](tel:01206323101)) is another alternative for lunches and light meals between 9 and 4.30 pm.

Opposite these tea rooms is the **Marlborough Head Inn** (tel [01206 323250](tel:01206323250)).

For those wishing to take a late lunch, there used to be three pubs to choose from in Stratford St Mary, some 3 km from Dedham. Latest update on these (July 2023): **The Anchor** (tel [01206-322143](tel:01206322143)), under new ownership since May 2021, is open seven days a week, serving food from 12 noon until closing. The **Black Horse**, an old drovers' inn frequented by highwaymen, is PERMANENTLY CLOSED, according to the website. The

Swan Inn (tel [01206-321244](tel:01206-321244)) is open from Wednesday to Sunday but with construction work taking place on site, normal opening hours may be subject to variation and change - according to its website, the pub has been temporarily closed - since July 2022 !.

Tea The suggested tea place is the National Trust's **Bridge Cottage Tearoom, by Flatford Mill** (tel [01206 298 260](tel:01206%20298%20260)) but opening hours vary according to the season; it is open every day of the week from May to September up to 5.30 pm while at other times of the year it is closed on certain days and may finish early so do phone to check.

An alternative for tea is the **Manningtree Station Buffet** (tel [01206 391114](tel:01206%20391114) which is open to 9.00 pm or later except on Sundays when it closes at 2.00 pm.

Updates No major changes. This edition June 2020. Pub update July 2023.

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By Car **Start** CO11 2LH

Help National Rail: 03457 48 49 50 • Traveline (bus times): 0871 200 22 33 (12p/min) • TFL (London) : 0343 222 1234

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Walk Directions

The [numbers] refer to a sketch map in the book.

1. **[1]** Coming off the train from London go under the tunnel to exit **Manningtree Railway Station** and *turn right downhill* with a carpark on your left, direction 255°.
2. At the bottom of the slope *turn left*, following the footpath sign to Flatford and Dedham. In 25 metres you reach a gravelled track and *turn right*, your direction 275°.

3. In 45 metres *turn left* on a signposted footpath and in 15 metres go through a metal swing gate. The footpath now starts to head uphill, with a field fence on your left and a ditch on your right, your direction 190°.
4. In 200 metres bend right and then left with the path to continue on, as the path levels out. After a further 400 metres you come to the churchyard of **St Mary's Lawford**. Ignoring a stile on the left, continue on the path which enters the churchyard. Lawford Hall (marked on the OS map) is away on the right.
5. 8 metres inside the churchyard *fork left and then right* to go past the side of the church to its entrance. Continue past the church door, or if you visit the church turn right when you leave, going westwards.
6. In 45 metres go out by the wooden swing gate beside a cottage. Cross the tarmac road and take the footpath ahead *signposted half-right* through a car parking area (ignore another signpost 15 metres to the left).
7. In 30 metres go through a gap in the hedge and in another 15 metres go through a gap where there used to be a wooden swing gate with an Essex Way sign. Follow the path round to the right then left and after 100 metres go through a wooden kissing gate with a metal fieldgate on its left-hand side. Ahead is a gravelled lane where you *turn left*, with a hedgerow on your right, your direction 255°.
8. In 240 metres go through a defunct kissing gate (with a wooden fieldgate on its left-hand side) to *go left* on a tarmac road, your direction due south **[2]**.
9. In 150 metres by concrete and wooden footpath signs *turn right* into a field. ! Your way ahead over this field will depend on its being in crop or not, and the paths marked out by the farmer. If there are three paths marked out, take the middle one, half-right on a diagonal, on a bearing of 250°. If there are no obvious paths ahead, proceed ahead along the *left-hand edge* of the field. In 410 metres you come to the end of the field, with a fence ahead and a line of pylons immediately behind it. Here *turn right* to follow the fence along the field boundary. In 150 metres the middle route joins you from the right. Here *turn left* at a post with yellow arrows and in 10 metres cross into the next field through a gap.
10. Follow the enclosed path with a hedge on your left and a fence on your right. In 160 metres go past a wooden pole to reach a gravel track. *Turn left* and in 5 metres *curve right with the track* to continue in the previous direction.
11. **[3]** In 40 metres ignore a turn to the left. In 25 metres you pass a corrugated hay barn on your right. In a further 100 metres *bear right* with the track downhill, passing a house entrance on the right after 40 metres and then a clapboard barn.
12. Eight metres beyond the barn *fork right* on a path marked with a yellow arrow on a post, your direction 315°. In 20 metres you pass a wooden log shed on your left and keep on down, on a winding path through the wood.
13. The path soon swings right over wooden slats covered with chicken wire and at the bottom, pass onto a wooden bridge covered with chicken wire across a stream and

then over a stile at the far end of the bridge.

14. Continue on and in 60 metres *cross the railway line* with a stile at each end and then go through a metal kissing gate.
15. Carry straight on, your direction 310°, up through the middle of a grassy field. After 215 metres go through a pair of metal kissing gates and onwards between the wooden fences of horse paddocks.
16. In 110 metres go through another metal kissing gate and keep ahead, with a pond on your right, on an enclosed path. In 55 metres you come out onto a tarmac road. Cross it *slightly to the right* and go through a metal kissing gate on a signposted footpath. *Turn half left*, down a field, your direction 305°, with a view over the River Stour Valley on your right-hand side.
17. In 140 metres go through a metal kissing gate in a gap in the hedge in the far corner of the field to reach a tarmac road. *Turn right*, your direction 340° gently downhill. In 35 metres you pass Frostwood House on your left and the road swings to the left.
18. **[4]** In 220 metres, where the road veers right, you *go left* through a wooden swing gate along a signposted footpath uphill, your direction 250°. In 65 metres go through another wooden swing gate and straight on with the field edge on your left.
19. In 60 metres go through a wooden swing gate and onwards with Dedham church now visible to your right.
20. In a further 80 metres go through another wooden swing gate, then in 140 metres go through a metal kissing gate and straight on along a fenced-in wide grassy way between fields.
21. In 230 metres go through a fieldgate out on to a driveway, passing a pantiled clapboard building.
22. Carry straight on the driveway for 75 metres to a car road T-junction *where you go right*, due north, with Lombardy poplars on both sides of the road.
23. **[5]** In 80 metres by a concrete finger post *go left* through a wooden swing gate, your direction 280°, downhill, across a field. In a further 125 metres go down some steps, then swing right for 25 metres to go through a wooden kissing gate, with an Essex Way sign.
24. Continue along a narrow path with a private garden on your left and then down through the front garden of a house. Then *go right* on its gravelled drive to a tarmac road where you *turn right*, initially gently uphill, your direction 20°.
25. In 200 metres take the tarmac lane, signposted public footpath *to your left*, just after a pink painted cottage.
26. In 20 metres you pass the timber-framed Old House. In a further 30 metres *fork right* and go through a wooden swing gate (a metal fieldgate to its right) and across the tarmac front garden of a house. Just in front of a metal fieldgate on the far side, *turn right* through a metal swing gate, your direction 30°.

27. In 8 metres go through a gap where there used to be a stile, swing left and keep close to the farmyard on your left, on a wide grassy way. In 30 metres you pass a notice on your left in memory of two horses, Fred and Shem 'Now forever in Trapalanda'.
28. In a further 90 metres go through a wooded swing gate and over a plank bridge with a scaffolding pole railing over a stream. Either cross the field diagonally to the right to the opposite corner or if that is not possible because of growing crops, go straight ahead and when you come to a footpath crossing after 65 metres turn right (without going through the hedge) for 110 metres.
29. Either way you come to a wooden bridge with scaffolding pole handrails over a stream. Cross it, go through the metal kissing gate on its far side and continue ahead, across a field, your direction 20°, through Lower Park (marked on the OS map) towards an old oak tree.
30. In 120 metres go through an old rusty metal kissing gate and onwards. In a further 105 metres go through another rusty kissing gate and continue along a fenced-in path.
31. In 110 metres go through a metal kissing gate into a playing field where you *turn left* along the top edge of the field, your direction 280°. In 80 metres exit the playing field and *turn right* on a public footpath with trees and a holly hedge on your left, and on your right a fence and finally a breeze-block wall.
32. In 90 metres you come out on to a gravel lane (School Lane) and go onwards, in 20 metres passing the Old School House on your right. In a further 80 metres you come out on to Dedham High Street where you *turn right*.
33. In 80 metres you come to the **Sun Inn** , one of the suggested lunch stops, on your left. In another 30 metres you pass the **Parish Church of St Mary, Dedham** on your right (worth a visit inside). In a further 35 metres the **Essex Rose Tea Room** , also a lunch option, is on your left, and on the opposite corner of Mill Lane is **The Marlborough Head Inn** , with the war memorial over to your right. Continue straight on and just beyond the war memorial are the buildings on the right that were once the grammar school attended by Constable. 120 metres past the war memorial you come to the Dedham Arts and Crafts Centre, which includes the **Dedham Centre Tearoom**, another suggested lunch stop.
34. Coming out of the Arts and Crafts Centre after lunch, *turn right*, your direction 85°, (or if you have lunched at the Sun Inn or Essex Rose turn left on leaving and continue up the High Street). 70 metres after the Arts and Crafts Centre, where the road veers right, *take the first left fork*, a worn tarmac lane between fences, your direction 25°, towards a pink house (Dedham Hall on the OS map).
35. In 65 metres *go left* through a gap where there used to be a wooden kissing gate along a signposted public footpath, your direction 335°, beside a pond on your left. In 100 metres the path continues slightly to the left through a small meadow and in

a further 50 metres go through the frame of a wooden kissing gate with a stream on your left.

36. In 30 metres you pass a car park on the left. In a further 75 metres go past a missing stile to reach a road which fords the stream. *Go left*, crossing over the streams on two footbridges, your direction 275°.
37. In 30 metres you come to the main road (the B1029) opposite a converted mill. Cross this road and *turn right*. In a further 75 metres go over a watercourse and almost immediately *go left* following a concrete public footpath sign, your direction 245°.
38. In 50 metres, with the converted mill now on your left, cross the bridge over the weir and in 25 metres go over the lockbridge of **Dedham Lock**. Then continue down the steps and after 15 metres through a metal kissing gate.
39. **Shortcut Option**
40. Here you have a choice. To take the shortcut, which misses out Stratford St Mary, *turn right* along the River Stour. In 100 metres you cross a road, and carry on along the river bank, with the river on your right. Initially the river curves to the right, but after 1km it curves sharply to the left. 150 metres after this, there is a footbridge across the river to the right. Shortly before you come to the bridge, the path is enclosed by bushes.

41. When you get to the bridge, you can either cross it and turn left on its far side, to reach Flatford Mill in another 1km (and pick up onward directions from there at point [9A]).
42. Or to visit East Bergholt church, do not cross the footbridge, but keep on up the enclosed path, which soon becomes a car-wide track. In 200 metres, keep left on the track at a path junction, and keep on this broad track, ignoring ways off as it climbs uphill for around 400 metres to a T-junction with a road. You can now resume the main walk directions at point [8].

43. The Main Route Continues

44. After crossing the lockbridge, *turn left* with the field edge nearby on your left, your direction 245°. After 240 metres you pass a Greek temple boathouse on the other side of the river and shortly afterwards go through a metal kissing gate in a field boundary. You are now on the riverside Stour Valley Path.
45. Keep ahead over fields with the river to your left and in 550 metres at a field boundary go over a small wooden bridge, with a wooden swing gate on its nearside and a metal kissing gate on its far side. Keep alongside the river, following its bends, for another 400 metres and go through a metal kissing gate to the left of a metal field gate. 20 metres beyond it *go through a tunnel* under the A12.
46. **[6]** On the other side, after 20 metres go through a metal kissing gate and onto a tarmac road where *you turn right*, due north, soon entering Suffolk.

47. In 200 metres you enter the village of **Stratford St Mary** with a timber-framed house on your left and **The Black Horse pub** (CLOSED - probably permanently since August 2021), on your right. In 225 metres, with Mill House on your right, you pass a footpath signposted left which takes you in 25 metres to a lock which Constable painted.
48. Keep on the road and in a further 70 metres you pass The Valley House with its glass lookout roof chamber on your right. In a further 80 metres *turn right* immediately beyond **The Swan pub** (a late lunch option - although Temporarily Closed, per its website, since summer 2022) to go down an earth and gravel access road, your direction 100°.
49. In 200 metres go straight through the garden of the house at the end of the access road, now on a path, to come through a gate to a T-junction. *Turn left*, northwards.
50. In 115 metres you come to the main road where you *turn right*, your direction 100°. In 125 metres you pass the Tudor timber-framed **Priest's House**.
51. In a further 80 metres you pass **the Anchor Inn** on your left-hand side, your very late lunch possibility. In 220 metres ignore a turning left to Higham and carry straight on the B1029 signposted to Dedham, parallel to the A12 which is to your right.
52. In 200 metres you go under the A12 and come in 115 metres to the **Parish Church of Stratford St Mary**.
53. In a further 60 metres, at a road T-junction, *turn right* on the B1029 (signposted to Dedham). In a further 230 metres you pass Haywards Cottage on your left. After another 115 metres you pass Ravenys on your left and *immediately turn left* on a worn tarmac lane, soon a track, your direction 105° **[7]**.
54. In 200 metres the track narrows to a path and enters a lightly wooded area. In a further 300 metre ignore a path to your left to continue straight on, your direction 115°, with a hawthorn hedge on your right and a large open field to your left. You are skirting the water meadows which stretch away to Dedham in the distance.
55. In 340 metres you come to a potentially muddy T-junction where you *turn right* following a yellow arrow, due south. In 30 metres, in front of a pair of metal field gates, *turn left* to go on three planks over a stream. Ignore a stile to the right on the other side to continue ahead, through light woodland, initially very close to the fence on your right and then veering towards a stile ahead which you reach after 45 metres. Cross it and continue ahead, along the right-hand side of a field.
56. In 100 metres go over another stile, bear left and carry on, your direction 130°, through a water meadow, with a field fence on your left. Ackworth Manor House (which Randolph Churchill used to own) is visible to the left.
57. In 90 metres ignore a path continuing to the right and go over a stile to enter a fenced-in path. In 215 metres go over a stile and *bear left* with a river backwater to the right and a field edge on your left towards a cottage, your direction 105°.

58. In 40 metres go over a stile to reach an earth road where you *go left*, steadily uphill, your direction 50°.
59. In 110 metres you pass a fork to the left (which leads to a field where, 10 metres in, Constable painted *The Cornfield* (although the stream is now gone). Carry on steadily up the road and in 240 metres you come to a road junction with a bench opposite **[8]**.
60. Here, if you do not want to visit the East Bergholt Church, *turn right*. After 15 metres take the signposted footpath left, resuming the directions at [*] below.
61. Otherwise, to continue on the recommended route, *turn left*, your direction 320°. In 135 metres you pass a private back entrance to Old Hall Community on the right.
62. In 115 metres you come to the **Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, East Bergholt** and its bell cage in the churchyard on the far side of the church.
63. After visiting the church, retrace your steps southwards down the lane opposite the church beyond the war memorial for 250 metres. Ignore the private road on the right marked as a footpath to Dedham and Stratford opposite a bench (this was the path from which you previously emerged onto the road).
64. [*] In a further 15 metres take a signposted public footpath *left*, your direction 160°, to go alongside the road. In 265 metres you rejoin the road and in 15 metres start again following a footpath alongside the road.
65. In 65 metres you cross a footpath. Ignore the stile to your left and keep ahead. In a further 155 metres you cross a driveway to a sewage works and go straight on. After 130 metres you come down to the road and continue on it with a stream to your left.
66. You soon start to head uphill and in 170 metres you come to a road junction with a car park on the right. *Go left uphill*, your direction 70°, past the thatched Hay Barn on the right.
67. **[9]** In 100 metres *go right* on a signposted footpath, through a gap between metal fieldgates. Continue ahead, now gently downhill, with a fence on your right, again passing the Hay Barn - this time on your right.
68. In 80 metres, go through a gap in the field boundary to enter the National Trust Flatford estate. Continue ahead on uneven ground, with a fence on the right.
69. In 80 metres [!] *zigzag 5 metres to the right* to continue on, now with a hedge to your left, downhill. In 280 metres you come to a car road T-junction where you *turn left*, your direction 135°.
70. In 35 metres you come to the thatched and black timber-clad building, The Granary (a bed and breakfast establishment). In a further 60 metres you come to **[9A] Flatford Mill** where Constable painted *The Hay Wain* ; (it is now a field centre for nature studies).

71. *Turn back, retracing your steps.* Continue beyond The Granary to reach **Bridge Cottage Tearoom, Flatford**, the recommended tea place where there is also a National Trust shop and a small exhibition about Constable. Toilets are in the car park on the opposite side of the road.
72. After tea, *turn left* out of the Bridge Cottage complex and just beyond it, *left again* to go over the hump back bridge. On the other side *turn left* with the River Stour on your left, direction 140°.
73. In 50 metres you come to **Flatford Lock**, the subject of another Constable painting.
74. In 500 metres ignore the earth road to your left to *go straight on*, passing to the right of a concrete **flood defence barrier**, your direction 175°. In 40 metres cross a stream on a bridge and pass through a metal kissing gate. There is a National Trust sign on the right for Dedham Vale. Keep ahead and in 60 metres more, at the far end of the flood defence barrier, go up the embankment and *turn left* passing to the side of a kissing gate, following the signpost to Manningtree Station. Beyond this carry straight on along a raised embankment, a potentially muddy path in winter. The onward paths on the way to the railway station can be overgrown in summer.
75. In 260 metres pass to the side of a metal kissing gate, and 20 metres later a wooden one. In a further 70 metres, you pass under pylons and keep on along the estuary defence dyke, with the River Stour on your left.
76. In 300 metres you reach a three-way footpath sign on your left. Here *turn right*, away from the river, your direction 150° **[10]**.
77. In 60 metres go through a wooden swing gate. In a further 70 metres, veer left with the track, following a yellow arrow on a post on your right, your direction 105°.
78. In 300 metres *veer right* with the track and follow it under the railway tunnel, 275 metres away. *Go through this tunnel* and 15 metres beyond it *turn left* on a surfaced track, parallel to the railway lines on your left, due east.
79. In 600 metres you come to **Manningtree Railway Station**, for the last 150 metres retracing the morning's route. The **Buffet** is on the nearest platform.

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