



Hartford Civic Society - Village Walks (3)

Whitegate Way and Vale Royal Abbey

Start Point: Whitegate Railway Station Car Park

Distance: 7.5 miles

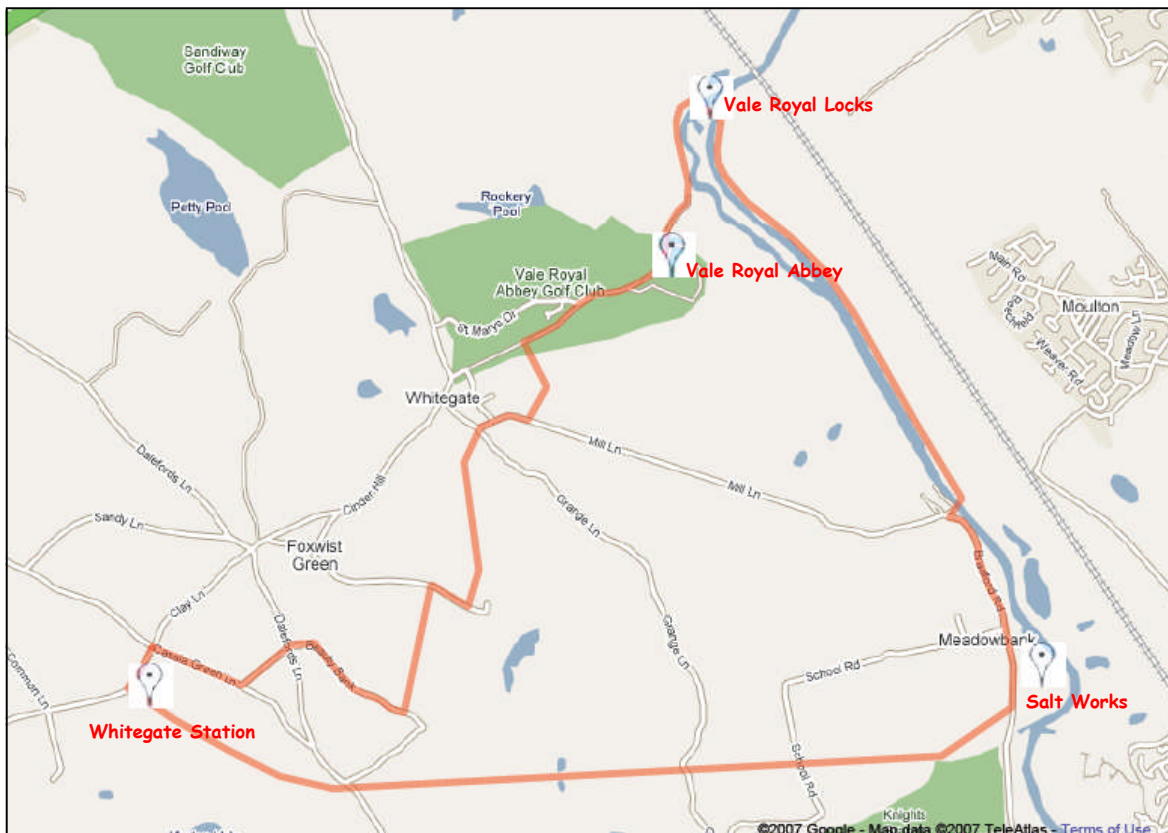
Paths: Grass field and woodland paths with some quiet roads

Waymarks: The path is generally well marked with footpath signs.

Observations: Toilets available at the start of the walk.

Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 267

The Whitegate Way follows the trackbed of the old railway that transported salt from the Winsford salt mine. This circular walk takes in part of the Way, passes the mine and goes along the Weaver valley before going through the grounds of Vale Royal Abbey and then fields and country lanes back to the start.



- Starting from the Car Park walk along the Whitegate Way towards Winsford (the toilet block should be on your right as you pass it—if it's on your left you are going the wrong way!).
- Follow the Way, keeping straight on at any path intersections, over Catsclough Crossing and, at one point, crossing straight over Grange Lane to continue on the path.
- At the main Winsford road turn left, crossing the road and walking past the Salt Mine.
- After the end of the mine's lorry park look for steps on the right leading down to the River Weaver.
- Cross the river here and turn left on the far side to follow the path alongside the river—there are picnic benches here so it's a convenient place for a break.
- Follow the river path until you reach Vale Royal Locks and cross back to the other bank.
- Follow the path up to a T junction with a tarmac lane. Turn left and follow it until you come to a gate into the grounds of Vale Royal Abbey.

- Enter the grounds and then walk along the road, passing the Abbey on your left.
- Once past the Abbey you will come to a row of new houses, opposite number 21 leave the road and follow the track branching off to your left that used to be the old driveway to the Abbey.
- Look out for a signposted footpath on your left, going over a stile and crossing a large field.
- At the far side of the field, near a wood, turn right and follow the path up to the road.
- Turn right and follow the road down the hill. Just before it bends sharply right, at the junction of Grange Lane and Mill Lane, look for a stile and path by the side of house opposite you.
- Take the path between beech hedges and over a small stream, crossing another stile and walking uphill to cross a field.
- Going through a gap in the hedge turn right and then after about 15 yards turn left to follow a field boundary to a stile in the corner of the field.
- Cross the stile and then another to pass along the side of a white house and reach a lane.
- Turn right onto the lane and follow it until you come to a signposted path on your left leading across fields.
- Follow this path across several fields to emerge onto another lane from between a row of houses.
- Turn right and follow the lane past The Plough public house and up to a crossroads on the main road.
- Go straight over the main road into Cassia Lane and follow it to a T junction.
- Turn right and follow the road to another T junction.
- Turn left. This road will take you over the railway bridge and the entrance to the car park will be on your left to complete the walk.

Winsford Salt Mine

Winsford Rock Salt Mine was opened in 1844 and is the oldest operating mine in the UK.

It is located 150 metres (over 500ft) below the Cheshire Plain and its naturally protective atmosphere stays at a constant 14C (56F) all year round with a humidity band of 60% - 70%.

The Mine produces over a million tonnes of Rock Salt a year and this is primarily used for highway de-icing.

The 'Room and Pillar' method of mining has formed a huge network of underground tunnels or roadways with an average height of 8 metres and a width of 20 metres. There are currently over 135 miles of tunnels but this grows daily.

Mining is carried out using a Joy Continuous Miner - one of the largest single Drum Head Mining Machines operating anywhere in the World.

In 1732 salt accounted for 79% of the cargo carried on the river Weaver.

Vale Royal Locks

As you approach the locks you can see the old course of the River Weaver diverging to the left over a weir. It was separated from the man-made navigable part of the river (Vale Royal Cut) when, between the 1730s and the end of the century, the river was straightened and locks built in order to allow the passage of larger commercial barges.

The size of craft that could be accommodated can be judged by looking at the dual lock system that was built as you re-cross the river. At each level change there are a pair of locks—one larger and one smaller.

Vale Royal Abbey

Founded in 1278 by King Edward I, the Cistercian Abbey took 53 years to build and was opened in 1330. The king laid the foundation stone on 13th August 1277 after promising to build the largest abbey in England for the Cistercian monks of Hereford after he survived a storm at sea returning from the Holy Land.

The original Abbey was almost destroyed by a fierce storm in 1360 but was extensively rebuilt by the Black Prince and remained in use until 1539. It was largely demolished following the Reformation. At it's height it was larger than Westminster Abbey.

Following the Dissolution the site was acquired by the royal commissioner, Sir Thomas Holcroft, who 'plucked down' the great church. Afterwards he built a house which incorporated some of the monastic buildings. Evidence suggests that the plan focused around the conversion of the south and west ranges. Holcroft's house, although much altered since the sixteenth century, can still be seen at Vale Royal today. It has recently been converted to provide a clubhouse and other facilities for a golf course. There are no visible remains of the church, although a monument known as the 'Nun's Grave' marks the spot where the High Altar is thought to have been