

The John Wood Countryside Trail Swainswick and the legends of Bath



This circular walk in the beautiful Lam Valley delves into Bath's legendary and architectural past. Starting in Larkhall, it heads to the tiny 18th century church at Woolley, designed by John Wood the Younger. From there it crosses the valley to St Mary's Church in Swainswick where John Wood and his family are buried. Finally, you climb Solsbury Hill where King Bladud launched his maiden (and final) flight.

Start/Finish: The Bladud's Head, 1 Catsley Place, Bath BA1 6TA
Distance: approx. 5 miles/ 3 - 4 hours
Parking: Larkhall – car park by New Oriel Hall
Refreshments/Toilet: Tea, Coffee & toilet at Swainswick Church
Terrain: lanes and footpaths. Some steep sections which may be muddy



John Wood

John Wood and his son (John Wood 'the Younger') were the architects of Georgian Bath, between them creating the Royal Crescent, King's Circus, Queen Square, Prior Park, North and South Parades and much else besides. But what inspired them and why are they buried in the tiny church of St Mary's in Upper Swainswick?

John Wood had a passion for classical architecture, but was also obsessed by the ancient, pre-Roman history and mythology of Britain. Wood was convinced that the legendary King Bladud was the true founder of Bath, a city at the centre of an ancient Druidic kingdom. Incorporated into this kingdom were other ancient buildings, whose ruins could be seen in the stone circles at Stanton Drew and Stonehenge. Stone circles and sacred geometry fascinated him and he meticulously surveyed both of them, using the dimensions of the inner circle of Stonehenge in his design of the Circus.

So where does Swainswick come in? The most famous story about King Bladud is that of his pigs. Banished from Athens when he contracted leprosy, Bladud became a swineherd in the hills around Bath. He noticed that his pigs enjoyed rolling in the mud warmed by the hot springs and that they didn't seem to suffer from skin conditions as other pigs did. So he bathed in the mud himself and his leprosy was cured. His royal position was restored and, in thanksgiving, he founded the city of Bath. Wood believed that it was at Swainswick that Bladud's healing took place.



John Wood the Younger

King Bladud is also said to have made himself a pair of wings and attempted to fly from the Temple of Apollo, which Wood claimed was built on the top of Solsbury Hill, the site of an iron-age settlement. So, King Bladud's ill-fated flight ended with him being dashed to pieces more or less where Swainswick Church now stands.



If Bladud was the original founder of ancient Bath, it is as if Wood cast himself as his successor – the restorer of Bladud's lost Druid civilisation. So how appropriate that he should choose to be buried with his family on the spot where, in his own mythology, King Bladud had met his end.

The Walk

1. Facing the Bladud's Head, go to your right along the road, away from Larkhall. Take the first turning on the left up Valley View Rd.
2. Walk up the road past Meadow Farm and in about 50 yards go up some steps to your right and over a stile. Walk a few yards along an enclosed footpath and through a gap in the fence to your right into a field. Head upwards across the field towards a gap in the opposite field boundary.
3. Through the gap, follow the path round to the right and up through the allotments, keeping the iron railings to your right. Carry on straight ahead to an iron gate out of the allotments and into the Larkhall Sports Club car park. Walk across the car park and out on to the lane.
4. Turn right on to the lane (the top of Valley View Rd) which shortly joins Charlcombe Lane. Continue uphill for about 50 yards and, after a 20 mile sign, turn right on to Woolley Lane. Follow the lane for about a mile, past a number of houses and farms. To your right, through gaps in the hedge, there are wonderful views across the valley over Middle Swainswick to Solsbury Hill.
5. Eventually, the lane reaches the village of Woolley. In the middle of the village, turn right down Church Street and walk down to **All Saints Church**.

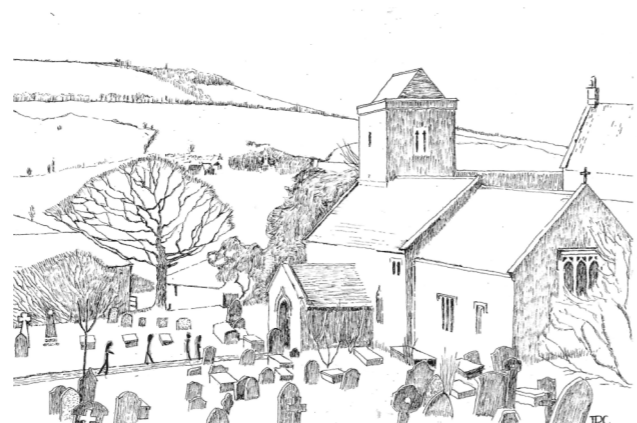


All Saints Woolley

There has been a church at Woolley since the 11th or 12th century. But by the mid-18th century, it was dilapidated and unusable. Around this time, Elizabeth Parkin inherited Woolley Manor and, in 1757, she commissioned John Wood the Younger to design and build a new church in keeping with fashionable Bath.

6. After visiting the church, turn left out of the churchyard and climb over a large, stone stile on your left. Walk down a narrow path through a kissing gate and continue downhill across two fields, with the hedge on your left, until you reach a post with a footpath sign. From here, you can look across the valley to Upper Swainswick, with its large stone barn and, to the left, some stone terracing – the remains of a 17th century water garden attached to the manor house. Behind the village is Solsbury Hill, from which Bladud supposedly took his flying leap.

7. At the sign, the path heads diagonally down to the bottom right hand corner of the field, where you come to a kissing gate and a footbridge over the Lam Brook. Cross the bridge and turn right, walking along the bottom of the field with the stream on your right. Go through a pair of gates with a small, plank bridge and follow the path as it heads diagonally left up the field towards Upper Swainswick. At the top, go up some steps and through a private garden. Walk up through the garden and out on to the lane to **St Mary's Church, Swainswick** where, in the north east chapel, you will find the stone slabs marking where John Wood and his family are buried.



8. On leaving the churchyard, turn left and go up the steep lane with the churchyard on your left. At the top of the hill, turn right and walk through the village to a Give Way sign.

9. Turn right (signed Bath A46) and head down the hill. Cross the road where the pavement appears on the other side. Continue downhill and turn left under the A46. Bear left uphill. Just before meeting the A46, carefully cross the road and head up the lane marked 'Private Property – No Unauthorised Access'. After about 100m turn right through a gate and go straight across the field aiming for a telegraph pole.



10. Turn right at the telegraph pole and follow the hedge line uphill through the two gates. Head straight on, up to the flat top of Solsbury Hill. Bear right following the edge of the hill until you come to the trig point.

11. From the trig point, continue along the edge until you see a National Trust sign. Turn right here downhill towards a gate. Pass through the gate and follow the lane all the way down hill to a T junction. At the T junction. Turn left, continuing down hill until you shortly see a footpath on your right.

12. Go through the metal gate and follow the path down the left hand field boundary. At the bottom, ignore the path on your left and continue round to the right along the field boundary to the bottom right hand corner.

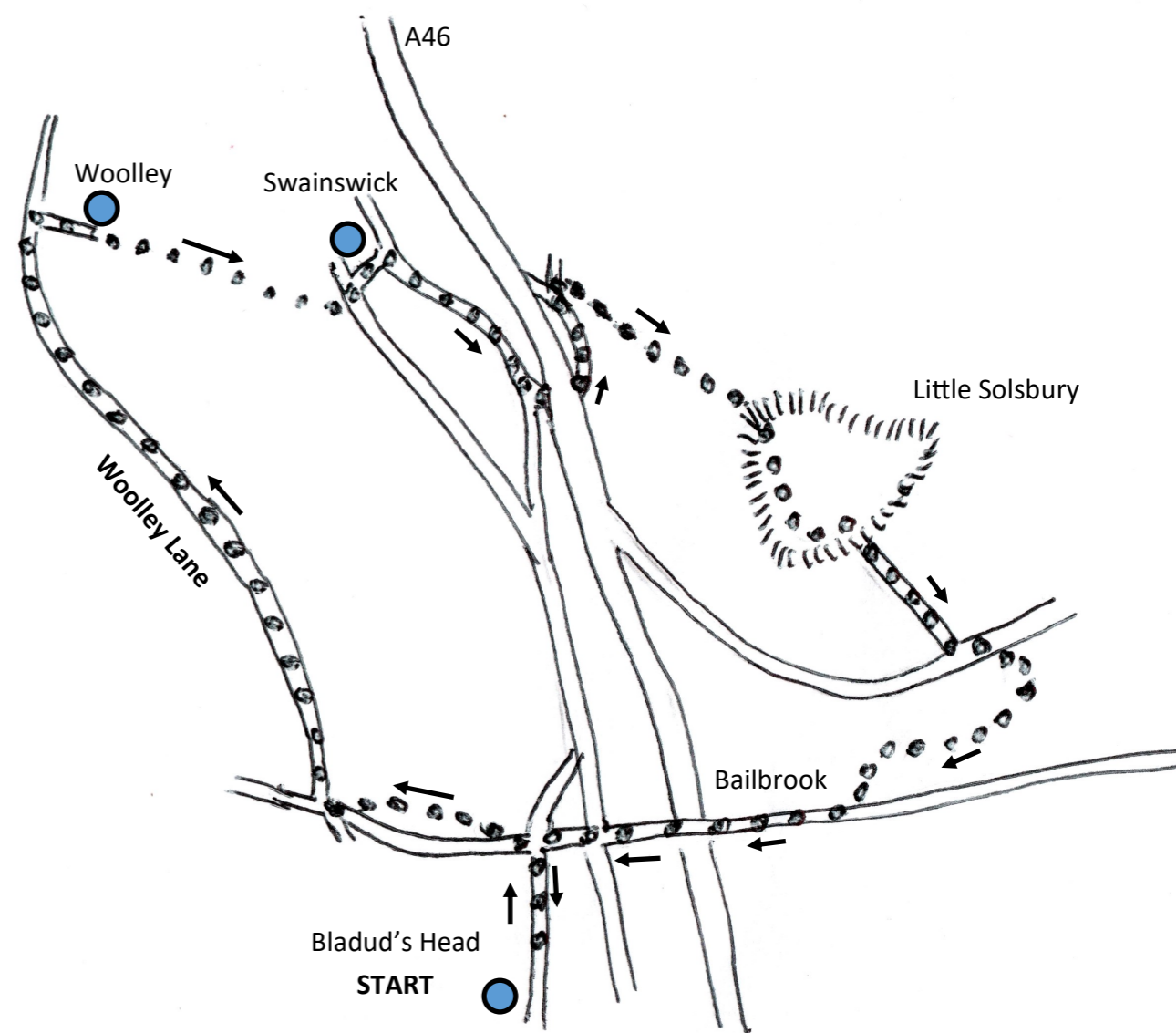
13. Go through a metal kissing gate and turn right along the path, passing through a second gate.

14. Carry on straight ahead along a grassy path until you reach a driveway. Just past the house on your left, the driveway curves round to the left to reach a lane.

15. Turn right along the lane, into Bailbrook, passing the tin church on your right.

16. Continue past houses as the lane goes downhill to meet a road.

17. Cross the road and go straight ahead down Ferndale Road with a sign "Unsuitable for wide vehicles". At the bottom, turn left and you will be back at the Bladud's Head.



Illustrations of All Saints Woolley and St Mary's Swainswick by Joanna Cacas