

# The Sparrowhawk and Ainsdale Nature Reserve, Formby, Merseyside



Moderate Terrain

5.5 miles  
Circular  
2 to 2.5  
hours

210114



## Access Notes



1. The walk is relatively flat throughout. Most of the paths are wide, well-made tarmac pavements or stone tracks, but one length of bridleway is narrow and can be quite muddy in winter and after periods of rain. There are no stiles on route, just a few gates/kissing gates.
2. You will need to cross the rail line at an un-signalled level crossing so take care to look and listen for trains before you cross.
3. You will also need to take care of traffic at two points: the first is to cross a dual carriageway; the other is the final mile of the walk that follows the edge of a quiet lane. The route crosses a golf course so keep alert and beware of any stray golf balls.
4. Dogs are welcome in the nature reserves, as long as they are kept under control.

The Sparrowhawk is a lovely old country house, beautifully converted to a classic pub with open fires to enjoy in the winter and a large terrace for the summer months.

A 5.5 mile circular pub walk from the Sparrowhawk in Formby, Merseyside. The walking route heads out via the Coastal Road to explore two local nature reserves. There's a real mix of landscapes throughout the walk including pine forest, acidic dune heath, a golf course, an airfield, residential streets and long bridleways. If you're lucky you might even get a glimpse of one of the rare red squirrels that populate the reserves.

## Getting there

Formby is located on the west coast, between Liverpool and Southport. The walk starts and finishes from the Sparrowhawk pub on Southport Old Road, which has its own car park.

Approximate post code **L37 0AB**.

## Walk Sections



Start to Ainsdale Nature Reserve



From the pub car park, head back out to the road and turn right along the road edge, taking care of any traffic. Just before the first set of traffic lights, keep straight ahead on the paved path and continue as this becomes the pavement alongside the main road. At the second set of traffic lights, use the pedestrian crossing to cross left over the road. At the far side of the crossing, keep ahead on the wide tarmac path running alongside Coastal Road. Follow this for some distance.

This path is part of the Cheshire Lines Path, a 14.5 mile route which follows the track bed of the Cheshire Lines Railway. To the right is the settlement of Ainsdale, with the main centre of Formby being to the south. Various

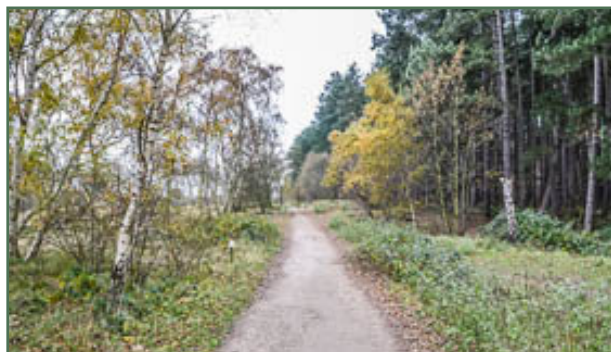
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professional football players have made Formby their home over the years including Steven Gerrard, Emlyn Hughes, Alan Shearer and Wayne Rooney.

Cross over the side road to keep ahead on the fenced pavement as it crosses over the rail line. As the railings on the right end, turn sharp right onto the sandy path which leads you into Ainsdale Nature Reserve.

## 1 → 2 Ainsdale Nature Reserve to Level Crossing



Follow the path as it swings left and continue until you reach a staggered T-junction. Turn right here and follow the path through the staggered barrier and under the bridge. Keep ahead on the obvious path with the rail line over to the left. You will reach a T-junction with a boardwalk opposite. Turn left and then keep left at the fork to pass by the vehicle gate and join the Woodland Path and Dobson's Ride. Follow this path (with the railway to the left) through the nature reserve for some distance.

Ainsdale Sand Dunes NNR has a range of habitats, each with their own distinctive plants and animals. Immediately to the right are the pine woodlands, with sand dunes and then the beach beyond.

The woodlands are dominated by pine, interspersed with areas of wet woodland, alder and scrub. The pines are home to the endearing red squirrel, a species increasingly under threat from encroaching grey squirrels which spread disease to the red populations. The pinewoods are also full of fungi in the autumn, offering a fascinating new world of dead man's fingers, plums and custard and blueleg brownies!

Between the ridges and dry dune grasslands are damper valleys, or dune slacks, one of the most important and diverse features of the reserve. Around 40% of the national area of dune slacks is found here on the Sefton Coast. The slacks are often flooded in the winter, and the pools provide spring breeding grounds for natterjack toads, as well as great crested newts and a variety of dragonflies. Formby is only one of a few sites in England where natterjack toads will breed. On spring evenings the male's distinctive song can be heard and is known locally as the Bootle Organ. As the pools dry up during the summer they are replaced by carpets of beautiful orchids.

You will pass a picnic area on the right and you will see RAF Woodvale on the left. The airfield opened in 1941 and is an ex World War II fighter station with three active runways, the main runway being a mile in length. Today it is used by RAF for light aircraft and fighter training, as well as a few civilian aircraft. The airfield's greatest claim to fame is that it was home to the last ever operational service of the British legend, the Spitfire.

Some distance further along, stay on the main stone track as it veers away from the railway and winds through the woodland. Ignore any smaller paths off to the right and the path will pass part of Formby Golf Course to the left. You'll emerge to a T-junction with another cycle path. Turn left here, signed to Freshfield and Formby. Note: the path now leads you across the golf course so allow golfers to play before you cross and beware of any stray golf balls. The path leads you to a level crossing.

## 2 → 3 Level Crossing to Brewery Lane



Cross the level crossing with extreme care, taking proper care to look and listen for trains before you cross. At the far side do NOT turn right along the cycle path, instead take the footpath at about 2 o'clock which you access via the two kissing gates, ahead and then right. You are now within Freshfield Dune Heath, another nature reserve. Follow the path ahead around the edge of the heath, with a fence on the right.

Freshfield's 17 hectares of dune heath comprise 9% of the national total of this very rare habitat. This habitat forms on the landward edge of sand dunes and has very acidic conditions suitable for heather and other acid loving plants. More than 1,000 species of insects have been identified here. Common Lizards are seen frequently and the dyke is home to a small colony of water voles.

At the fence corner follow the path as it bends left. Just before the path begins to swing hard left again, turn right through a kissing gate to leave the reserve to reach a small grass clearing. Fork left and follow the path with a black and white house visible across to the left. Follow the path swinging right through a section of trees (heading back on yourself) and the path will lead you to a kissing gate. Pass through the gate and turn left along the fenced track (heading back on yourself again). You'll emerge out of the corner of Brewery Lane and West Lane.

## 3 → 4 Brewery Lane to A565



Keep left along Brewery Lane. When you reach Bowler's Riding School on the left, fork right to join the tarmac path which continues in the same direction. At the T-junction turn right and, after just a few paces, turn left onto a narrow footpath between hedges (signed with a red arrow to Deansgate Lane).

On the left you'll pass the enormous expanse of horse paddocks belonging to the riding school. The bridleway eventually leads you to a T-junction with the main A565 dual carriageway.





Cross over the dual carriageway with extreme care, and take the tarmac path directly opposite. This path leads you past a large commercial greenhouse on the left. At the end of this, you'll reach a T-junction with Southport Old Road. Turn left along the road edge, taking care of any traffic.

You will be following this road for about a mile back to the pub. Whilst the traffic is fairly light there are a few sharp bends, so take care to stay close to the edge and swap sides for the bends to make sure you are visible to any traffic.

On the right you'll pass the Formby Golf Club and Spa. This stretch of coast is famous for links golf courses such as Royal Birkdale. However, Formby, unlike its neighbour Royal Birkdale, does not have the capacity to host large events such as The Open.

Next on the right you'll pass Formby Hall Farm, an impressive estate with stables and menage. Finally on the right you'll pass North Lodge (1893) and the gates to Formby Hall itself. The present Formby Hall, built for William Formby, dates back to 1523 but it is believed that the Formby family has occupied the site since the 12th century. The pub building was built as the Dower House for the hall.

Just a short distance further you'll come to the Sparrowhawk on the right for some well-earned hospitality.

#### Disclaimer

This walking route was walked and checked at the time of writing. We have taken care to make sure all our walks are safe for walkers of a reasonable level of experience and fitness. However, like all outdoor activities, walking carries a degree of risk and we accept no responsibility for any loss or damage to personal effects, personal accident, injury or public liability whilst following this walk. We cannot be held responsible for any inaccuracies that result from changes to the routes that occur over time. Please let us know of any changes to the routes so that we can correct the information.

#### Walking Safety

For your safety and comfort we recommend that you take the following with you on your walk: bottled water, snacks, a waterproof jacket, waterproof/sturdy boots, a woolly hat and fleece (in winter and cold weather), a fully-charged mobile phone, a whistle, a compass and an Ordnance Survey map of the area. Check the weather forecast before you leave, carry appropriate clothing and do not set out in fog or mist as these conditions can seriously affect your ability to navigate the route. Take particular care on cliff/mountain paths where steep drops can present a particular hazard. Some routes include sections along roads – take care to avoid any traffic at these points. Around farmland take care with children and dogs, particularly around machinery and livestock. If you are walking on the coast make sure you check the tide times before you set out.

