



About the Author

Steve Davison is a writer and photographer who has written several walking guides. He has also written for a number of outdoor magazines and other publications, including local and national newspapers, specialising in hill walking and European travel, with interests in nature, geology and the countryside. A keen hill walker for many years and a Mountain Leader, Steve has also worked as a part-time outdoor education instructor. He is also a member of the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild. Find out more about him out at www.steve-davison.co.uk.

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The Ridgeway National Trail

Walking in the Chilterns

Walking in the North Wessex Downs

Walking in the Thames Valley

WALKING IN THE NEW FOREST

30 WALKS IN THE NATIONAL PARK

by Steve Davison

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

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Front cover: Looking towards Hampton Ridge from Windmill Hill (Walk 6)

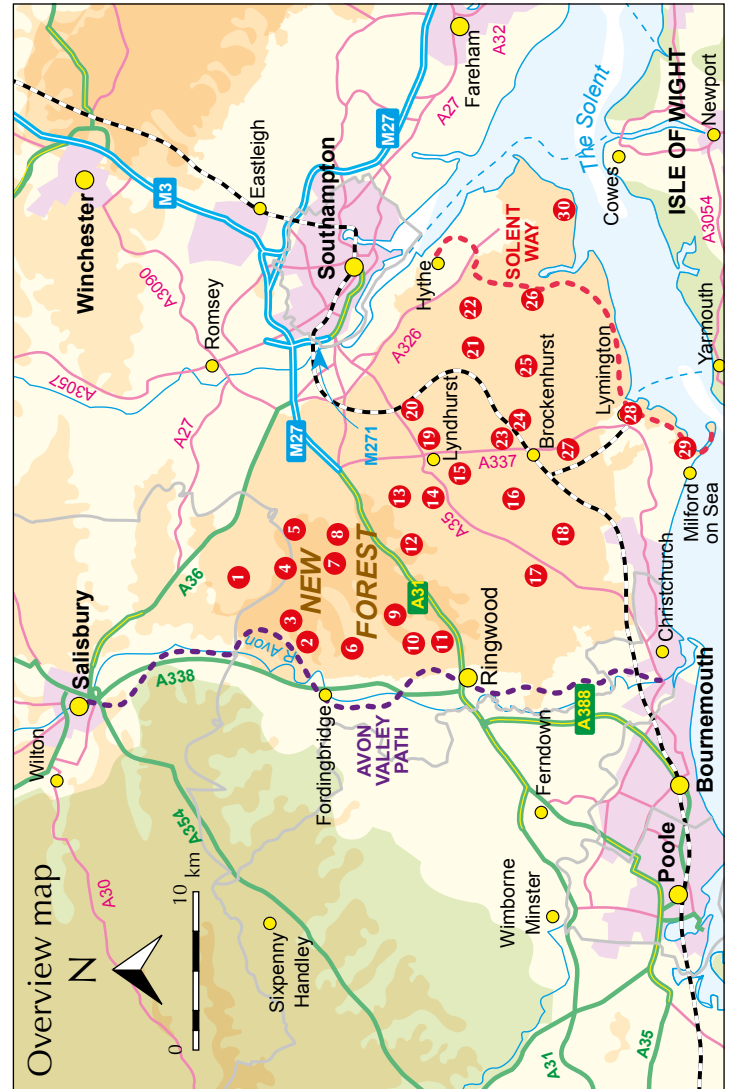
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Route symbols on OS map extracts (for OS legend see printed OS maps)	Features on the overview map
route	County/Unitary boundary
alternative route	Urban area
adjacent route	National Park
start/finish point	Forest Park/National Forest
alternative start/finish point	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty/National Scenic Area
route direction	400m
	200m
	75m
	0m





Passing trees on Holm Hill (Walk 16)

INTRODUCTION

The New Forest, or the Nova Foresta as it was known in the Domesday Book, is a unique and captivating landscape of open heath and ancient woodland tucked into south-west Hampshire and south-east Wiltshire. 'Created' by William the Conqueror in 1079 as a royal hunting ground, the New Forest has, for the last 900 years, owed its very existence to the influence of man and his animals.

To many, a key feature of the New Forest's natural beauty is the ancient and ornamental woods, and here can be found the greatest concentration of 'veteran' trees in western Europe. However, there is much more

on offer, including 42km (26 miles) of coastline, the largest area of lowland heath in Britain and three-quarters of the valley mires in north-west Europe, as well as picture-postcard thatched cottages, ancient churches and cosy pubs. And all this located within Britain's smallest national park, covering just 570 square kilometres (220 square miles).

The New Forest may not be a very hilly landscape and there are no sweeping mountain views, but a walk in the Forest takes you into a part of southern Britain that William the Conqueror would probably still recognise. Couple that with the fleeting



Heading south through Bramshaw Inclosure (Walk 5)

glimpses of wildlife – a deer suddenly stops to look before magically disappearing in the blink of an eye, bird-song mingles with the rustle of the wind in the trees, wildflowers add splashes of colour to the beauty of the enchanting woods, the commoners' stock grazes the land as it has done for centuries – and you have all the ingredients that make walking in the New Forest National Park such a unique and rewarding experience.

However, this is not some woodland theme park; the Forest is a working environment. Around 7000 commoners' animals graze the open forest, a quarter of the park is farmland and the forests still produce many tonnes of timber per year. Remember, it is these very activities that have helped to preserve the New Forest over the centuries.

PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

The New Forest has a patchwork of habitats that have been shaped since prehistoric times by man and his animals. Each offers a rich variety of plants and animals, and for anyone wishing to identify the plants, fungi, animals and birds that they might see while out walking, it's worth carrying a guidebook, along with a pair of binoculars.

Trees

Although less than half of the national park is woodland, woods are a key feature of its natural beauty, with

native trees ranging from the coniferous English yew and Scots pine to broadleaved species such as the common oak, beech and silver birch.

A more exotic tree is the wellingtonia, or giant sequoia, found along Rhinefield Drive (Walk 16). At a height of 55m (180ft), these may take the title of the tallest trees in the Forest; however, it is the native oaks, such as the Knightwood Oak (Walk 14), that lay claim to being some of the biggest. These trees have been pollarded: when it was young the top of the tree was cut off, allowing new growth on multiple branches, resulting in tree trunks with a very large circumference but short height. Pollarding was a traditional way to harvest wood sustainably for fencing and firewood and the practice generally helps the tree to live longer – many examples in the Forest are between 400 and 600 years old.

Plants

Within the Forest there are around 2700 species of fungi and 700 species of wildflower, including rare species such as the blue marsh gentian (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*), yellow-green flowered bog orchid (*Hammarbya paludosa*) and the wild gladiolus (*Gladiolus illyricus*).

A much more common plant is gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), sometimes called 'furze', and its colourful yellow flowers can be seen throughout the open heath. Although the plant's spiky foliage should help to protect it from

being eaten, it forms a vital part of the New Forest pony's diet, especially in winter, when other food is scarce.

Another widespread plant is common heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), also known as ling, which creates a colourful pale purple carpet across the open forest in late summer. Three other species of heather grow in the Forest: bell heather (*Erica cinerea*), which thrives on acid heathland, blooms earlier in

the summer with larger reddish-purple flowers; the pink-flowered cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), which prefers damper sites; and the much rarer Dorset heath (*Erica ciliaris*).

Common cotton grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), known locally as bog cotton, grows in the wetland areas, particularly valley mires. It is easily recognised by its characteristic white tufts which are

Clockwise from left: lesser celandine; wood anemone; cross-leaved heath; wood sorrel



most visible in late spring. Another plant which likes wet areas is the insectivorous round-leaved sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*); the sticky scarlet hairs that cover the leaves are a perfect trap for small insects.

Two of the more common varieties of orchid are the common spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) and the heath spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata*). Both look very similar, with varying amounts of brown spots on their leaves and spikes of white to pink-purple flowers produced between June and August, although the common spotted orchid is the taller of the two species.

Reptiles

All six of Britain's native reptiles (snakes and lizards) are found in the New Forest, as well as three species of newt (smooth, palmate and great-crested), the common frog and common toad.

The six reptiles are:

- adder (or viper) – Britain's only poisonous snake; light shade of grey or brown with a distinctive black zigzag marking along the length of the back
- grass snake – dark green colour marked with black vertical bars and spots that run along the sides



- smooth snake – greyish colour with usually two rows of darker brown or black markings along the back; also have round pupils to their eyes
- slow worm – a type of legless lizard; have an almost cylindrical body with a polished-looking grey or brown colouration
- common lizard – colouration can include shades of brown, grey and dark green
- sand lizard – grey-beige colour with dark brown blotches; successfully reintroduced in 1998 having become extinct throughout Hampshire by about 1970

Birds

The Forest supports a wide range of birdlife, including many woodland birds such as woodpeckers, tawny owls, nuthatches and wood warblers. Areas of conifer are good for

seeing siskin, along with the rare and diminutive firecrest. The Forest also supports a number of birds of prey, including sparrow hawks, buzzards, hobbies, kestrels and the rare honey buzzard.

Valley mires support important populations of snipe, curlew, lapwing and redshank, whereas the open heaths are home to the likes of woodlark and the UK's largest breeding population of the rare Dartford warbler, with summer visitors such as Montagu's harrier and the more nocturnal nightjar.

Along the riverbanks and estuaries you may see herons, little egrets or the vivid turquoise-blue and orange flash of a kingfisher darting along the river. The coastal stretches in winter see the arrival of large numbers of wildfowl and waders, including dark-bellied brent geese, wigeon and curlew.

Ponies and thatched cottages at Woodgreen (Walk 3)



Mammals

The Forest is home to a variety of animals, including large numbers of commoners' stock such as New Forest ponies and cows. There are five species of deer: fallow, roe, red, sika and muntjac, the most common being fallow and roe deer; the deer population is kept at around 3000 animals. Throughout the area, as with much of England, you will probably catch sight of the abundant grey squirrel which, sadly, has replaced the native red squirrel.

As dusk approaches you may be lucky and catch a glimpse of the elusive badger or the much rarer polecat, a new arrival to the Forest within the last few years. Other mammals that may be seen at dusk are bats; 13 of the 17 native species have been recorded in the New Forest, including the nationally rare Bechstein's and barbastelle bats.

Invertebrates

There is a rich array of insects, including butterflies, moths, beetles and dragonflies. Many species are found in the ancient and ornamental woodlands, mainly due to the large quantities of dead wood found in these areas. One of the Forest's more striking beetles is the stag beetle. The males have large 'antlers' that they use for fighting with each other, hence the name. Butterflies include the silver-studded blue and dark green fritillary that live on the open heath, and silver-washed fritillary

and white admiral that can be found in wooded areas.

GEOLOGY

The New Forest is located in the Hampshire Basin – a shallow dip, or syncline, in the underlying chalk, surrounded by the chalk downs of Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, along with the prominent chalk ridge on the Isle of Wight to the south, which includes The Needles. This chalk was laid down while the area was submerged by seas between 99 and 65 million years ago, in a period known as the Upper Cretaceous.

Subsequent seas, lakes and rivers in the Eocene period (from about 56 to 34 million years ago) laid down layers of gravel, sand and clay over the chalk. These layers have been tilted so that the oldest layers are to the north and more recent to the south, forming a slightly elevated plateau that slopes towards the coast. Rivers and streams have cut through this plateau to form gentle valleys between low flat-topped hills.

Overlying these layers, in large parts of the Forest, are superficial deposits of gravel that date from the Pleistocene period (2.5 million to 10,000 years ago) when Britain underwent periods of repeated glaciations. Although the ice sheets never reached as far south as the New Forest, the glacial rivers washed large quantities of flint gravel down from the chalk outcrops to the north. The final main

geological event took place around 9000 years ago when the area that now forms the New Forest became separated from the Isle of Wight due to rising sea levels.

HISTORY OF THE NEW FOREST

The New Forest, recorded in the Domesday Book as Nova Foresta, was 'created' by William the Conqueror in 1079 as a royal hunting ground. At that time, the word 'forest' meant an area of countryside, not necessarily woodland, set aside for royal hunting. However, the area's history stretches back to at least the Bronze Age and at one time was known as Ytene, 'the place of the Jutes'. People who lived within the forest perambulation (or boundary) became subject to harsh

Forest Law, although these laws were slightly relaxed in 1217 with the 'Charter of the Forest'. The Verderers were authorised by the Crown to deal with the day-to-day administration of the Forest.

Move forward a few hundred years to 1483 and the New Forest Act was passed allowing inclosures to be created, and the growing of timber became more important than protecting the deer. In the mid 1500s Henry VIII built large fortifications along the south coast, including ones at Hurst and Calshot. The last king to use his right to hunt in the Forest was James II in the 1680s. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Verderers' powers were increased to help guard against offences undermining the planting and preservation of oak for

Thatched cottage at Minstead (Walk 13)



WALK 2

Godshill and Castle Hill

Start/finish	Godshill Wood car park (SU 177 160), 1.5km (1 mile) north from the B3078 at Godshill heading to Woodgreen
Alternative start	Ashley Walk car park (SU 186 156)
Distance	7.5km (4¾ miles) or 11.5km (7¼ miles)
Time	2¼hr or 3½hr
Map	OS Explorer OL22
Refreshments	The Fighting Cocks, Godshill (01425 652462)

From Godshill Wood car park the walk heads through Godshill Inclosure to reach Castle Hill, with a great view across the River Avon. Then it's along lanes, paths and tracks to reach Godshill and the Fighting Cocks pub. From here the main route heads back along Godshill Ridge to reach Ashley Walk car park, passing Godshill cricket pitch. The route then descends to Millersford Bottom before climbing back up to the car park. Alternatively you can follow a longer loop passing through an area that, during World War 2, formed part of the Ashley Walk bombing range. After crossing the Ditchend Brook (no footbridge) the route visits Pitts Wood Inclosure before heading west back to the car park, passing Ashley Walk car park and Millersford Bottom on the way.

From Godshill Wood car park head north-east away from the road following a broad grassy path with a fence and trees to your left for 700m. Turn left through the gate (easily missed) and follow the path through the trees of **Godshill Inclosure**. Turn right along the gravel cycle track for 25m to a junction (SU 180 167, shared with Walk 3). Turn left and keep ahead along the gravel track through mixed woods for 700m. Where the track bends hard right (SU 173 169) go straight on along a narrower path to reach a gate and leave the inclosure.

Turn right down the road towards Woodgreen for 50m and then turn left at the junction along the road for **Castle Hill**, now following part of the Avon Valley Path.

The view from Castle Hill looking north-west over the River Avon towards Breamore House



The 55km (34 mile) **Avon Valley Path** follows the River Avon from the cathedral city of Salisbury in Wiltshire, heading south through Hampshire to Christchurch Priory in Dorset.

Continue along the road, passing a small car park to reach a second parking area at **Castle Hill Viewpoint** (SU 170 166). ►

Continue alongside the road, using the verge where available, and start descending. Follow the road round to the left (ignoring a track to the right) and soon fork right along a gravel track past Arden Lodge. At Brook Cottage, continue between the hedges and cross a footbridge to reach a fingerpost and path junction in the field. Turn up to the right, following the fence on the right past some trees, cross a stile in the top right corner and keep ahead through the trees to cross another stile. Head diagonally left up through the trees and turn left along the track to a house and track junction.

Turn right (south) along the hedge-lined track (this soon becomes just a wide path heading south-east) for

Sit a while and admire the lovely view out across the River Avon towards Wiltshire.



350m to reach a path junction. Go straight on through the gate and follow the enclosed path. Dogleg left over a stile and continue, now following the field boundary on your right. In the far right corner of the field ignore the track down to the gate and keep ahead

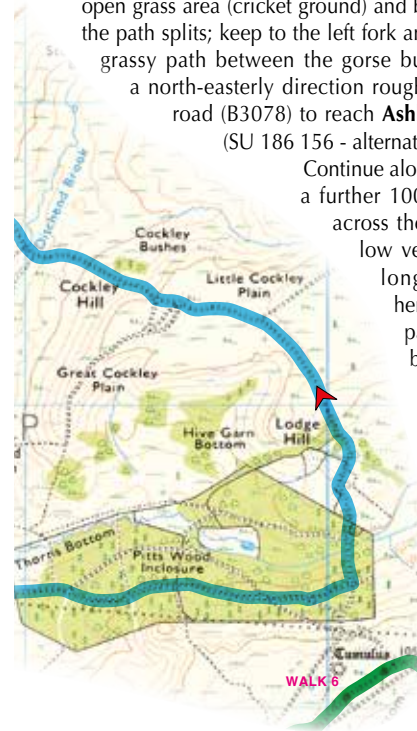
to leave via the gate in the corner. Turn right up the road to a T-junction with Roger Penny Way (B3078) next to the **Fighting Cocks pub** (SU 175 149).

Here you have a choice of continuing with the main walk or following the extension to Pitts Wood Inclosure.

For the main walk turn left towards Cadnam, keeping alongside the B3078 for 500m and when the road starts bending left, fork right along the gravel track into Godshill Cricket Pitch car park. Keep ahead onto the open grass area (cricket ground) and bear left, and soon the path splits; keep to the left fork and follow a broad, grassy path between the gorse bushes, heading in a north-easterly direction roughly parallel to the road (B3078) to reach **Ashley Walk car park** (SU 186 156 - alternative start).

Continue alongside the road for a further 100m, then turn left across the road and pass a low vehicle barrier (the longer walk rejoins here). Follow a grassy path between gorse bushes, keeping the wire fence on the left, and then head steeply downhill with views over Millersford Bottom. Keep ahead with the fence and trees over to the left and cross the **footbridge**

over Millersford Brook. Continue beside the trees (left) and then up over open ground, bearing diagonally left (west) after some trees to arrive back at the car park.



Alternative route

From the junction beside the Fighting Cocks, turn left for 20m and then right, following the lane towards **Newgrounds** for 1km, keeping right at the split signed for Hartwell. On reaching a large barn at Fernlea Farm, fork slightly left onto a grassy path at the vehicle barrier, but still continue eastwards parallel with the lane. Keep ahead, following the trees on the right, to reach a ford over **Ditchend Brook**; crossing may be difficult if water levels are high. Continue straight on over open ground towards the trees.

Go into **Pitts Wood Inclosure** (SU 189 143), passing a small cast-iron plaque by the old gateposts.

The land here contains varying amounts of clay and **Pitts Wood Inclosure** was one of several sites in the Forest where Romano-British pottery kilns have been found. The iron plaque mentions that the wood was enclosed in 1775, thrown open in 1815 and then re-enclosed in 1903; the wood is no longer enclosed. It's hard to imagine, but this area was once part of the

*Heading into Pitts
Wood Inclosure*



Ashley Walk Bombing Range during World War 2, where many experimental bombs were tested.

Follow the main track heading east through the wood for 800m, ignoring a track to the left, and keeping straight on at two crossing routes. At a skewed T-junction go straight on along a level path through the trees, keeping left at the split to reach a gravel track (alternatively, fork right up along the track to a cross-junction and turn down to the left).

Turn left downhill to cross a stream and keep straight on at the junction. The route now follows this gravel track for 2.1km. From **Lodge Hill** there are good views down into Hive Bottom. Keep left at the junction heading west-north-west over **Cockley Hill** and down to cross a bridge over **Ditchend Brook** before climbing up to Ashley Walk car park (SU 186 156). Turn right alongside the road (B3078) for 100m and then turn left across the road to a low vehicle barrier. From here, follow the directions given for the main route to return to the start at Godshill Wood car park.

*Looking west from
Cockley Hill towards
Godshill Ridge
(longer walk only)*

