

WALKING IN THE CHILTERNS



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WALKING IN THE CHILTERNS

by Steve Davison

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Front cover: Typical Chiltern scenery on the way to Christmas Common (Walk 22)

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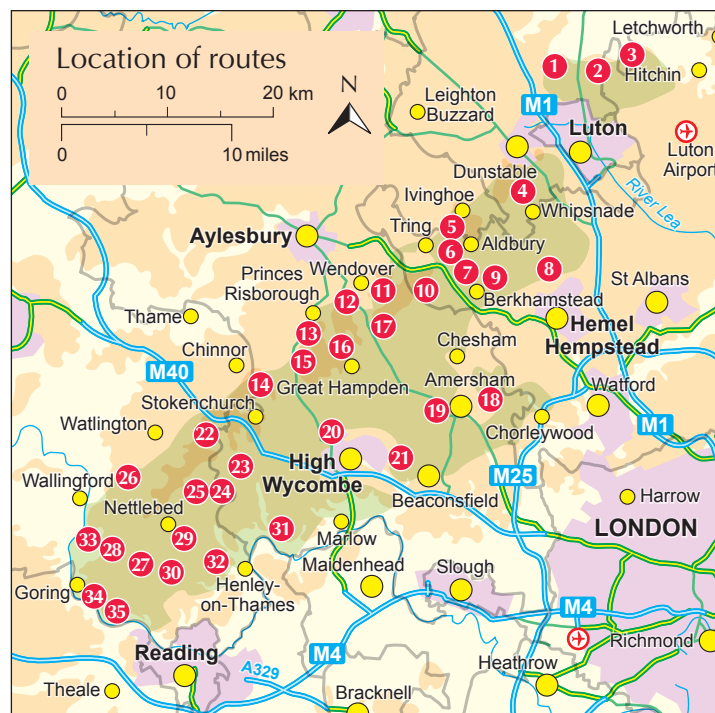
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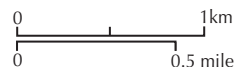
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Route symbols on OS map extracts

For OS legend see printed OS maps








-  route
-  alternative/detour/shortcut
-  start/finish point
-  alternative start/finish point
-  direction of walk



The extracts from 1:50,000 OS maps
used in this book have been reproduced
at 1:40,000 for greater clarity

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/1018/GPX.

Features on the overview map

-  County/Unitary boundary
-  Urban area
-  The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
-  400m
-  200m
-  75m
-  0m

Leaving Great Chalk Wood to head through fields towards Goring-on-Thames (Walk 34)



INTRODUCTION



Looking north from Pitstone Hill (Walk 6) to Steps Hill (straight ahead) and Ivinghoe Beacon (left) – visited on Walk 5

The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) covers an area of 833km² in south-east England, stretching north-east for 70km from the River Thames at the Goring Gap in Oxfordshire through Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire to Hertfordshire. This chalk landscape is famed for its beech and oak woods (around one fifth of the area is covered by woodland) which give way to a more open chalk grassland along its northern reaches, such as the Ivinghoe Hills and Dunstable Downs. The Chilterns are definitely 'hilly' but they don't rise to any great height: the highest point – albeit a

rather indistinct feature surrounded by dense woodland – is Haddington Hill near Wendover at 267m. More prominent hills, with the advantage of panoramic views, include Coombe Hill near Wendover at 260m (Walk 12) and Beacon Hill near Ivinghoe at 249m (Walk 5).

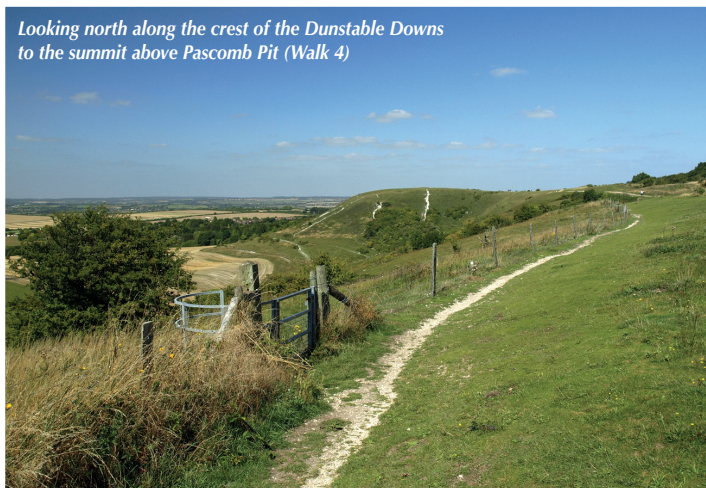
The area of the AONB itself has a relatively low population – around 100,000 – but its boundary skirts around larger urban areas such as High Wycombe and Luton, meaning that a further half million people live within 3km. Good transport links also make the Chilterns easily accessible to people from London.

Yet peace and tranquillity are in abundance: listen to the birdsong in the ancient woodlands or the skylarks singing over the open grassland; be dazzled by the myriad flowers and butterflies; admire the gently rolling landscape that has inspired many over the centuries, from famed authors to artists and poets, including the WWI poet Rupert Brooke, who wrote of the countryside in his poem *The Chilterns*:

I shall desire and I shall find
The best of my desires;
The autumn road, the mellow wind
That soothes the darkening shires.
And laughter, and inn-fires.

Be inspired, and explore some of the 2000km of footpaths and bridleways that criss-cross the Chilterns.

Looking north along the crest of the Dunstable Downs to the summit above Pascomb Pit (Walk 4)



GEOLOGY

The geology of the Chilterns tells the story of the seas that once covered southern England and the sediments that were laid down at that time. It is perhaps easiest to think of the area's geological structure as a multi-layered cake.

The lowest, and oldest, layers of this 'cake' in the Chilterns are formed from Gault Clay and Upper Greensand, laid down during the latter part of the Lower Cretaceous period (145–99 million years ago). In the middle is a thick layer of Upper Cretaceous chalk, formed 99–65 million years ago from incredible numbers of minute calcareous shells which are the remains of plankton, known as coccoliths, which lived in the shallow subtropical seas that



once covered much of southern England.

Chalk is a highly porous rock with numerous microscopic pore spaces that can store huge amounts of water, thus it acts like a giant sponge or aquifer, soaking up most of the rainfall. Because of this, over most of the higher ground there is no surface water in the form of ponds or streams.

Associated mainly with the upper (white) layer of chalk are horizontal bands of irregular silica concretions, known as flints; these also occur in profusion in the jumbled deposits of weathered chalk, known as 'clay-with-flints'. When struck, flint breaks with a shell-shaped fracture, leaving very sharp edges, and our Stone Age ancestors used flints to make a range of

tools. Being a very hard-wearing rock, flint has been widely used as a building material both in its natural state and knapped to form a flatter surface. It is a characteristic of the area – a great number of the region's churches and old cottages have flint walls.

Finally, at the top are the Tertiary (65–2.6 million year-old) deposits that include layers of clay. Historically this clay has been used to make bricks and tiles, such as at Nettlebed (Walk 29). It was during the Tertiary period that the European and African continental plates collided – an event that formed the Alps. In southern England the effects were less dramatic, although the collision caused our sedimentary 'cake' to ripple, with resultant changes to the landscape that remain

in evidence today, including the formation of a prominent ridge with a steep north-facing scarp slope along the northern edge of the Chilterns with the wide, flat plain of the Vale of Aylesbury beyond. This rippled layer of chalk also forms the Berkshire Downs, the North Hampshire Downs, the North and South Downs and the Purbeck Hills in Dorset.

Throughout the last 2.6 million years (the Quaternary period) Britain has been subject to periods of glaciation separated by warmer interglacial periods (the last glacial period ended about 12,000 years ago). During these glacial periods much of Britain was hidden beneath a thick layer of ice. There is no evidence to suggest that the Chilterns were ever covered in ice, but the area did suffer periglacial conditions which allowed the formation of dry valleys, or coombes, in the chalk plateau, eroded by water flowing over the surface of the chalk during cold periods when the underlying ground was frozen, making the normally porous chalk impermeable.

Another major feature caused by glaciation was the creation of the Goring Gap and the diversion of the Thames southwards to flow past Reading. Originally the river flowed through the Vale of St Albans, past Watford and Hertford, eventually reaching the North Sea in East Anglia near Ipswich. The gap was created when a large glacial lake, which formed over the Oxford area about

450,000 years ago, eroded a line of weakness in the chalk. The Goring Gap now forms a junction between the Chiltern Hills to the east and the Berkshire Downs to the west.

PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

The Chilterns form a patchwork landscape with areas of broadleaved woodland (especially beech and oak), open chalk grassland and farmland. Many of the wooded areas are known as ancient woodlands, having been continuously wooded since at least 1600. These areas tend to support a greater number of species as their character often closely reflects the underlying soil conditions, producing a wide range of woodland types and wildlife habitats.

Below the downs, chalk streams flow from the spring-line that forms along the boundary between the upper porous chalk and a lower impervious layer of Gault Clay, resulting in water that has seeped through the porous layer being forced to the surface. Chalk streams support a diversity of plant and animal life; some of these streams, such as the Hamble Brook (Walk 31), are winter-bournes, only appearing after heavy winter rainfall.

Throughout the Chilterns you should have plenty of opportunity to catch glimpses of local wildlife, from foxes to roe and fallow deer or the much smaller muntjac; you may even catch sight of the elusive badger



Red Kite (milvus milvus) – a fairly common sight throughout much of the Chilterns

as dusk approaches, or an edible dormouse around Tring Park (Walk 7). Alongside the streams and rivers, as well as seeing the ever-present ducks and mute swans, you may spot the vivid turquoise-blue-and-orange flash of a kingfisher as it darts along the river, or an otter, or the endangered wood vole.

In the ancient broadleaved woodlands – which are carpeted in late spring and early summer with vivid bluebells – you may hear the drumming knock of the great spotted woodpecker declaring its territory, or the raucous call of a jay; those with a keen eye might catch sight of a goldcrest or nuthatch.

The open chalk grasslands support a wide range of butterflies, plants (including gentians and orchids) and birds such as the pheasant, skylark and yellowhammer.

High above you might see the majestic silhouette of a buzzard, or hear the high-pitched whistling call – ‘weeoo-wee-weewee’ – of a red kite. Buzzards have broader wings and a rounded tail, while red kites have a distinctive forked tail and chestnut-red plumage. The latter were successfully reintroduced between 1989 and 1994 and their numbers have steadily increased.

Anyone wishing to identify the flora and fauna they see while out



Clockwise from left: Cowslip (Primula Veris), Clustered Bellflower (Campanula Glomerata) and Common Spotted Orchid (Dactylorhiza Fuschii)

walking should carry a guidebook and a pair of binoculars.

BRIEF HISTORY

Around 12,000 years ago the last Ice Age was coming to an end; the climate was warming and both people and animals migrated northwards from mainland Europe before the formation of the English Channel made Britain an island for the last time. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle flourished, and by the start of the Neolithic period (4200—2200bc) man was starting to make pottery and farm the land. These Neolithic ancestors left behind a number of burial mounds,

such as the one at Whiteleaf Hill (Walk 13).

This was also the time of the Icknield Way – a prehistoric ‘highway’ that allowed people to move through the heavily wooded countryside on a route stretching from Dorset and Wiltshire to Norfolk. These ancient trackways were later used by invading Saxons and Vikings, and later still by drovers driving animals to market. Even today, the Ridgeway National Trail follows their route.

The discovery of bronze and, later, iron allowed agriculture to develop further. Our Iron Age ancestors also built a number of forts to help defend their land, and the

earthworks of these can still be seen today, such as at Cholesbury (Walk 10). Recent evidence now suggests that Grim’s Ditch – the name given to several linear earthworks that can be found in the Chilterns, including Hastoe, Pitstone Hill, and Nuffield – dates back to the Iron Age.

The Iron Age was brought to a close by a full-scale Roman invasion in AD43 – although their impact on the Chilterns was limited to the building of villas (including those along the Hambelden, Chess and Gade river valleys) and the formation of a network of roads, including some that are still used today.

Following the Battle of Hastings in 1066, Anglo-Saxon landowners were replaced by those loyal to William the

Conqueror. Manors were formed that later morphed into the country estates still in evidence today. The Normans also built motte and bailey castles, such as at Berkhamsted (Walk 9), and many of the area’s churches originate from this period, albeit having undergone a fair number of alterations over the centuries. This was also a time of great monasteries and abbeys such as Ashridge (Walk 9) and Missenden (Walk 17).

The Chilterns are a mainly agricultural region, although over the centuries the area has seen various cottage industries come and go, from straw-plaiting to lace-making, as well as small-scale brick- and tile-making. The abundant supply of wood helped the furniture industry to flourish and

The view over Princes Risborough from Whiteleaf Hill above the Whiteleaf Cross (Walk 13)



WALK 1

Harlington and Sharpenhoe Clappers

Start/finish	Village hall car park on Sundon Road in Harlington (TL 037 304), 2km east from M1 Junction 12; or Harlington railway station (TL 034 304). Car drivers may also start at Sharpenhoe Clappers car park (TL 065 295)
Distance	9.2km (5¾ miles)
Ascent	175m
Time	2½hrs
Map	OS Explorer 193
Refreshments	Shop, Carpenters Arms (01525 872384) and The Old Sun (01525 877330) at Harlington
Public transport	Bus and train links to Harlington

This walk, the first of three exploring the outlying section of the Chilterns AONB to the north of Luton, sets out from Harlington, where the preacher John Bunyan was arrested, and heads south-east up to the tree-crowned Sharpenhoe Clappers for some lovely views. The route then drops steeply down to Sharpenhoe before meandering back through fields to Harlington.

To start from the railway station turn right over the bridge, follow Station Road up to the crossroads and turn right on Sundon Road.

From the village hall in Harlington, with the Carpenters Arms opposite, cross over Sundon Road, turn left and go downhill for 250m, soon passing The Old Sun. ◀ Continue past Kent Court (left), and just after a row of white cottages (also left) turn left across the road and follow the narrow signed path beside the driveway, passing a house. Keep ahead to a field. Head diagonally right with a distant view of Sharpenhoe Clappers. At the far side bear right along the field margin through two fields and continue straight on across the middle of the next field. Pass through the boundary and bear left (east) along the left-hand field margin. Cross a footbridge and turn right along the minor road for 400m, then turn left past a gate, following the track for 450m.

HARLINGTON

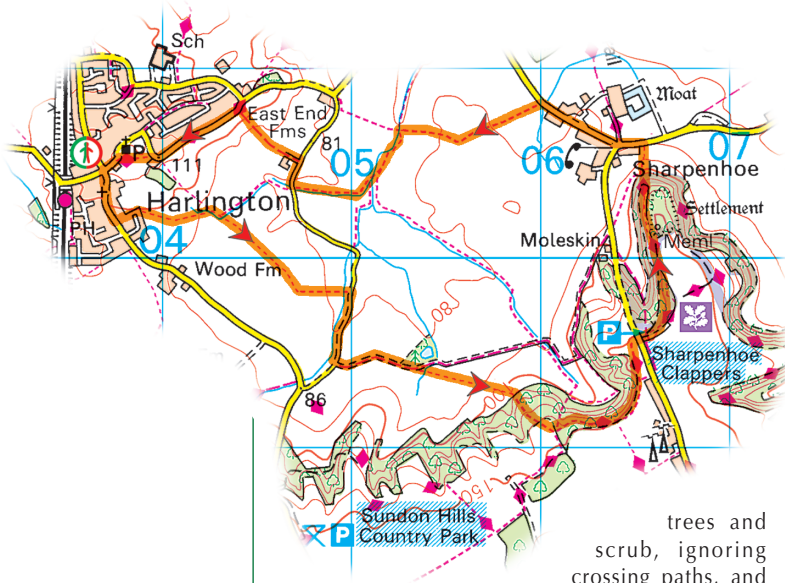


Church of St Mary the Virgin, Harlington

At the time of the Domesday Book, Harlington was known as Herlingdone and the lord of the manor was Nigel D'Albini. Several hundred years later the 17th-century non-conformist preacher John Bunyan (1628–1688) was arrested here for holding an unauthorised religious gathering. It was during his imprisonment at Bedford gaol that he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and many believe the Sharpenhoe Clappers along with the Barton Hills (Walk 2) and Pegsdon Hills (Walk 3) gave him the inspiration for his 'Delectable Mountains'. Visit the 700-year-old Church of St Mary the Virgin to see a stained glass window commemorating Bunyan.

It was from the village green that the first English National Steeplechase (flat horse race over fences) took place in 1830 on a 4¼-mile course to the obelisk at Wrest Park, Silsoe (the obelisk was moved to Trent Park in 1934).

At the trees (surrounding a hidden pond), where the field narrows turn right through the hedge and continue east-south-east (diagonally left) up across the field. Go through a gate and head south-south-east up through the



trees and scrub, ignoring crossing paths, and leave through a gate at the top. Head half-left across the field and enter the trees where the path splits. Follow the right-hand path (Chiltern Way and John Bunyan Trail) heading east to a path junction; keep ahead (left-hand fork), with a fence to the right and trees on the left, to reach another junction. Keep left through the gate and head slightly right (north) across the field, then go through a gate in the hedge on the right and cross the road to Sharpenhoe clappers **car park**.

Follow the surfaced path for 200m, then fork left along the Chiltern Way and The Bunyan Trail, heading among trees, to reach a grassy area. Keep to the path along the lower-left edge; it soon meanders through the trees of **Sharpenhoe Clappers**.

Sharpenhoe Clappers is crowned both by the remains of an Iron Age promontory hill fort and a lovely beech wood. Hidden among the trees is the Robertson Memorial, commemorating two brothers

who died in action during WWI. The site was also used as a medieval rabbit warren; 'Clappers' is thought to derive from the French *clapier* or the medieval Latin term *claperius*, meaning a rabbit warren or pile of stones.

At the northern end follow a path steeply down steps towards Sharpenhoe, keep ahead and continue down the left-hand field margin to a road just south of a former **moated manor**.

A former owner of Sharpenhoe's **moated manor** was Thomas Norton (1532–1584), who, along with Thomas Sackville, wrote the play *Gorboduc* – claimed to be the earliest English tragedy.

Turn left, keep ahead at the junction, continue to the end of the village and turn left past a gate (footpath sign) to follow the right-hand field margin. In the next field bear right to follow the right-hand boundary along two sides of the field, 300m along the second side turn right

Looking north-west out over the village of Sharpenhoe from Sharpenhoe Clappers





*From Sharpenhoe
the walk heads
through fields back
towards Harlington*

over a footbridge and then go left. Follow the left-hand field margin to a minor road and turn right for 150m. At the buildings on the left (Willow Farm) go left along the driveway and soon keep ahead on a path (just right of the driveway) heading up to Barton Road in **Harlington**.

Cross over and turn left (to your left are views of the Sinodun Hills and Sharpenhoe Clappers); at the right-hand bend cross over again and follow the surfaced path straight on, heading west across the park with the pond (often dry) and then the **church** on your right. Leave through the gate and continue along Church Road to a crossroads beside the war memorial (left) and village sign (right); go left (Sundon Road) for the village hall or straight on (Station Road) for the railway station.

WALK 2

Barton-le-Clay, Hexton and the Barton Hills

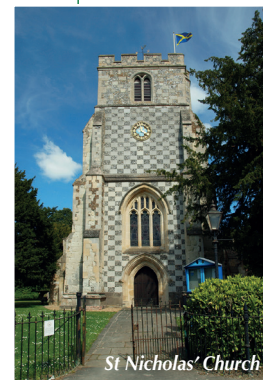
Start/finish	Church Road in Barton-le-Clay (TL 085 304), accessed from the A6; limited roadside parking
Distance	15.7km (9¾ miles) or 10.9km (6¾ miles)
Ascent	250m or 170m
Time	4½hrs or 3hrs
Map	OS Explorer 193
Refreshments	The Raven (01582 881209) and Lavender Tea Room (07805 815672) at Hexton; Lilley Arms (01462 768371) at Lilley
Public transport	Bus links to Barton-Le-Clay from Bedford and Luton

From Barton-le-Clay the walk heads east below the Chiltern escarpment to the neighbouring village of Hexton. From here the route climbs up onto the chalk hills, taking in parts of the Icknield Way, Chiltern Way and John Bunyan Trail, to pass through peaceful Lilley before heading northwards to the Barton Hills. A final descent through the nature reserve with some great views leads back to Barton-le-Clay. A shorter walk, missing out Lilley, is also described.

From the church in Barton-le-Clay head north along Church Road, cross over Hexton Road (B655), turn right and then left along Manor Road and continue for 500m, passing a school.

Barton-le-Clay, overlooked by the Barton Hills that form the northern extremity of the Chiltern Hills AONB, is home to the 800-year-old **St Nicholas' Church**, whose Perpendicular-styled chequer-patterned tower was added in the 15th century.

Some 100m after the school, turn right on a surfaced path and soon go over a footbridge;



St Nicholas' Church