

BISHOPSTONE CIRCULAR WALK

4½ miles (7¼ km) - allow 2 hours (see maps on final pages)

Introduction

This walk is within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and starts from the small, picturesque, spring line village of Bishopstone at the foot of the downs in Wiltshire about 5½ miles (9km) east of Swindon. It takes you through a lovely coombe up onto the downs, and along a stretch of The Ridgeway before descending the scarp slope and returning to the start via the hamlet of Idstone

Ridgeway Circular Route

The walk is waymarked with this 'Ridgeway Circular Route' waymark.

Terrain and conditions

- Field paths mostly through pasture, tracks, and minor village lanes and footpaths.
- This walk is moderately strenuous with one fairly long, steadily uphill section near the start. 120m (394 feet) ascent and descent.
- No stiles. 9 gates.
- Some paths can be muddy and slippery after rain.
- There may be seasonal vegetation on the route.

Preparation

- Wear appropriate clothing and strong, comfortable footwear.
- Carry water.
- Take a mobile phone if you have one but bear in mind that coverage can be patchy in rural areas.
- If you are walking alone it's sensible, as a simple precaution, to let someone know where you are and when you expect to return.

Getting there

By Car:

The walk starts in the car park of the Royal Oak in Bishopstone (if leaving your car there please patronise the pub) which is at the back of the pub on Cue's Lane, north of the main road through the village at map grid reference SU245838. To find it online, visit www.multimap.com and enter 'SU245838' in the box under 'find a map', and click 'find'.

By Bus: ***(Please note these details were correct in May 2009 but bus services can change with little notice so do check before travelling)***

- Service 47 provides a regular service between Swindon and Lambourn stopping in Bishopstone Mondays to Saturdays (no service on Sundays). ☎01793 428428 for further details.

- Service X47 runs on Sundays only with three services each way between Swindon and Wantage and stops in Bishopstone. ☎01993 869100 for further details.

Facilities and refreshments

- Refreshments: Bishopstone has two village pubs:
 - The Royal Oak – open every lunchtime and evening, and all day Saturday. It provides lunches and evening meals and serves organic meat. ☎01793 790481 or visit www.royaloakbishopstone.co.uk
 - The True Heart – open lunchtimes and evenings 7 days of the week serving food. ☎01793 790080 or visit www.trueheart.co.uk
- Accommodation in Bishopstone can be found at:
 - The Royal Oak – see above
 - Prebendal Farm – ☎01793 790485 or visit www.prebendal.com
 - Cheney Thatch Guest House – ☎01793 790508
- Toilets: In the pubs only

Things to remember

- If you bring your dog with you, keep it under close control and on a lead when near to livestock.
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home.
- Remember that the countryside is a working place; leave crops, buildings, machinery and livestock well alone. Leave gates and property as you find them and please keep to the line of the path.
- Park your car responsibly: do not obstruct gateways, narrow lanes and village facilities. Consider leaving valuables at home.
- Please enjoy your walk and spend your money in the local facilities - they need your support!

Walk directions

1. Exit the Royal Oak car park via the vehicle entrance and turn left. Follow the road past the front of the pub to the junction with the main road through Bishopstone and turn right passing the pond.
2. At the edge of the pond turn left along the tarmac track alongside the pond. After 100m turn left onto 'The City', the first footpath you come to, and follow this round to the right, across a stream and then past the front of cottages.
3. Bear sharp left, ignoring the stepped path that leaves to the right on the corner, but turn right at the next narrow path by the side of a cottage and go up to the road.
4. Turn right up the minor road signed to Russley Downs up Nell Hill. After a short distance turn right after the last house onto the wide gravel footpath that soon becomes a narrow bare earth path.
5. Go through the gate into a pasture field and continue in the same direction keeping the bank to your left. *At the end of the field there are good views ahead, slightly to the right of medieval strip lynchets.*

6. Go through the gate into the next field that can be grazed by sheep, cattle or both, and bear left up the floor of the coombe (dry valley) to the gate at the far end.
7. Go through the gate bearing right as you continue more steeply up the valley as it narrows. At the top of the valley continue in the same direction across the field, still steadily uphill, until you reach The Ridgeway. *Remember to turn around to look at the view of the coombe and the Thames Valley beyond!*
8. Go through the gate and turn left along The Ridgeway. After some farm buildings go straight over at a crossing of tracks and continue. After a while The Ridgeway starts to climb gently. *(NB at the foot of the slope there is a permissive footpath to the left, signed Eastbrook Valley, that leads down to Bishopstone. It is not included as a short cut in this walk as there is a stretch of narrow and quite busy road at the end.)*
9. At the top of the slope, turn left at a crossing of tracks by farm buildings *(NB there is a water tap and trough here)*. Head downhill towards Ildstone, first gently and then quite steeply, and enjoy the fine, extensive views of the Thames Valley with the sprawling mass of Swindon to the left.
10. Cross carefully over the road at the bottom of the hill and continue down into Ildstone, turning right when you reach a road junction.
11. Just before the end of the road go left on the footpath through the farm gateway. Continue ahead with farm buildings to the right and go through the gate into the pasture field. Keeping the same direction, head towards a line of mature trees, then bear right and follow the hedge to the bottom corner of the field.
12. Go through two gates, crossing a small stream between them, and turn left along the field edge. When, after a short distance a hedge to the right starts, go through the gate continuing on the path between the hedges to the road. A short way along this path there is the opportunity to explore a newly planted wood to the left.
13. Turn right along the minor road, and left at the next junction. The road swings right, then left and as it bears left again turn right along Cues Lane passing chalk-built and thatched Laurel Cottage.
14. As Cues Lane turns left, continue straight ahead on the footpath which descends gradually to a stream with a fine example of a thatched, chalk built cottage with a sarsen stone base on the right. Keep to the left of the stream (don't go over the wooden footbridge) and at the next junction of paths bear left up to the road (right soon takes you to Bishopstone Church) and back to the Royal Oak

Points of interest

The Ridgeway is one of only 15 National Trails in England and Wales. It's thought to be the oldest road in the country having been in existence since Neolithic (New Stone Age) times some 5,000 years ago and is surrounded by numerous prehistoric sites.

Starting in the Avebury World Heritage Site it travels for 87 miles (139km) in a north-easterly direction along a chalk ridge, bisected at roughly the mid-point by the River Thames and finishing in an Iron Age fort on top of Ivinghoe Beacon. Throughout its length it is within fine countryside: to the west of the Thames there's the open, rolling and remote downland of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and to the east it's in the more wooded and intimate landscape of the Chilterns AONB.

Bishopstone and Ildstone

Both Bishopstone and Ildstone are spring line settlements, situated where the water that has soaked through the chalk above reappears lower down the slope providing an important water source. Bishopstone which is a maze of small lanes and footpath also has a fine village pond at its centre.

The chalk of the downs was often used as a building material as demonstrated in both villages. Chalk however is a relatively soft material and so the lower courses of walls are frequently built of much harder sarsen stones, remains of a cap of sandstone that once covered the chalk hills. There are several examples of this on your route through Ildstone as well as a long buttressed wall built entirely of sarsen stones. Often, too, the roofs of chalk buildings are thatched to prevent rain from hitting the walls and eroding them.

The church of St Mary the Virgin in Bishopstone is well worth a visit as it has a splendid setting with its irregular churchyard falling steeply away to the north east. It also has a fine, small Norman (late 12th century) door in the north Chancel wall.

Coombe (dry valley) and lynchets

Your walk up to The Ridgeway at the top of the scarp slope of the downs is via a splendid example of a coombe, sculpted by the action of water long ago when this area still supported surface streams.

The strip lynchets visible from point 6 were created by farmers during medieval times. A bank of earth (lynchet) builds up on the downslope of a hillside ploughed over a long period of time creating terraces as seen here.

Farming

The steep scarp slope up to The Ridgeway remains unploughed these days and is grazed by cattle and sheep, although the evidence of strip lynchets shows that parts at least were ploughed during medieval times.

The plateau stretching to the south of The Ridgeway is excellent arable land, primarily growing grain crops or oil seed rape that dominates the views with its vivid yellow flowers during spring and is increasingly grown as a biofuel. However beyond the first set of farm buildings along The Ridgeway there are frequently pigs on one side or the other that are being organically reared by the well-known organic Eastbrook Farm (which is also the tenant of the Royal Oak in Bishopstone).

Views along the route



Cottage in Bishopstone



Strip lynchets



Heading up the coombe



Looking back at the coombe from The Ridgeway



The Ridgeway

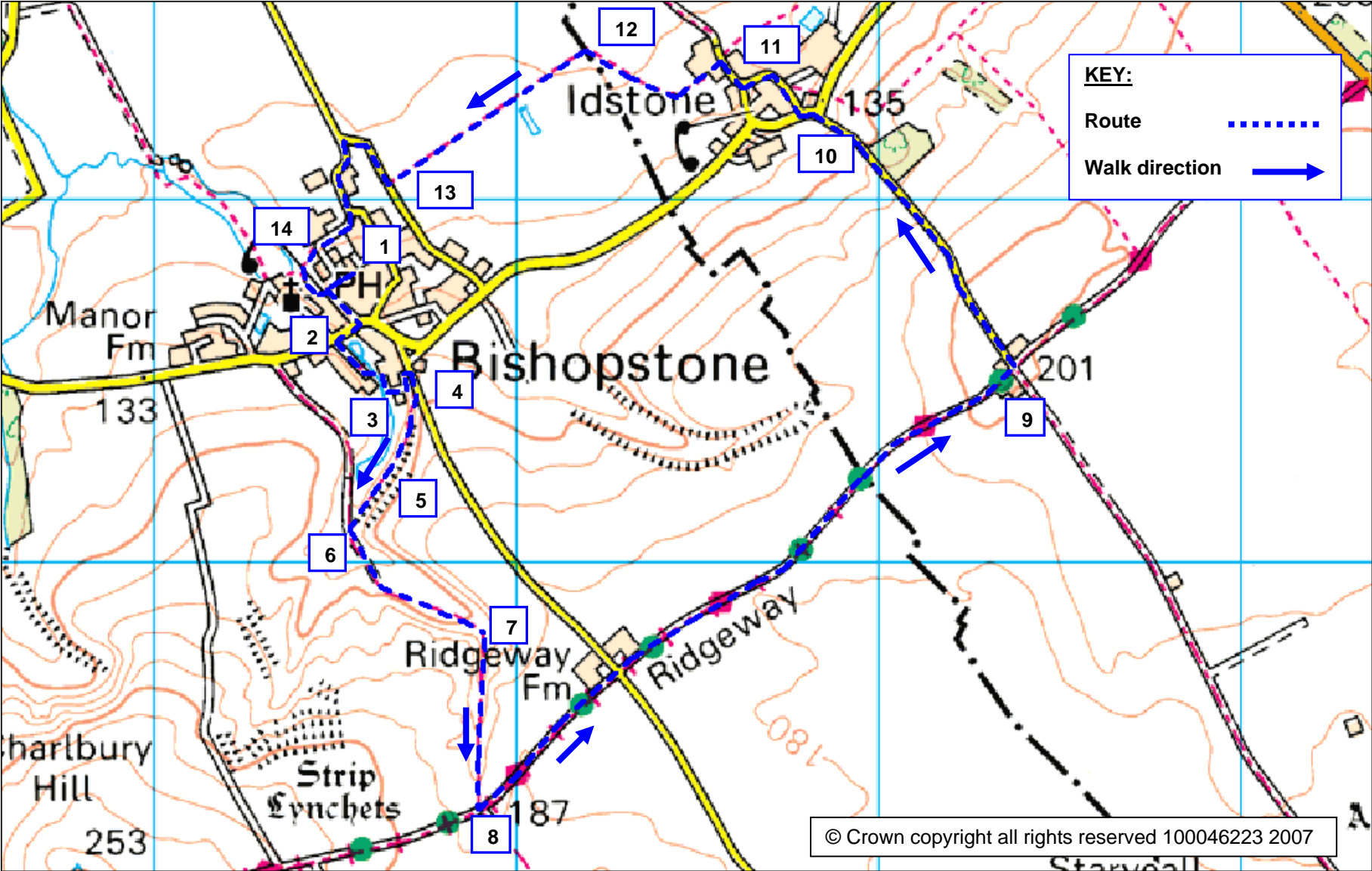


The stream in Bishopstone

This walk has been supported by



BISHOPSTONE CIRCULAR WALK MAP - see large scale map of Bishopstone below



Large scale map of Bishopstone

