

EAST & WEST ILSLEY CIRCULAR ROUTE

7 miles (11 km) - allow 3 hours if walking (see map on final page)

Introduction

This route lies within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, roughly 7 miles (12km) west of the River Thames at Goring-on-Thames. It includes a stretch of The Ridgeway along the scarp face of the Downs which gives tremendous views of the Thames Valley. The remainder of the route between the two Ilsley villages is classic rolling downland. This route can be enjoyed by walkers, cyclists and horse riders.



The route is waymarked with this 'Recreational Route' waymark

Terrain and conditions

- Mostly on downland tracks with just one section on a village road.
- This route is moderately strenuous for walkers but with no steep sections. 158m (518 feet) ascent and descent.
- No stiles or gates.
- Some paths can be muddy and slippery after rain.
- There may be seasonal vegetation on the route.

Preparation

- Wear appropriate clothing, and helmets if cycling or horse riding. Walkers wear 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 alone it's sensible, as a simple precaution, to let someone know where you are and when you expect to return.
- Cyclists carry a puncture repair kit, a spare tube and bike tools.

Getting there

The walk starts at the Bury Down car park on The Ridgeway about a mile north of West Ilsley at SU479841. To find it online, visit www.multimap.com and enter 'SU521799' in the box for 'Find a map'. There is ample space to park horse boxes.

Facilities and refreshments

- Refreshments:
 - East Ilsley has two pubs where you can get lunches or evening meals throughout the week - Crown & Horns ☎01635 281545, and the Swan Hotel ☎01635 281238 or visit www.theswaneastilsley.co.uk
 - West Ilsley has one village pub, the Harrow ☎01635 281260. It serves lunches every day and evening meals Tuesdays to Saturdays.
- Accommodation:
 - Crown & Horns, East Ilsley ☎01635 281545
 - The Swan Hotel, East Ilsley ☎01635 281238 or visit www.theswaneastilsley.co.uk
- 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 or ride and spend your money in the local facilities - they need your support!

Walk directions

1. From the car park head east along The Ridgeway to go under the A34 at Gore Hill. Continue, and after just over ½ mile (1km) The Ridgeway swings to the right and heads downhill with gallops on the right.
2. At the bottom of the slope as The Ridgeway bears to the left, take the 2nd bridleway off to the right and follow this gently downhill to East Ilsley.
3. Turn right at the road, taking care as initially there is no pavement. At the next road junction bear right, keeping both the Crown & Horns and the Swan on your left. Cross to the pavement on the other side and continue along Fiddlers Lane and under the A34.
4. Immediately beyond the underpass, as the road swings right, cross the Ball Pit Lane junction and take the byway that bears off slightly left. This path climbs gradually away from the sound of the A34 before then heading downhill between hedges.
5. Pass a byway coming in from the right, and after 100m turn right at the next junction onto a bridleway. After just another 100m bear right at the next junction of paths to follow the bridleway which heads uphill gradually on a grassy track before swinging to the left and descending.

6. Bear right at a junction of tracks keeping the white rail on your left.
7. At the bottom of the slope turn right keeping to the hard-surfaced track. Turn left when you reach the tarmac drive and follow this to the road junction in West Ilsley. (NB: Turn left here to visit the Harrow pub - about 800m through the village.)
8. Turn right on to the road and shortly left along a track. After 150m, just before the last cottage on the left, keep to the track to the right where two diverge. This climbs gently and soon there's a strip of woodland to the right.
9. Bear left at a junction of tracks at the top of the slope. There are gallops off to the right here.
10. Soon you reach The Ridgeway, where you turn left to return to the car park.

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.

Gore Hill

The A34 Southampton to Manchester road crosses The Ridgeway at this point. It has been a notorious spot for travellers for many years. In 1830 the Southampton coach from Oxford 'was enclosed so fast in snow at Gore Hill the coachman and passenger were necessitated to leave it'. 150 years later the snows of the winter of 1981/82 also caused the abandoning of vehicles for the warmth and comfort of the pubs and schoolrooms of East Ilsley. Road improvements in the late 1980s placed The Ridgeway under a new section of dual-carriageway, obviating the need to cross this very busy road. In the early 1990s a local art group painted the murals in the underpass showing life in the area from Stone Age to more recent times.

East Ilsley was famous for its sheep fairs which started in the reign of Henry III in the 13th century and continued until 1934. Permanent pens were sited along the main street and during the fair's hey-day over 80,000 sheep were penned in one day and 13 pubs existed. There are two pubs remaining in the village. The Church of St Mary, said to have been built by Canute in the 11th century, is now mostly 13th century with a 14th century bell tower containing a peal of five bells dating from 1589.

*'Ilsley remote amidst the Berkshire Downs
 Claims those distinctions o'er her sister towns
 Far famed for sheep and wool though not for spinners
 For sportsmen, doctors, publicans and sinners.*

'From 'Berkshire book of song, rhyme and steeple chime'. Humphreys

EAST & WEST ILSLEY CIRCULAR ROUTE MAP

