

ASHBURY CIRCULAR WALKS

Main walk: 7¾ miles (12½ km) with a shortcut reducing it to 6 miles (9½ km) - allow 4 hours (3 hours for shortcut route)

Short Walk: 2½ miles (4 km) – allow 1¼ hours

See map on final page

Introduction

These walks are within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty 10 miles (16km) west of Wantage. They start on The Ridgeway and take you through classic chalk countryside with wonderful views of rolling downland and the Thames Valley. They include the attractive spring line village of Ashbury at the foot of the scarp and provide some fascinating historical and natural features to explore.



Ridgeway Circular Route

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

Terrain and conditions (main walk)

- Tracks, field paths through arable and pasture, and minor village lanes and footpaths.
- The walk is fairly strenuous with one relatively steep hill up and another down. 200m (660 feet) ascent and descent.
- One stile only in a temporary fence. 9 gates.
- Some paths can be muddy and slippery after rain.
- There may be seasonal vegetation on the route.

Terrain and conditions (short walk)

- Tracks, field paths through pasture, and minor village lanes and footpaths.
- The walk is fairly strenuous with one relatively steep hill up. 95m (310 feet) ascent and descent.
- No stiles. 3 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 parking area on The Ridgeway a mile southeast of Ashbury on the B4000 at map grid reference SU273843. To find it online, visit www.gridref.org.uk, enter 'SU273843' in the box and click 'find a place'. Alternatively there is also limited street parking in Ashbury.

By Bus: (***Please note these details were correct in April 2014 but bus services can change with little notice so do check before travelling***)

- Service 90 provides a regular service between Swindon and Lambourn stopping in Ashbury Mondays to Saturdays (no service on Sundays). Bus operator: Go Ride 0330 330 8489. Service X47 has a service on Saturdays only, telephone Thames Travel on 01491 837988 for further details.

Facilities and refreshments

- Refreshments: Ashbury has a village pub, the [Rose and Crown](#), which is open every lunchtime and evening, and all day on Saturdays and Sundays. It serves lunches every day and meals every evening except Sunday. If you're planning on eating, it's best to book in advance on ☎ 01793 710222.
- Accommodation: The Rose and Crown Hotel – see above
- Toilets: In the pub 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

Main Walk: Approximately 7¾ miles (12½ km)

1. Start on The Ridgeway National Trail where it crosses the B4000, ¾ mile (1 km) southeast of Ashbury. Walk northeast along The Ridgeway - if you approached up the hill from Ashbury, that's left! Go over the first crossing of tracks and pass Wayland's Smithy long barrow on your left.
2. Turn right at the next crossing of tracks leaving The Ridgeway. Follow the track first past woodland strips on the right and then more woodland on the left.
3. At the break between the woodland to your left bear right across arable fields heading to the left of the woods on the far horizon. After the first field cross a bridleway (about 100m left of a solitary hawthorn bush). After a second large field cross a track with an ageing signpost. After yet another field you come to a

fence.

4. Go through the gate in the corner of the field, which is usually sheep-grazed. Bear left keeping the remains of a weathervane (currently just a post amongst a pile of stones but due to be renewed) to your left and the first coombe (dry valley) to your right. When you're exactly between Ashdown House and the weathervane, bear half right (approx 45°) and follow the ridge downhill to the gate by the road.
5. Cross the road and head down the minor road opposite keeping Ashdown House to your right.
6. As the track turns left, carry straight on through the gateway and then round to the right. Head up the field edge track through two gates keeping Alfred's Castle to your left.
7. After the 2nd gate, head up the middle of two fields and then along the fence line on your left. At the end of this field go through the gate and continue in the same direction ignoring any paths or tracks to your right until you reach The Ridgeway.
8. Cross The Ridgeway and head down to Ashbury. **Alternatively, to shorten the walk to 6 miles (9½ km), turn right along The Ridgeway and return to the start after 400m.**
9. At the bottom of the hill turn left following the bank round. Bear right onto the tarmac path leading past the church.
10. At the road, cross straight over (pub is only a short distance to the right). Bear right keeping Manor Farm to your left.
11. Cross the road onto the tarmac bridleway. Turn right onto the footpath just before the pond taking care along this narrow path.
12. Cross the road bearing slightly right and take the footpath past allotments on the left. Go through the gate, cross a field and through another gate.
13. Keeping the beech trees just to your right walk up through the middle of the coombe ahead that gradually swings left. At the top go left along the fence.
14. Turn right after the gate and at The Ridgeway turn right back to 1.

Short Walk: Approximately 2½ miles (4 km)

1. Start on The Ridgeway National Trail where it crosses the B4000, ¾ mile (1 km) southeast of Ashbury. Walk southwest along The Ridgeway – if you approached up the hill from Ashbury, that's right!
8. Turn right at the first footpath that crosses The Ridgeway after 400m. Then follow the directions for 9 to 14 given for the main walk.

Points of Interest

Wayland's Smithy

This is a fine example of a Stone Age long barrow built over 5,000 years ago as a burial chamber. It is probably a thousand years older than the oldest parts of Stonehenge. The entrance to the grave is flanked by 3m high sarsen stones probably dragged here by Stone Age man from the Marlborough Downs.

Wayland was a mythical Saxon smith. Local legend has it that his magic forge is contained in the barrow and if a horse is left here overnight with a coin then it will be re-shod.

Ashdown House

Now owned by the National Trust this house was built in the 17th century by the 1st Earl Craven. He is said to have built the house in this isolated site so that Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, the sister of Charles 1, could escape from plague-ridden London. Elizabeth, however, died without ever seeing the house finished.

The house, built of chalk blocks, is open to the public for guided tours from April to the end of October on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons – book when you arrive at the house. Further information by visiting www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ashdown-house

Alfred's Castle

This Iron Age hill-fort built about 2,500 years ago may well be close to the site of the battle of Ashdown in 871 AD. This battle fought and won by the Saxons led by King Ethelred and his brother Alfred, later to be King Alfred who was born locally in Wantage, was against the Danes. These invaders had a stronghold at Reading and used The Ridgeway for their forays into the surrounding countryside.

Alfred's Castle is simply constructed with its defences being just a single earth bank and a very steep sided ditch – easily built but needing a large work force. The ramparts were lined with sarsen stones, very hard and heavy remnants of a layer of sandstone that once covered the chalk. These were removed and used as building material in the locality. Sarsen stones are locally abundant and can be seen in the fields next to the road at point 5.

Ashbury

The village's claim to fame is that the first Sunday school in England was founded here by the curate in 1777. It was held in the church at first before moving to some cottages. The church, like many of the cottages, is built primarily of chalk blocks that would have been quarried locally and has a lovely Norman south door.

A close look at some of the cottages will reveal that the lower building layers and surrounds of windows and doors are often of a stronger material such as sarsen stone or brick.

The Manor of Ashbury was given by King Edred in the 10th century to Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset under which control it remained for over 500 years. In 1544, after the dissolution, it was granted by King Henry VIII to the Essex family and later purchased in 1625 by the Craven family who also built Ashdown House. Manor Farm, passed on the walk, was the 15th-century manor house.

The fields in the parish of Ashbury were enclosed in the 1770s with the majority of the present field boundaries being established then. As with several other local spring line villages, Ashbury used to have watercress beds fed by the pure water coming from the chalk.

Wildlife

The wildlife on this route is typical of chalk downland with many flowers, butterflies and birds if you are here at the right time of year. The larger animals to look out for all year round are hares and deer. Of the birds, skylarks and meadow pipits singing overhead and corn buntings singing from fence posts are common summer sounds.

Spring views along the route



Downland view from The Ridgeway before point 2



Ashdown House and Park from between points 4 and 5



Flower-rich meadow north of Alfred's Castle



Cottages in Ashbury

April 2014

This walk has been supported by



ASHBURY CIRCULAR WALK MAP

