

WHITE HORSE HILL CIRCULAR WALK

4¼ miles (6¾ km) – allow 2 hours (see map on final page)

Introduction

This circular walk within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Oxfordshire is 7 miles (11km) west of Wantage. It takes you through open, rolling downland, small pasture fields with some wonderful mixed hedgerows, woodland and a quintessential English village. It includes a classic section of The Ridgeway, with magnificent views of the Vale of White Horse to the north, and passes the unique site of White Horse Hill before descending the steep scarp slope to the small picturesque village of Woolstone in the Vale.



Ridgeway Circular Route

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

Terrain and conditions

- Tracks, field paths mostly through pasture and minor roads.
- Quite strenuous with a steep downhill and uphill section. 174m (571 feet) ascent and descent.
- There are 9 gates and one set of 5 steps, but no stiles.
- 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 National Trust car park for White Horse Hill (parking fee), south off the B4507 between Swindon and Wantage at map grid reference SU293866. To find it online, visit www.multimap.com and enter 'SU293866' in the box for 'Address, town or postcode'.

By Bus: The X47 provides a limited service from Swindon on Saturdays. Telephone Thames Travel 01491 837988 for further details.

Facilities and refreshments

- Refreshments:
 - Woolstone has a village pub, the White Horse Inn, which is open all day and provides lunches and evening meals (if you're planning on eating, it's best to book in advance) – 01367 820726 or visit www.whitehorsewoolstone.co.uk.
 - Cream Teas are served on Saturdays, Sundays & Bank Holidays from 2-6pm at Britchcombe Farm, which also has a campsite – 01367 821022 or visit <http://www.britchcombefarm.co.uk/>
- Accommodation:
 - The White Horse Inn – see above
 - Britchcombe Farm campsite – 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

1. Exit at the top end of the car park and turn left onto the minor tarmac road. Continue uphill with good views of Uffington Castle to your left.
2. Where the minor road bears left, continue straight ahead onto the rougher track.
3. At the next junction of tracks, turn left onto The Ridgeway and head uphill.
4. If you want to explore the Iron Age fort of Uffington Castle and the White Horse, as well as have great views of the Manger, the Vale of White Horse and, in fine weather, the Cotswold Hills to the west, go left through the gate at the top of the hill. Otherwise continue along The Ridgeway gently downhill. From here, on a clear day, there are views to the east of the Chiltern Hills in the distance with Didcot Power Station in between. The Ridgeway itself keeps to the high ground to the right before crossing the River Thames and climbing into the Chilterns.
5. Turn left at the bottom of the slope, a couple of hundred metres before the long belt of trees on the right, and head across the field on the unfenced grass track. Soon you will be heading downhill with fine views of the Thames Valley. In the foreground are the villages of Fawler and Kingston Lisle and in the distance to the right, beyond the gap in the low hills, is Oxford.

6. Go through the wooden gate and continue downhill heading to the right edge of the woodland.
7. Go through a metal kissing gate. Continue ahead going steeply down the scarp slope through pasture with the woodland, and then a hedge, to your left and passing through another kissing gate. To the right are good views of a dry coombe or valley created by the retreating ice during the last Ice Age.
8. At the bottom, turn left through a kissing gate and head down to the road. Turn left along the road keeping to the verge for about 50m before crossing the road onto the footpath opposite when you reach the farm entrance. Go downhill through the field (campsite during summer) keeping the hedge to your right.
9. Continue ahead through the next field with the fine mixed hedge to your right.
10. At the bottom turn right over the small stream, then immediately left and continue with the hedge and stream to your left. In the next field beyond a footbridge is another mixed hedge to your left.
11. At the end of the field turn left over another footbridge back over the stream and follow the path as it meanders through the woodland next to the stream.
12. When the path emerges from the woodland turn left along the grass track with a hedge to your left and a young plantation, mostly ash trees, to your right.
13. At the road turn right and after about 30 paces turn left onto a track first passing paddocks and then a mixed plantation of deciduous trees.
14. At the end, where the track bears left, continue straight ahead through a belt of trees. When you emerge continue ahead on the field edge path with another hedge rich in fruit in late summer/autumn on your left.
15. At the road turn left into the small village of Woolstone taking care as there are no pavements although it is a quiet road. Turn left at the White Horse Inn and follow the road uphill out of the village.
16. To visit the small late Norman church of All Saints, take the footpath to the left before the road rises steeply and cross one field to the churchyard. Otherwise continue ahead.
17. Go straight over the cross roads and after a few paces turn left and then right through the gate. Head steadily uphill, keeping the hedge to your right, back to the car park in the clump of trees ahead. It's a stiff climb and rests are recommended to enjoy the good views of the Manger, the White Horse and Dragon Hill to the left, and the Thames Valley behind you! Uffington with its fine church is in the foreground and, in the middle distance to the left of Uffington, the clump of trees on a slight rise holds Faringdon folly.

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.

White Horse Hill is a gem with some of the best prehistoric sites and views along The Ridgeway. The Horse itself, probably the oldest chalk hill figure in Britain, dates from the late Bronze Age about 3,000 years ago. Measuring 110m (360ft) in length the Horse has regularly been cleaned to stop vegetation encroaching. This used to take place during festivals and the author Thomas Hughes described one such event in the 19th century in his book 'The Scouring of the White Horse'. He describes a country fair with stalls selling a wide variety of food and wares, musicians, acrobats and competitions that included climbing a greasy pole and cheese rolling down the Manger. Why the Horse was created still remains a mystery: it can only be seen fully from the air, so perhaps those who cut it wanted it to be seen by the ancient gods as well as by men.

Above the Horse, next to The Ridgeway, and crowning both the hill and Oxfordshire (for this is the highest point in the county at 262m (857ft)) is Uffington Castle. This early Iron Age fort was constructed around 2,700 years ago and has a single ditch and rampart. Originally the ditch was about 3m (10ft) deeper than it is today with the ramparts topped by a timber palisade.

From the Horse there are excellent views of both the Manger and Dragon Hill below. The Manger, an impressive steep-sided dry valley, has ripples along its western flank known locally as the Giant's Stairs created by the scouring effect of melt-water during the retreat of the last Ice Age. Legend tells that the Horse leaves its hillside one night a year to feed in the Manger but is always back in place by first light. The conical, flat-topped Dragon Hill has its legend too: St George killed the dragon here and its spilt blood has forever poisoned the soil so grass has never regrown, leaving the bare white patch seen today.

Wildflowers: The banks of The Ridgeway towards the top of the slope before point 4 on the map are an excellent place to find a range of chalk grassland flowers that once were common on the downs but are now relatively rare. During the summer months you should find chalk milkwort, clustered bellflower, common spotted orchid, harebell, horseshoe vetch, kidney vetch, sainfoin, salad burnett, spiny restharrow and yellow (or hay) rattle. White Horse Hill is a good place for these and others too.

Between points 4 and 5 on The Ridgeway are several specimens of broomrape that is fairly rare in this part of the country. It is parasitic on other plants so has no need of chlorophyll which gives plants their green colour, and when flowering it has a medium tall pale reddish brown spike.

Hedgerows: A feature of this walk is the wonderful mixed hedgerows, full of fruiting bushes or trees during late summer and early autumn, but lovely to investigate at any

time. You'll find damson, hazel, elder and crab apple trees, bramble, dog rose, hawthorn and blackthorn with its crop of sloes. Other common trees are ash and some wonderful oaks. In places too you'll find dogwood, spindle and the dramatic wild clematis draped over other plants with its autumn fibrous fruits that give it one of its alternative names of old man's beard. Another name for it is travellers' joy – hopefully an apt description for this walk!

Views along the route



View west from The Ridgeway near point 4 in May



The Manger and the Vale of White from the White Horse



Descending the scarp from point 7



Cottage in Woolstone



Sainfoin flowering in May just before Point 4



A profusion of crab apples and blackberries in August

This walk has been supported by



WHITE HORSE HILL CIRCULAR WALK MAP

