



Cookham Stanley Spencer's Village

Distance: 12¼ km=7¾ miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire

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Refreshments: Cookham, Cookham Reach, Cookham Dean

Map: Explorer 172 (Chiltern Hills East) *but the map below should be sufficient*

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

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Village, art gallery, historic church, river, hills, woodland, country lanes

In Brief

This is a hugely varied scenic circular walk centred on one of the Thames' prettiest and oldest villages, famous as the home of painter Sir Stanley Spencer. The walk combines a wonderful stretch of the river, a long woodland trek and a country village.

Note that the old Cookham village has *no shop*. All the shops are by the station. There are two pubs along the way (apart from the *Crown* in the village), one a big gaudy riverside cabin, the other an absolute gem of a village pub in Cookham Dean (ring 01628-482905 for info).



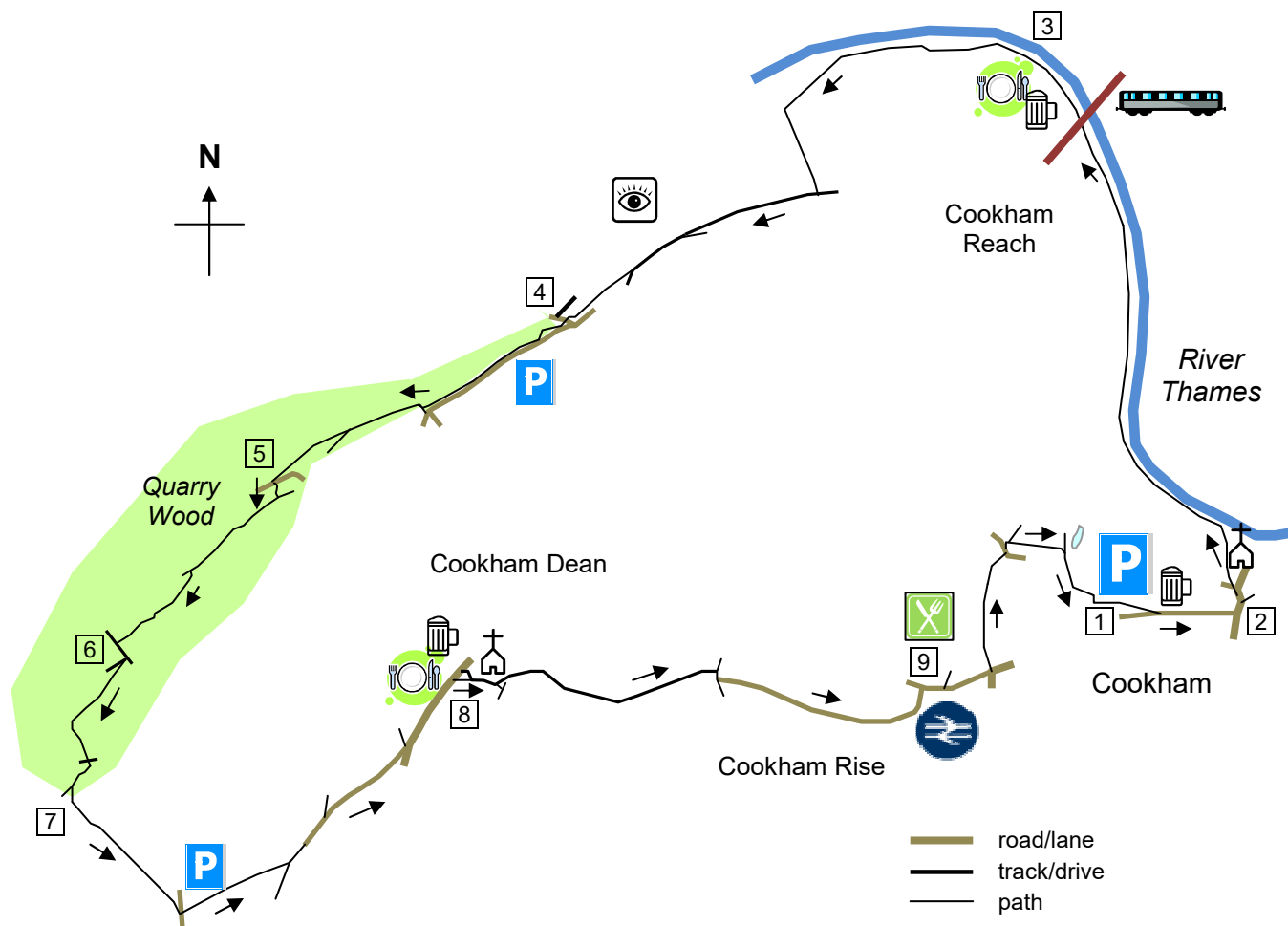
There were no nettles or brambles to speak of on this walk. Boots are probably needed in a wet winter because of the woods, otherwise sensible shoes are adequate. Your dog will be welcome on this walk.



The walk begins at **Cookham Railway Station** (start at section 9) or at the **car park on the green** 200m after the end of the High Street in the village of **Cookham**, Berkshire, nearest postcode **SL6 9SB**. By the time you do this walk, the National Trust may have introduced a charge, but at £2 for the whole day, not a huge sum. There are a number of free car parks along the route: see the text and the map. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk



The Welsh for “boat” is “cwch”, pronounced a little like “cook”, and you will soon see why this village is the “place of boats”, set in this meandering curve in the Thames. The river was a blessing and a curse with awful floods, such as in 1894 and 1947. So the Romans and the later inhabitants pitched their dwellings in Cookham Rise, near where the station is now. East of the present-day village, a number of islands divide the river. The Roman road, the Camlet Way, from St. Albans to Silchester, probably used them to cross the Thames and the remains of wooden piles may indicate a historic bridge. King Alfred-the-Great built a “Burgh”, or place of refuge, from the Danes on an island. One island was sacred to the Saxon gods. The present village seems to have grown up around an 8th-century Saxon monastery and the Saxon kings also had a royal palace here. A national religious Synod took place here and the “Witan” (a Saxon parliament) met here in 997.

Modern Cookham is a hugely desirable place for the well-heeled to live and residents include Tim Brooke-Taylor, Chris Rea (the rock singer-songwriter), Ulrika Jonsson, Jim Rosenthal (sports presenter) and Sir Clive Woodward (rugby coach).

- 1 Go to the far side of the car park and turn sharp **right** alongside the green heading for the village centre. (In 100m, there's a short cut to the river on the left through Marsh Meadow for those rarest of visitors who do not want to see the village.) *These greens and meadows caused a huge enduring furore in the 1800s when landowners tried to fence them in.* Go up and down steps by the Crown pub and continue along the High Street. You pass on both sides several historic cottages and, on the right, Stanley Spencer's house (with a

blue plaque). At the end of the High Street, on the right is the Stanley Spencer Gallery.



Visionary painter Stanley Spencer was Cookham's favourite son and he lived there almost the whole of his life. He was famous for portraying large groups of human figures in extravagantly pious religious scenes or at work in heavy industry. He was infamous in his time for his frank nude portraits and self-portraits which are now seen to anticipate Lucien Freud. The small Stanley Spencer Gallery is not a permanent exhibition: instead it organises a new show around a theme roughly twice a year by "borrowing" Spencer's pictures from other galleries (rather like a brief "homecoming").

- 2 Turn **left**, following the main road and fork **left** to the church, going through the churchyard which appears in Spencer's painting *Resurrection*.



You cannot help admiring the clean massive stone walls and sheer size of this mostly-13th-century church (although it dates from earlier times and has Victorian "improvements" of course). An anchoress (incarcerated within the walls) who died in 1181 seems to have been doing penance for King Henry II after the murder of St. Thomas à Beckett. Inside there are a number of brasses and tombs. The line from St. Matthew on Margret Gerrard's slab, "wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove", sounds a bit back-handed now.

Go past the church on your right, on a tarmac path, leading to the river. Turn **left** along the grassy bank of the Thames, known here as Cookham Reach. You pass the sailing club, a wide grassy space and a line of willows. On the opposite Buckinghamshire bank, you see a marvellous series of fine houses, boathouses and lawns. In 1½ km, the river path goes under the railway bridge, which incidentally also carries the Thames Path. Stay on this side of the river, passing some chalets and bungalows and, 250m from the bridge, reaching the *Bounty* pub, a pleasant surprise. *The "Bounty" is a big bright and cheerful sparkly chalet with a huge terrace and an icecream parlour; four real ales are on tap, including the local Rebellion.*



- 3 Continue along the river path, through a swing-gate beside a large meadow, through a large kissing-gate and beside a crop field. Just before a line of houses, the path veers away from the riverside and goes along the right-hand side of the field. At the first corner, the footpath turns **left** across the centre of the field. At the other side, go through wooden swing-gate and cross the grass to the foot of a hill where several paths meet. Turn **right** here on a wide dirt track uphill. You gain ever-widening views as the path ascends and, after 500m, another path joins you from the left. You come through a large metal kissing-gate. In about 100m, your wide track veers left to run uphill. In 20m, **leave** this track by forking **right** on a narrow path through trees and, as they thin out, you have extensive views across the river to the Westhorpe Lake and Marlow. You come out on a private tarmac lane at a curve.



- 4 Go straight across the lane, up a bank, over a drive and up another bank, still on the narrow path. In 20m, your path curves left to reach a tarmac lane. Do not cross or join the lane: instead, fork **right** on a narrow, fairly level, path. Your path takes you up shallow steps and runs level again. Finally, it bends left up more steps and through a wooden barrier to a T-junction with a wider horse path. Turn **right** on this wide path. It runs parallel to the lane, passing a small car park and veers right just before a house. Turn **right** on a gravel drive and, beside the gates of *Rivendell*, keep **right** on a narrow path which runs beside the fence of the house. In



300m take the **right** fork, the more level option. In another 300m your path comes up to meet a road.

5 Cross straight over the road to a path opposite and immediately turn **right** up a flinty bank into the wild labyrinth which is Quarry Wood. In 20m, at the top of a slope, turn **right** on a narrow woodland path. (There are many paths through the wood, making the directions rather complex. Your route is distantly parallel to the road you crossed, but higher up and **always level** and generally **straight on**. The road will soon be inaudible as it drops down to the river level. Summer foliage permitting, you should soon be able to see part of the Thames valley on your right, with the hills beyond.) Your path widens and runs under beeches. 400m from the road, you pass, on your left, a tree trunk lying lengthways. [Care! Some walkers go wrong here – there are several fallen trees.] Take the **left** fork here just before the standing-up trunk of a dead tree. Not long afterwards, you pass a Woodland Trust memorial bench. Immediately after the bench, avoid a narrow path on your left and keep straight on. You pass a misleading marker post. At the next marker post, your path zigzags left-right. Stay on this narrow main path, avoiding all minor paths off. Where the path forks, take either branch as they meet up again. Finally, 800m from the road, your path ends at a wide sunken path with wooden barriers visible left and right.

6 Turn **left** on the wide path and go through the wooden barrier to see a second barrier just ahead. Turn **right before** this second barrier, avoid a wide sunken bridleway which runs downhill and instead keep **left** through another wooden barrier on a more level wide woodland footpath. In 200m, the path starts to wheel left around a private garden containing a pitch-and-putt course. The path rises to a wooden barrier. Go straight across a muddy horse track and through yet another wooden barrier into Bisham Woods on a rising snaking path. The path curves right and runs not far from a field you can see on your left. In 100m, keep **left** close to the field and turn **left** through a small wooden gate into a wide meadow – a welcome change from the gloom of the woods.

7 Go straight ahead between a hedge on your left and a young tree plantation. At the first corner, continue ahead along the left-hand side of the next field, under overhead wires. Just before the end of the path, ignore a stile and plank bridge on your left (leading across the road to a small car park). Go through a large metal kissing-gate, turn **left** on a track and cross the road to a narrow footpath opposite. Take a faint path straight across the grass, enjoying the song of the larks, passing a jutting wood on your left. Keep exactly the same direction across the grassy space, passing a small copse on your left, to the far corner where you can see some posts. Take a path into the woods and through a wooden barrier to the corner of a rough drive next to a signpost. Keep straight ahead along the drive, soon coming out to the green in Cookham Dean. Go past a National Trust sign for *Bigfrith* on your left and follow the lane uphill to a T junction. Turn **left** on this major road. Continue another 300m, using the nicely mown verges, soon reaching the *Jolly Farmer* pub on your left. *Note: the people of Cookham Dean are blessed with three pubs: there are also the "Chequers" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin", both ½ km from here.*



The Jolly Farmer was told by Courage in 1987 that the pub was to be sold. So the villagers got together and decided to buy it "for the village by the village". This is a gem of a pub, without modern "themes" or distractions, just a warm fire in winter. Ales are typically two from Rebellion (IPA and Cracked Nuts) and

another local White Waltham's Stardust. Food is good too with interesting bar snacks and a masterly menu.

Cookham Dean was the home of Kenneth Grahame, author of the "Wind in the Willows". The character of Mr. Toad was based on the eccentric Col. Francis Ricardo, Sheriff of Berkshire. He was the first car owner in Cookham, with a canary-yellow Rolls Royce Silver Ghost – just like the one that landed Mr. Toad in so much trouble.

- 8 After possible refreshments, cross the road to the church and turn **right** just before it on a rough track. Turn **left** round the side of the churchyard, past houses, and keep **left** on a drive marked *Huntsmans House*. *Cliveden House*, where the *Profumo* affair was kindled in 1961, is visible on the hill in the distance. The track curves right round a new house and runs between fields. It leads through a small wooden gate and between hedges. Finally, you pass a cricket green on your left and reach a road. Cross the road, a fraction right, and take a residential road opposite. This quiet road has a mixture of houses of different styles. Eventually it bends left beside the railway. Turn **right**, over a level crossing to Cookham Railway Station. There are also shops here, plus a café.



- 9 Continue along the main road (that is, **right** if you are coming out of the station) as far as a mini-roundabout where a major road meets you at a bend. Turn **left** here on a track marked as a footpath. Keep straight ahead past farm sheds and past a large metal gate, continuing on a rough drive past houses. In 400m or so, at the end of the drive, turn **left** on a tarmac lane and, in 10m, turn sharp **right** on a narrow path, passing a house *The Meadows* on your left. The path narrows even further and runs beside a wooden fence. You come through a large kissing-gate to a junction of meadows with a pond ahead. Turn **right** alongside a horse pasture on your right. After a small wooden gate and a bridge over a stream, you are back at the car park on the green where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: Cookham is close to Maidenhead in a bend in the Thames. If coming from the London area or the M25 or from the west, the easiest way is via the M4. Come off at exit 7 **Slough West**. Follow the connecting road to the A4 and turn **left**. In 2 miles, just after going over the Thames bridge, turn **right** at a roundabout. Cookham village is in 2½ miles. Turn **left** along the High Street and park on the **right**, about 250 yds after the end of the houses. There are other small free car parks, both on Winter Hill Road approximate postcodes **SL6 9TS** and **SL6 9UG**.

By train: Cookham lies on the Marlow branch line. There is a regular service every day from London Paddington, but you will need to change at Maidenhead (unless you join the commuters early or late in the day when there are some through trains).

By bus: bus 37 from Maidenhead stops in Cookham Village, not Sunday. Check the timetables.

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