



Donnington Castle, Bagnor, Winterbourne

Distance: 12 km=7½ miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire

Date written: 3-aug-2014

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Last update: 2-dec-2017

Refreshments: Bagnor, Winterbourne?

Map: Explorer 158 (Newbury) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Nature reserve, heath, woodland, castle, villages, rivers, views

In Brief

This walk just north of Newbury offers great variety within such a modest distance. The medieval castle (with free entry) is a real surprise if you don't know the area. Two villages are visited, both a picture and both with a characterful pub (to enquire at the *Blackbird*, ring 01635-40638; to enquire at the *Winterbourne Arms*, ring 01635-248200.) *The Winterbourne Arms has been closed off-and-on during 2017: it's vital to ring before you go. The Blackbird in Bagnor, by contrast, has a new head chef with "ambitious plans" (but still ring!).*

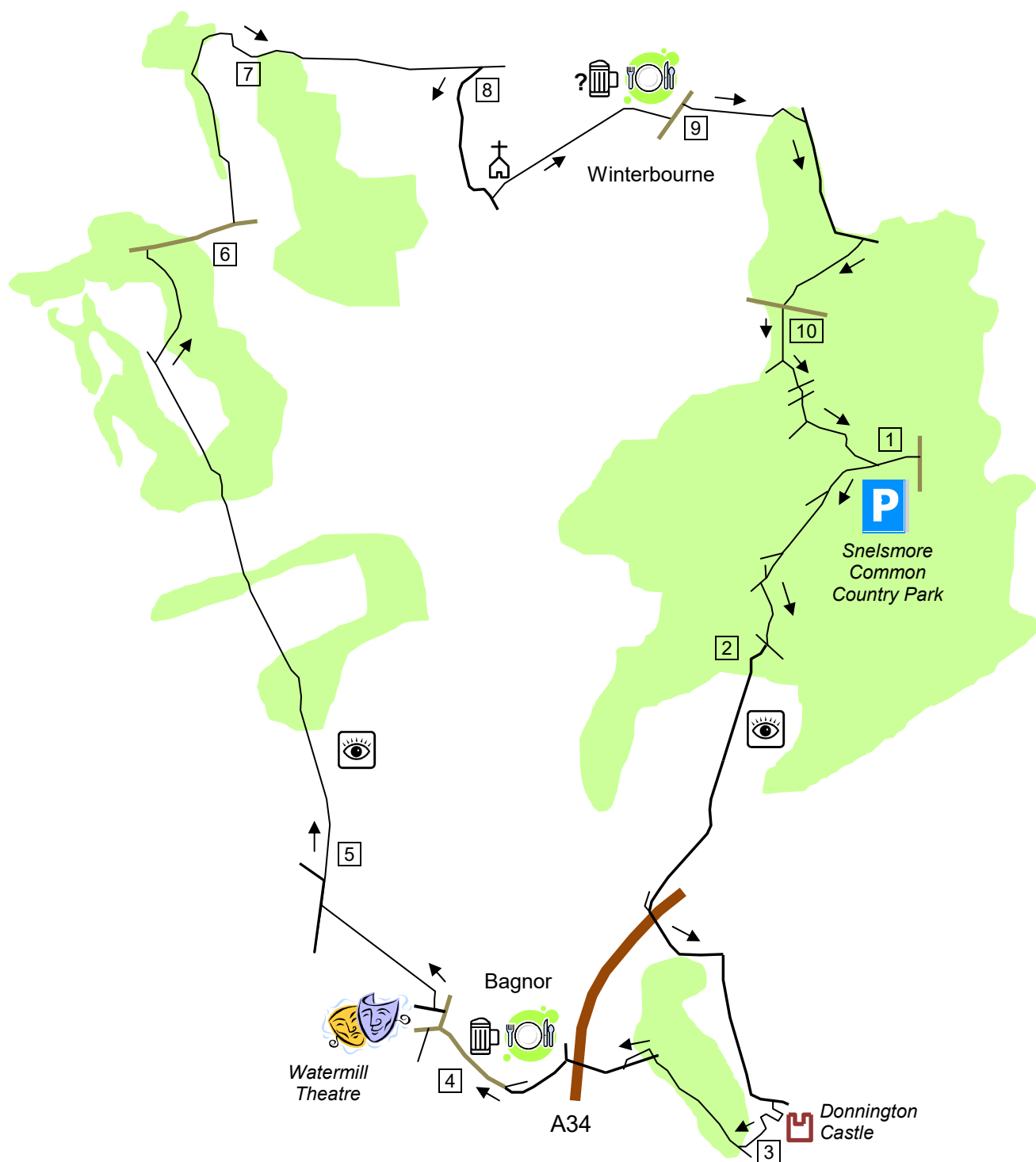


There are some nettles and brambles, mostly bordering the paths and avoidable, but you might brush against some unseen, so long trousers are necessary. The terrain is fairly firm with tarmac or gravel paths, so good walking shoes or trainers are adequate, except in the winter months when you will be glad of hiking boots. The stiles generally have a gap for a dog if you want to bring him along.

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The walk begins in the car park of **Snelsmore Common Country Park**, nearest postcode **RG14 3BQ**. It is clearly marked off the B4494 road, opposite the entrance to the Mary Hare School. There are loos near the entrance where there are some parking spaces and an occasional café. There are two much larger parking areas further inside. The car park closes at dusk, so if there is the slightest risk of going astray and returning late, it may be best to use a parking space by the entrance. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1 Walk through the left-hand car park of Snelmore Common Country Park, passing a picnic area on your right. Go straight ahead past a noticeboard, through a large metal swing-gate, on a wide path. The path veers left and runs straight. In 100m, at an oblique crossing path, avoid a path forking right. (*This path, worth exploring another time, is part of two long-distance routes: the British Horse Society's and the Three Downs Link.*) Just after a lookout tower on your left, where the tarmac path bends right, keep straight ahead on a gravel path. Veer **left** shortly after, where a path joins you from the right. 20m after that, take the **left** fork. Stay on the main path as it veers

right and passes under wires. You arrive at a fingerpost with a small metal gate beside a large one. Avoiding a footpath on the left, keep straight ahead through the gate.

- 2 This bridleway zigzags left-right past a house under reconstruction and suddenly you have great views ahead while, beneath your feet, the surface becomes tarmac. You are joined by a private drive from the right, just as the bridleway turns left and crosses the A34 Newbury Bypass (*scene of the **third** Battle of Newbury in 1996*) by a long high bridge, a surprisingly exhilarating experience. Keep left, staying on the tarmac, uphill. At the top of the rise, turn **right** in front of some wooden buildings of Castle Farm, passing its nettle-ridden old barn. Donnington Castle is now in view straight ahead. Follow the track until you pass through the (open) metal gates into the castle grounds. As the track curves left, a small wooden gate on the **right** takes you into the castle precincts.

Donnington was a comfortable fortified and decorated manor (witness the gargoyles and the vaulted ceiling) built in 1386 and owned by, amongst others, Thomas Chaucer, son of the poet. All until war broke out in 1642 between Charles I and Parliament. The Royalists seized and held the castle and built the fortifications that you now see as grass slopes, with cannon all around. Much was destroyed in the ensuing siege. This hardly counted because the real action took place in the neighbouring fields and villages where the Royalists lost in two Battles of Newbury. After their victory, Parliament voted to demolish what remained of the castle, leaving only the gatehouse, so you have to mentally reconstruct the body of the castle from the walls and small rooms that peep up from the grassy platform.

- 3 After a break to view the castle, facing the view of Newbury to the south, with the gatehouse to your left, take a grass path in the **right**-hand corner, downhill. The path curves right into Castle Wood and takes you through a small wooden gate to join the public footpath. Keep ahead through the dark woodland, using a board walk in two places to ease your tread. Your path goes downhill through woods. On meeting a tarmac track, turn **left** and immediately keep ahead on a narrow path through low trees, parallel to the golfers' path, which you shortly re-join. Keep straight ahead on the tarmac to cross the bypass again using another long bridge. At the other side, turn **left** on a descending tarmac path. This path ends at a wooden swing-gate: turn **right** here on a shingle path between houses, avoiding the byway sharp right. Welcome to the village of Bagnor! The *Blackbird Inn* is on your right.



Bagnor's history goes back to long before the Domesday Book, dominated by the Manor (the current building dates from the 1600s). The River Lambourn and the Winterbourne Stream run through the village. The many famous sons of the village include actor Sir Michael Hordern and George Melly the jazz singer. The "Blackbird" has been a country pub since the 1600s, recently acquired by a new team. The feisty Thai landlady often prepares her national cuisine in the evening. (However, lunch is even better at the next pub, the Winterbourne Arms, if you have time to wait.) Food is served each day except Monday and the pub is open all day from midday at weekends. Ales are West Berkshire's Good Old Boy with one or two rotating guests, such as Pitstop. In 2017, the pub was reopened with a new head chef, Dom Robinson.

- 4 Continue along the lane with houses on your right and the Winterbourne Stream and its pleasant green banks on your left. Avoid a footpath on the right and continue to a junction of lanes. [The left fork, though not on your route, is worth exploring.](#) In 30m, the footpath on your left leads over the Winter-

bourne Stream and then over the River Lambourn, making a soothing short there-and-back contemplative trip. The lane itself leads to the Watermill, a theatre of international renown. You can visit the garden and foyer and perhaps pick up a programme. In both cases, you need to retrace your steps.



The mill at Bagnor is as old as the village and much of the machinery still stands with the River Lambourn flowing beneath. But the milled product now is a year-round programme of theatrical performances which are reviewed in the national newspapers and engage notable professional players. The theatre's first professional season was in 1967 and it rose to national prominence under the tutelage of Jill Fraser from 1981. Actors such as Bill Nighy, Sean Bean and David Suchet began their careers here. The Poirot actor said "the Watermill fulfils my vision of a perfect theatre".

Keep **right** at the junction. In 20m, at the next junction, turn **left** on a cul-de-sac at a sign for *Bagnor Manor*. In only 20m, go **right** over a stile and go along the left-hand side of a small meadow, going through the second of two small wooden gates on your left. Continue into a meadow and take a wide path diagonally across the centre. At the end, go through a gap in the fence and up a bank to a T-junction. Turn **right** on a wide bridleway between tall hedges.

- 5 In 60m, at a junction, keep straight ahead, leaving the bridleway which bends left. Your footpath rises and comes out into the open on a wide path between fields. It ends at a broad path which takes you through the woods on Mount Hill, going straight over a crossing track. A wide path now leads between crop fields, through a band of trees, then on a grassy course up the right-hand side of a field. At the top, go straight ahead into Boxford Common. A winding path goes uphill to a gate leading into a large hayfield surrounded on all sides by woodland. Go through the gate and take a path across the centre of the field, heading for a gate visible in the fence ahead. Go through this gate and immediately take a path forking **right** to another gate in the nearby trees. This gate leads onto a path running along the edge of the highest part of the wood. Finally you emerge via a wooden swing-gate (all these gates were installed by the W.Berks Ramblers) onto a lane. Turn **right** downhill.
- 6 In 250m, before a house, turn **left** through a swing-gate and go up a grassy path beside some sheds. At the top, go through a wooden swing-gate and continue along the left-hand side of the next meadow. In the far left corner, go through a wooden swing-gate and continue as before along the left-hand side of a rather rough meadow. In the corner, wheel **right**, staying in the meadow close to the woods of Borough Copse on your left. In the next corner, ignore a gate and a stile and turn **right**, staying in the same rough meadow. In the next corner, keep going round to the right and cling to the edge as it curves left. Finally you will find a small wooden gate. Go **left** through this gate.
- 7 Your path now leads you along the right-hand side of a field. Just before the start of the next field, your path forks **right** into the shrubbery, under wires. *Don't miss this turn!* [Summer 2015: This right fork was very overgrown and the crop has been planted up to the hedge, obliterating any path in the field; it may be easier to venture 20m into the field at this point and follow a path made by a tractor down to the bridleway.] On entering the next field, keep to a line of a dense bracken hedge on your left. The path zigzags left-right. *This patch may be rather overgrown, but it is perfectly navigable and quickly clears.* You now have a wire fence on your right, followed by a long wooden fence

belonging to Lower Farm on your right and later a hedge. At the end of the hedge you meet a diagonally crossing bridleway.

- 8 There is a [direct route across the fields to Winterbourne](#), but the route given here is [more interesting](#). Turn sharp **right** on this wide cinder track, passing the farm and its house on your right. The track curves left to pass round the far side of the old barn of Winterbourne Manor. *The Manor is on your right and you can glimpse it over the hedge. The pilastered front porch is a century newer than the north part which was built in the 1600s. The church of St James “the Less” was founded in the 1100s but completely rebuilt in Victorian times.* Just after a small house, turn **left** on a shingle path through a small wooden gate into the churchyard. Go round either side of the church and take a footpath in the rear left-hand side of the churchyard, following some wires to your right, between fields. At a junction of wires, your path curves right between shrubs and comes down, beside a garden fence and down steps, to a road in Winterbourne beside the thatched *Hawthorne* and opposite the timbered *Pedlars*. Turn **left** to reach the *Winterbourne Arms* – a bright prospect! [2017: has been [closed](#) for periods this year, possibly for sale? vital to ring if you plan to take a break here!]

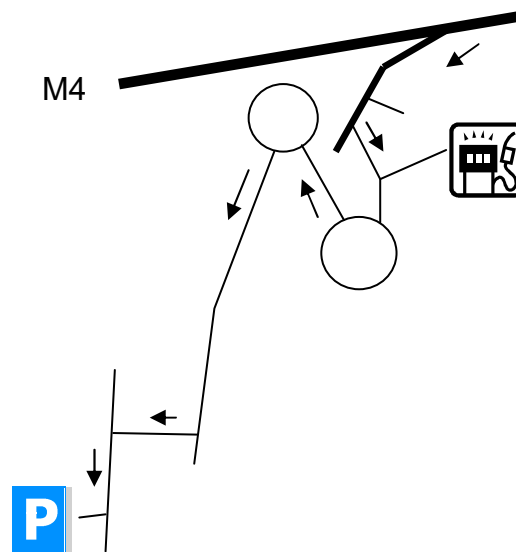


A “winterbourne” is a general word for a stream that dries out in summer but this village which bears that name has the benefit of its gentle rippling all year. The village saw action in the Civil War and Oliver Cromwell stayed near here. The big “Winterbourne Arms” stands back behind its generous front garden, emphasising the sudden welcome. The wide-ranging menu will please everyone except gastronome snobs. Beer is Ramsbury from nearby Marlborough. The pub is open all day from 12 on Sunday but closes from 3-6 other days.

- 9 After a rest break, cross the lane directly opposite the pub, and the pleasant little grassy space with seats, to go over the Winterbourne Stream by a little bridge into a crop field [Nov 2017: [illegally ploughed over! this is a signed footpath: please let us know if you have similar trouble or find a way round](#)]. Avoid a path forking right and go straight up heading for the woods of Mapleash Copse. At the top, your path turns left along the edge and plunges quickly right, into the woods. At a T-junction turn **right** on a bridleway, ignoring a footpath left in 30m. This is Pebble Lane, an ancient byway. After 400m, your path curves right and you can see a house through a hedge on your left. You quickly reach a 4-way fingerpost: turn sharp **right**. This path follows a tortuous course through radiant mixed woodland, goes under wires and comes down to a tarmac lane.
- 10 Cross straight over the lane, through a small metal gate, into Snelmore Common. Follow the path down, by a marker post and past a pit on your left. Immediately after the pit, leave the official footpath, which curves right over a 2-plank bridge, and instead take a **left** fork (almost straight on) up a steep bank ahead. This narrow shingly path goes under wires and runs uphill through birch and heather. Your path crosses one narrow path and reaches a second narrow crossing path which has on the right a small kissing bench with a sentimental inscription. [A brief rest here allows you to admire the heather which is stunning](#). Continue straight over on a humpy and rooty path to reach a wide gravel track. Turn **left** on this track. At a tarmac path, keep **left** through a metal gate and turn **right** into the car park where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: Snelsmore Country Park is well-known to Newburyites but for the outsider the approach is via the M4. The junctions are difficult to navigate so this route needs some care. Come off at Junction 13, stay on the left and go a very short distance on the **A34 south** as for *Newbury*. Avoid a private left turn for *Chieveley Depot* but, almost immediately after that, **filter left** as for *Donnington* and **Services** (you will see *M&S* and *Costa* signs). At a junction, ignore the Services on your left (unless you need them) and keep straight on as for *Donnington*. At the next roundabout, go **more than three quarters round** as for *Donnington*, under the slip roads. At the next roundabout, turn **left** as for *Donnington*, going over the bypass. After nearly 1 mile, turn **right** at a sign for *Winterbourne*. At a T-junction, turn **left** as for *Newbury*. After less than ½ mile, you will see a minor crossroads. Turn **right** into Snelsmore Country Park.



Getting back is simpler: retrace the route until you see signs for the M4.

By bus/train: bus 107 runs from Newbury to Snelsmore Common, not Sunday. Check the timetables.

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