



Ewelme, Nettlebed, Warburg Nature Reserve *Orchids and Clear Water*

Distance 25 km=15½ miles easy-to-moderate but lengthy walking

Region: Chilterns

Date written: 3-nov-2011

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Refreshments: Nettlebed, Ewelme (2 km=1¼ miles extra circuit)
Middle Assendon (after the walk)

Map: 171 (Chiltern Hills South) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Nature reserve, woodland, historic villages, churches, hills, views

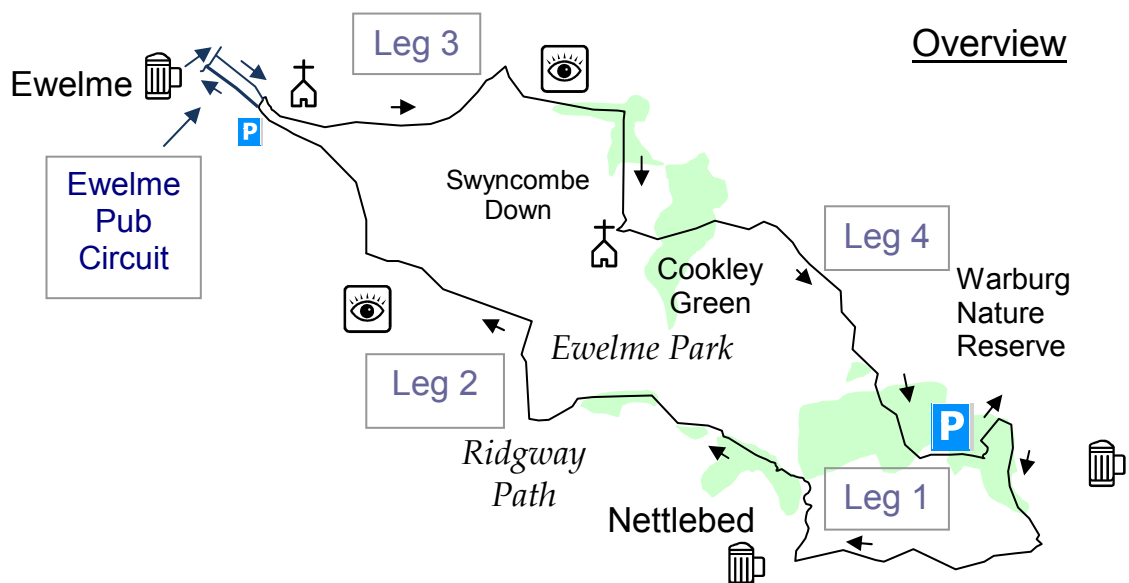
In Brief

Take the most beautiful village name, place it in the most perfect Chiltern walk with huge variety and this is the result. This walk leads you from the dense microclimate of a nature reserve, into extensive woods, to the historic village of Ewelme, then over the hills to an isolated church and on a remarkable trek ending back at the nature reserve.



There are a few small patches of nettles near the start of the walk, so shorts might be a problem. Underfoot the ground is fairly firm, so any strong comfortable footwear should be fine. This walk should be ideal for your dog.

This walk is another tribute to the books of *Adventurous Walks* and follows a similar path to one of them.



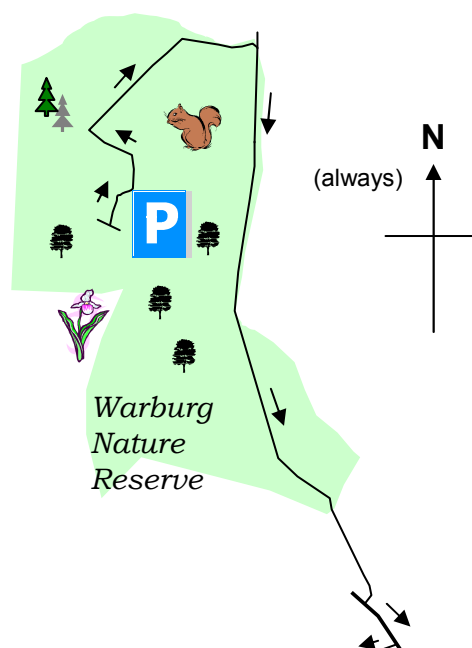
The walk begins at the **Warburg Nature Reserve**, grid ref SU 720 879, postcode **RG9 6BL**, in Bix Bottom, near Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. An alternative starting point is the car park by the playing fields in Ewelme, at the southeast end of the High Street, postcode OX10 6HQ. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

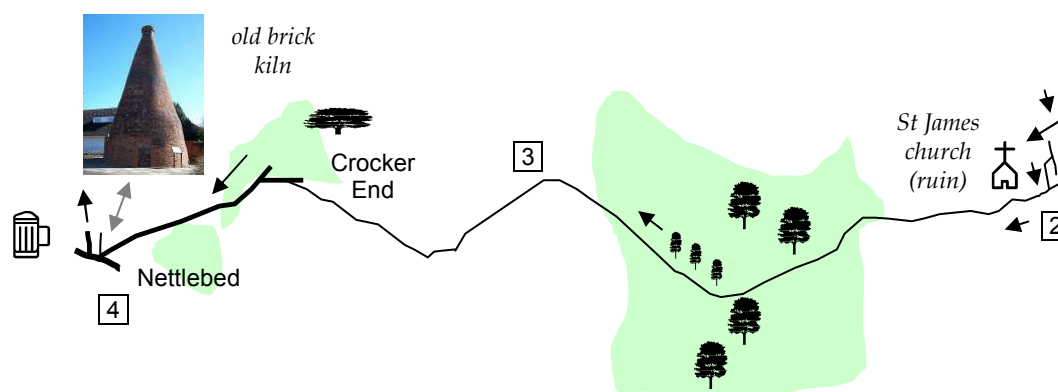
Leg 1: Bix Bottom to Nettlebed 5 km=3 miles

- 1 Go through the car park and through a small wooden gate past a small wooden shelter containing some information about the Nature Reserve and showing some of the possible nature walks. The Reserve is much larger than you might think at the start of this walk, but you will get a better measure of it at the end.

Warburg is the premier nature reserve of the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust, a voluntary organisation which manages 80 reserves around the three counties. These act like "reservoirs" from which wildlife can spread back in the countryside. Warburg preserves at least 400 species of fungi and 1600 other species of animals and plants, especially in summer with its helleborines and orchids.



Go out into an open grassy area and keep **left**, passing markers with white arrows for the Wildlife Walk. In 50m, at the second marker, turn **right** on a marked footpath, going uphill through a wooden gate and through woodland. At the top, veer right and left and continue uphill with a wire fence on your left. At the top, your path veers right by a fence where some houses of Maidensgrove are visible. Go through a wooden gate to meet a wide track and turn **right** on it. *You are on part of the Oxfordshire Way, a national trail of 105 km=65 miles which links the Chilterns with the Cotswold Hills. You will soon meet it again.* You have a field and views on your left. At a fork with signs on a tree, take the **right** fork, marked as SW26, staying on the Oxfordshire Way. Your path opens out with more fine views ahead, before running by more trees, then between fields. Eventually you come down to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane.



2 In 100m, look for a narrow unmarked path through a hedge on your **right**. This is just before an oak tree and, in case you overshoot, about 50m before a junction with a track on the right. This path leads to the ruins of the church of St James, Bix Bottom. *This Norman church was abandoned in 1875 when the new church was built. It has been used as a setting for horror films. The name "Bix", incidentally, is a shortening of "Bixa", meaning box-tree wood.* Turn **left** in front of the church and find an unclear path between ash trees, heading for a hedge. (You may need to improvise a pathway.) In 20m, you reach a track. Turn **right** on this wide path. Your path leads uphill between fields and you may see some of the ubiquitous red kites. Soon your path enters a glorious beechwood, as befits a Chiltern walk. Keep straight ahead at all times, later passing a yew wood on your right. On emerging from the wood, go through a swing-gate and along the left-hand side of a meadow.

3 Keep to the edge of the meadow as it curves left. As you approach the houses of Crocker End, go through a swing-gate beside a metal gate and continue along a pebble lane. As you make your way through this prosperous village, keep ahead along the left-hand side of the Green, going straight over a tarmac drive in about 80m. *Crocker End is well worth exploring for its period cottages. It lost its pub about 20 years ago. Crocker End House, soon on your right, was bought by the Duke and Duchess of Kent in 1989.* Your path crosses another tarmac lane obliquely. Keep ahead, passing a small fingerpost and still keeping to the left-hand side of the Green. Your path eventually merges with a tarmac lane on your right and this lane is joined by another tarmac lane from the right. Avoid another lane branching off soon on the left, passing *Walnut, Appletree and Cherrytree Cottages* to reach the main road in Nettlebed.

4 Bear **right** towards the village. Very shortly, you pass a cul-de-sac where the old Brick Kiln is on view.

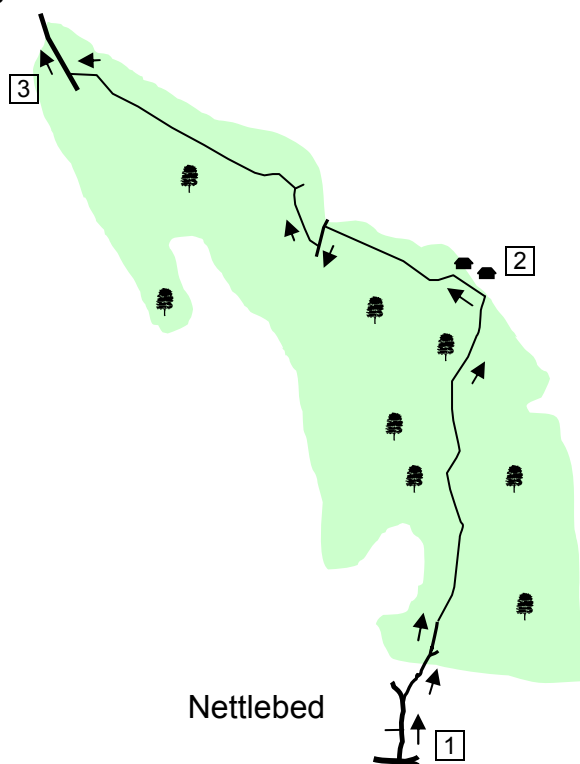
The whole of this local area lies on a bed of clay above the chalk escarpment and Nettlebed and Crocker End were producers of bricks and tiles since the Middle Ages. The 18th-century kiln was just one of many, now preserved for posterity. What you see is only the firing chamber, the fuel shed and working areas being long gone. Among the buildings made from these local bricks are Stonor House (see "Red Kites & Red Deer" in this series) and Ewelme which you will see soon. This particular kiln was later converted to burn lime.

Your route continues for just a few metres, by turning **right** on Watlington Street. However, you may wish to stroll through the village first.

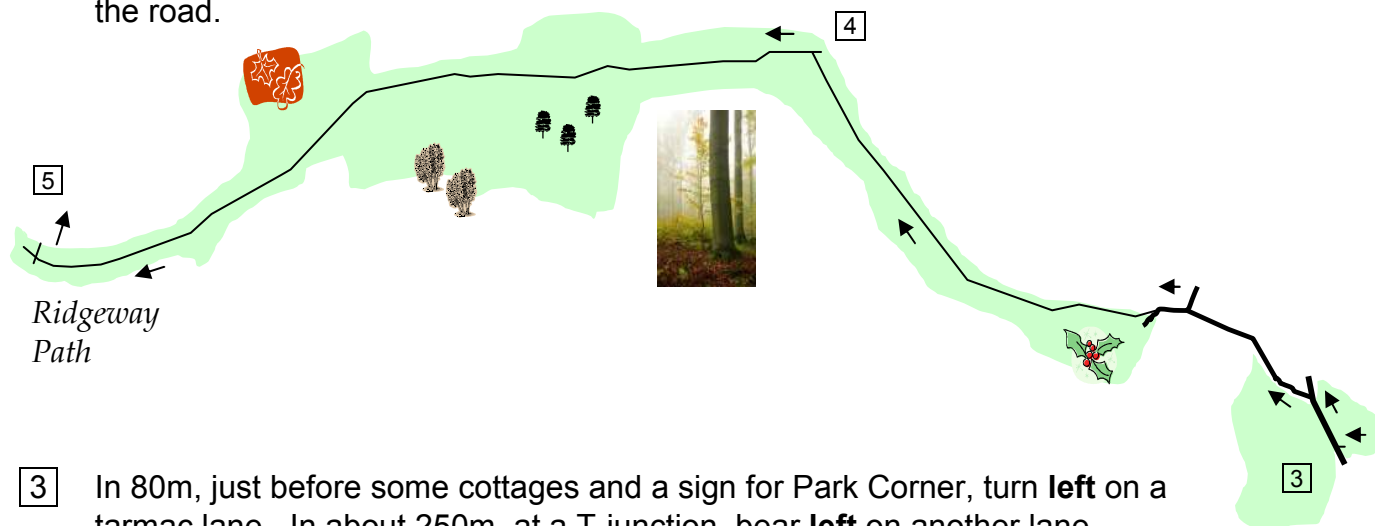
Nettlebed has obscure origins, compared to the much smaller villages that surround it. The church of St Bartholomew, however, dates from Norman times, although only one arch and a window remain of the old church. The Fleming family still live in Nettlebed, the most famous so being James Bond writer Ian Fleming (see also "Hampstead to Oxford Circus" in the London series of this website). The "White Hart" hotel/restaurant, in a 600-year-old building, has had good reviews and also does a hearty breakfast in case you are an early starter. There is a small village store and café at the end on the left (the store is open Sundays).

Leg 2: Nettlebed to Ewelme 9 km=5½ miles

- 1 Proceeding up Watlington Street, ignore a footpath left and, when the road bends left, keep straight on along Mill Road, marked as a bridleway. After some houses, take the **left** fork, avoiding a driveway to the *Mill House*. At the top, turn **left** just before some green metal gates. Follow the main path through woodland, marked by occasional white arrows on trees. The path is quite clear but it winds somewhat and you need to concentrate to spot the arrows. Where the path joins a cinder track, keep straight on. Soon you reach two houses. Turn smartly **left** here, keeping just to the left of the lawn of the larger house.

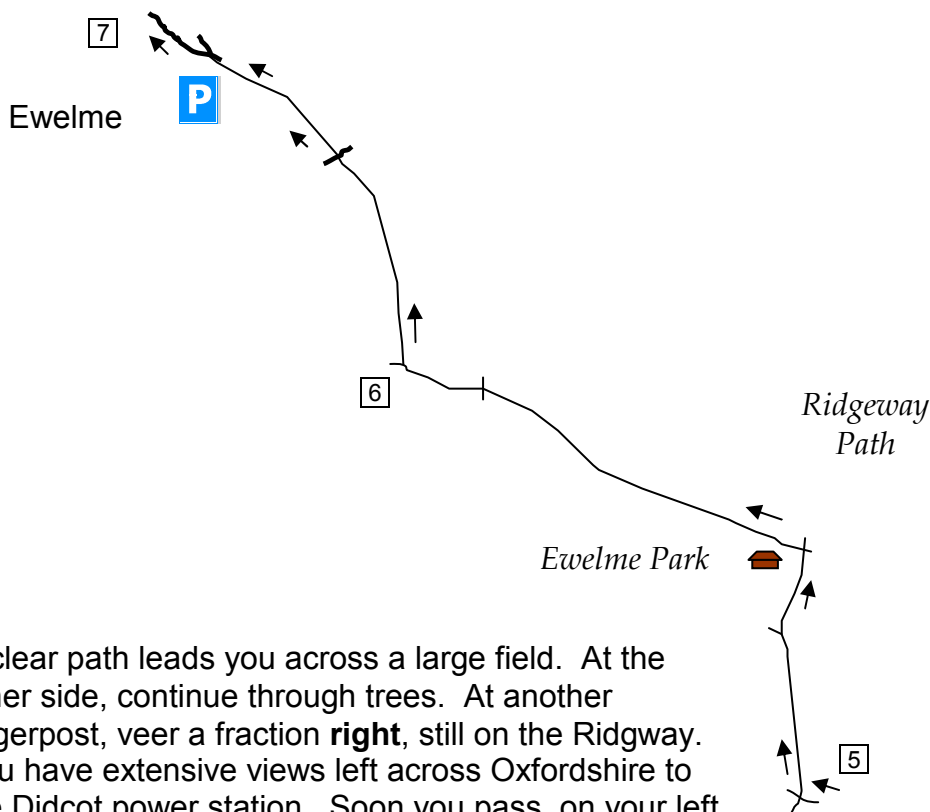


- 2 Your path reenters trees with meadows visible on the right and an occasional white arrow to confirm your route. It goes down a dip, probably an old sawpit, and meets a concrete track for Westwood Manor Farm. Turn **left** on the track. In just 30m, at a white arrow on a tree, turn **right** on a path that runs just this side of a line of beeches. Keep to the path, always following the line of beeches, as it curves immediately right and then left. Here, ignore a small path on your right. The magnificent beeches seem to grow taller as you go. Finally, your path emerges at a road. Turn **right** on the road.



- 3 In 80m, just before some cottages and a sign for Park Corner, turn **left** on a tarmac lane. In about 250m, at a T-junction, bear **left** on another lane. Where the lane bends left in just a few metres, leave it to continue straight ahead on a track, Digberry Lane, marked as a bridleway. Your track passes some isolated cottages and a wooden gate. Your path runs through a wide strip of woodland. After some distance, you come to a T-junction with a field ahead. Turn **left** here on a similar woodland path.

- 4 Your path crosses a farm track obliquely: keep on the main path through more woods. Soon you meet a footpath on the left by a gate on the right: again, ignore these and continue ahead. *If you pass this way in late spring, the bluebells here are particularly abundant.* After some distance, you pass a fenced-off enclosure on your left, concealing a small reservoir. The path leads between fence posts, by a large field on your left. Soon, you reach a 4-way fingerpost in colour-on-black, the distinctive livery of the Ridgway Path. Turn **right** here, thus leaving the wood and joining the Ridgway.



- 5 A clear path leads you across a large field. At the other side, continue through trees. At another fingerpost, veer a fraction **right**, still on the Ridgway. You have extensive views left across Oxfordshire to the Didcot power station. Soon you pass, on your left, a large house *Ewelme Park*.

Ewelme Park was once a great deer park and royal residence, now much reduced and with a 20th-century reproduction of the original house. The land was originally owned by Geoffrey Chaucer's son, Thomas, and passed to the de la Pole family but was seized by Henry VII because of "treason". It was in the care of Sir Henry Norris at the time that Henry VIII found, in his "adultery" with Anne Boleyn, an excuse to be rid of her for good. It passed to his daughter Elizabeth I and her favourite, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, visited the Park just before his execution. There is obviously something in the country air.

Shortly after the house, you reach another 4-way fingerpost. Turn **left** here on a track, thus leaving the Ridgway. You pass a stable yard; the track zigzags under an apple tree and descends into an open field. Keep straight on down the left-hand side of the field. In the corner, go through some shrubbery and straight on along the right-hand side of the next field. Your path runs between fields, then with a hawthorn hedge on your right. At the end of the field, by a post with arrows, go straight over a track, a fraction left. Your path becomes enclosed. After 350m, you pass a post with blue arrows. Turn **right** here on a gently descending enclosed track.

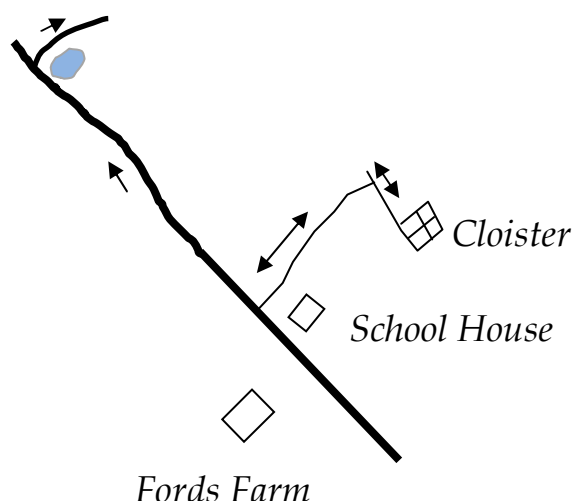
- 6 This drovers' trackway, known as Grindon Lane, has fields each side, with various shrubs, hedges and small trees, a testament to its antiquity. It crosses a farm track, curves left and reaches a tarmac lane, part of the old

Icknield Way. Cross straight over, go through a swing-gate and across a large meadow, a piece of commonland known as Cow Common. The path at first crosses the centre and then rises towards the hedge on the right-hand side. When you reach the hedge, ignore the stile on your right and stay in the meadow, keeping next to the hedge. At the end, go through two small wooden gates beside a cowpen, go across a parking area (alternative start) and continue down the High Street, signposted *Benson Wallingford*. As you pass Ford's Farm and its farmhouse (which does B&B) and approach the old School House, you soon realise that this is no ordinary village.

The whole of English history is written in the stones and pastures of Ewelme. Its euphonious name is obscure Anglosaxon meaning a water spring. The poet Geoffrey Chaucer wrote "In worlde is none more clere of hue / Its water ever freshe and newe / That whelmeth up in waves bright / The mountance of three fingers height". It was his granddaughter Alice whose "strange eventful history" did so much to bring Ewelme into the light. She married William de la Pole in 1430 and the wealth of both powerful families enabled the construction of the church, school and almshouses that you see today. King Edward III and John of Gaunt visited the Manor on occasions. William de la Pole fell foul of the politics of court and was banished for "sundry treasons". On the crossing to France, he was seized by the crew and put into the ship's boat where his head was brutally struck off with a rusty sword after several blows by "one of the lewdest of the ship's company". King Henry VII, the first Tudor, took stock of the amenities of Ewelme and decided that it would be suit him as a country retreat and had it converted into a royal palace. TV historian David Starkey claims that Henry VIII was conceived at Ewelme in 1490.

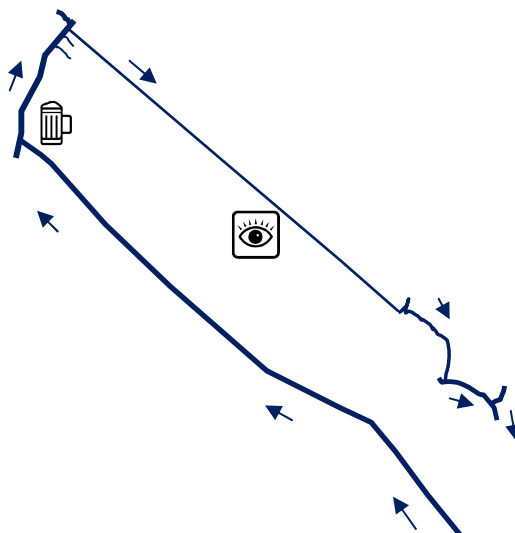
Unsurprisingly, Ewelme has its ghosts. William de la Pole, without his head, and Alice both appear in the Cloister. Another is an enormous growing dark shape like a hairy animal seen near the cress beds. People live or dead may suddenly relocate in the fields. There was also a witch's curse put on all the sons of one family. An outstanding account of Ewelme past and present will be found at: <http://www.fordsfarm.co.uk/History-of-Ewelme.html>.

- 7** To begin your exploration, take a small excursion **right** at the School House, up some steps and into the garden. Turn **right** on a path into the cloister, with its little central well. **There is a loo on the right as you enter the cloister.** The cottages here are almshouses, occupied mainly by pensioners. Return to the road and continue onwards. (You can visit the church from the upper road soon.) You pass various brick and thatched cottages and soon the King's Pool on your right, at a junction with Parson's Lane. Your route is **right** here on the lane, immediately passing the Ewelme Store (closed Sunday afternoon), originally a Methodist chapel.

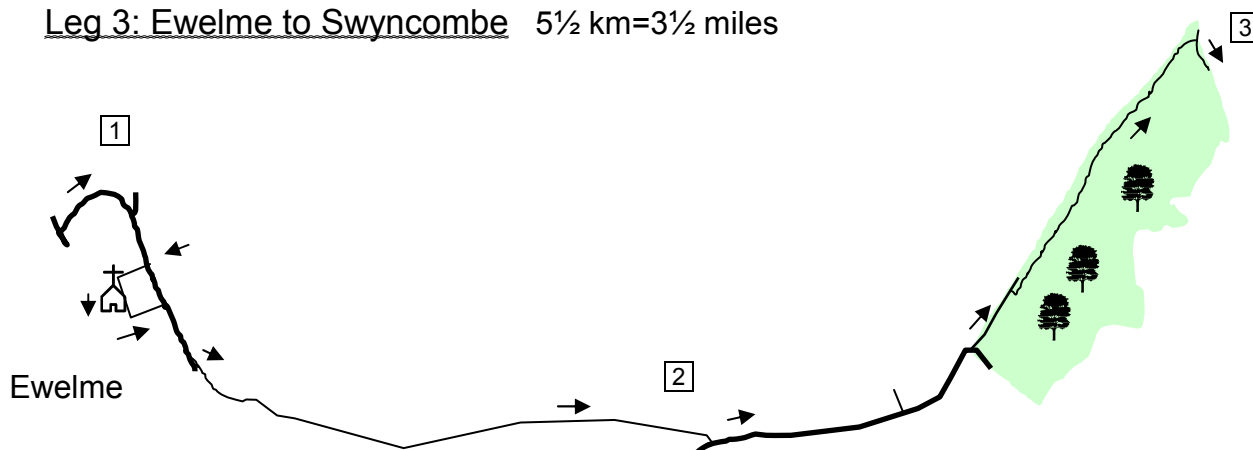


Ewelme Pub Circuit 2 km=1¼ miles

Decision point. However, here is a short optional loop to the *Shepherd's Hut* pub, enabling you to see more of the village. Instead of turning right, keep straight on, passing more attractive cottages. In 600m you reach the *Shepherd's Hut* (Greene King), a well-liked local which serves good food. It has recently (August 2011) taken on a new chef. After refreshment, turn **right** at the T-junction. Ignore a residential close and one track and take the second track **right**, almost opposite a road junction on the left. The track runs beside a field on the left and eventually through a metal gate and on an enclosed path. It zig-zags left-right on a drive by some converted stables. Turn **right** at the end on Chaucer Court and **left** at the road. You have now rejoined the main walk.



Leg 3: Ewelme to Swyncombe 5½ km=3½ miles

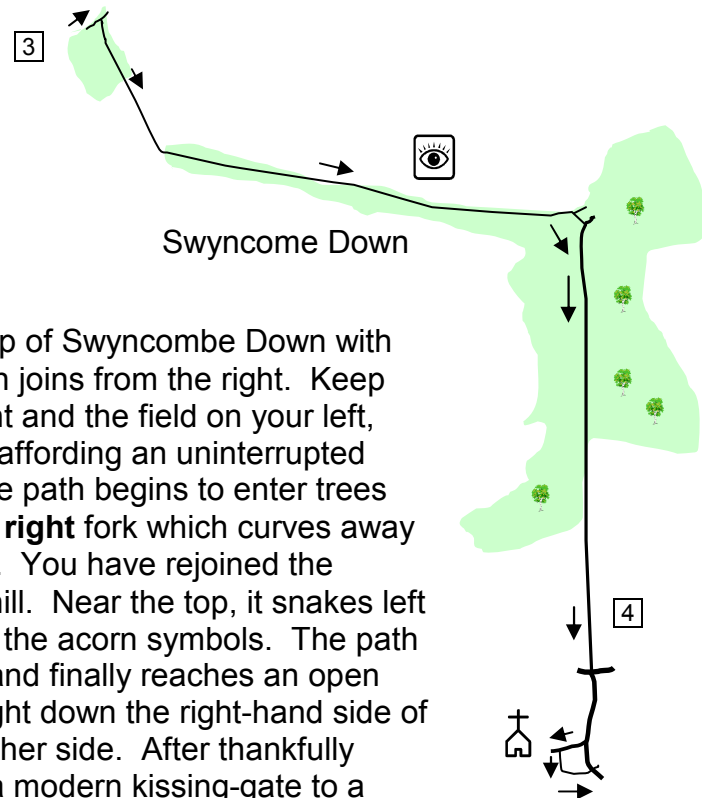


- 1 Continue up Parson's Lane and, where the major road curves away sharp left, veer right, still on Parson's Lane. Soon, you pass the churchyard and church on your right, both unmissable.

The church of St Mary the Virgin has hardly been altered since it was rebuilt in 1430 by Alice and William de la Pole. The style is perpendicular with the nave aisles and clerestory extending into the chancel. If you look up above the ancient font, you will see the image of a king on the corbel. This is believed to be of King Edward III, patron of Chaucer.

If you leave the church by the south door, entering another part of the churchyard, you will soon find the grave of Jerome K. Jerome, author of *Three Men in a Boat*. Continue along the road, passing the Old Rectory. 50m after this, fork left on a track, marked as the Chiltern Way. Keep ahead on a grassy path between hawthorns and then continue straight on across a field with many comfortable lodgings for pigs on your left. After the first field, continue similarly alongside the next field with views of Swyncombe Down ahead. The path descends to a metal gate and a road. Turn **left** on the road.

- 2 Ignore a byway on your left, thus leaving the Chiltern Way. Where the road bends right, leave it by continuing straight ahead on a track. Go straight over a crossing track, quickly reaching a *Restricted Byway* sign. Here, fork **right** on a narrow path and bear **left** on a woodland path that runs parallel to the byway. (You can of course stay on the byway but the woodland path is much more comfortable and interesting.) Keep left at all times so that you are always within sight of the byway. You pass several horse jumps as this area is used by the Ewelme horse trials. Where the woodland ends and you reach a field, turn sharp **right** on a path with the field on your left.



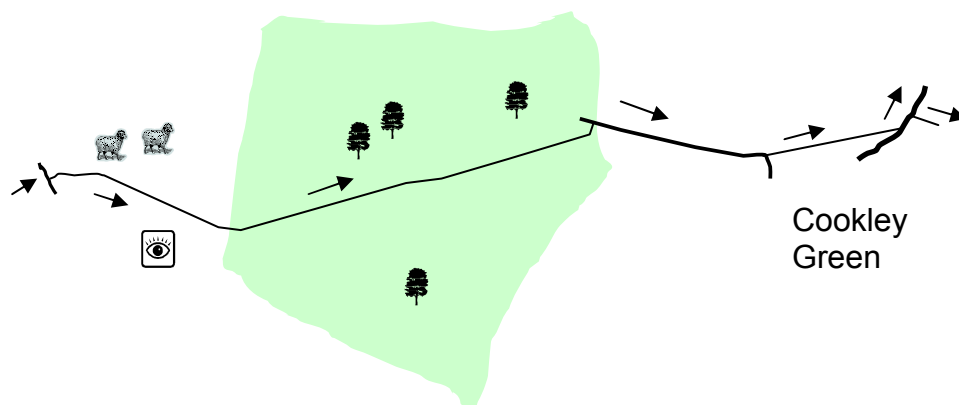
- 3 The path leads uphill to the top of Swyncome Down with great views. At the top, a path joins from the right. Keep ahead with banks on your right and the field on your left, visible through trees but later affording an uninterrupted view. After some distance, the path begins to enter trees and reaches a fork. Take the **right** fork which curves away uphill and meets a wider path. You have rejoined the Ridgway! Turn **right** on it uphill. Near the top, it snakes left and right as you simply follow the acorn symbols. The path descends through woodland and finally reaches an open field. Your route here is straight down the right-hand side of the field and straight up the other side. After thankfully reaching the top, go through a modern kissing-gate to a road.

- 4 Go straight over the road to a lane opposite and, at the bottom, turn **right** on a track beside St Botolph's Church. Turn left through a gate into the churchyard.

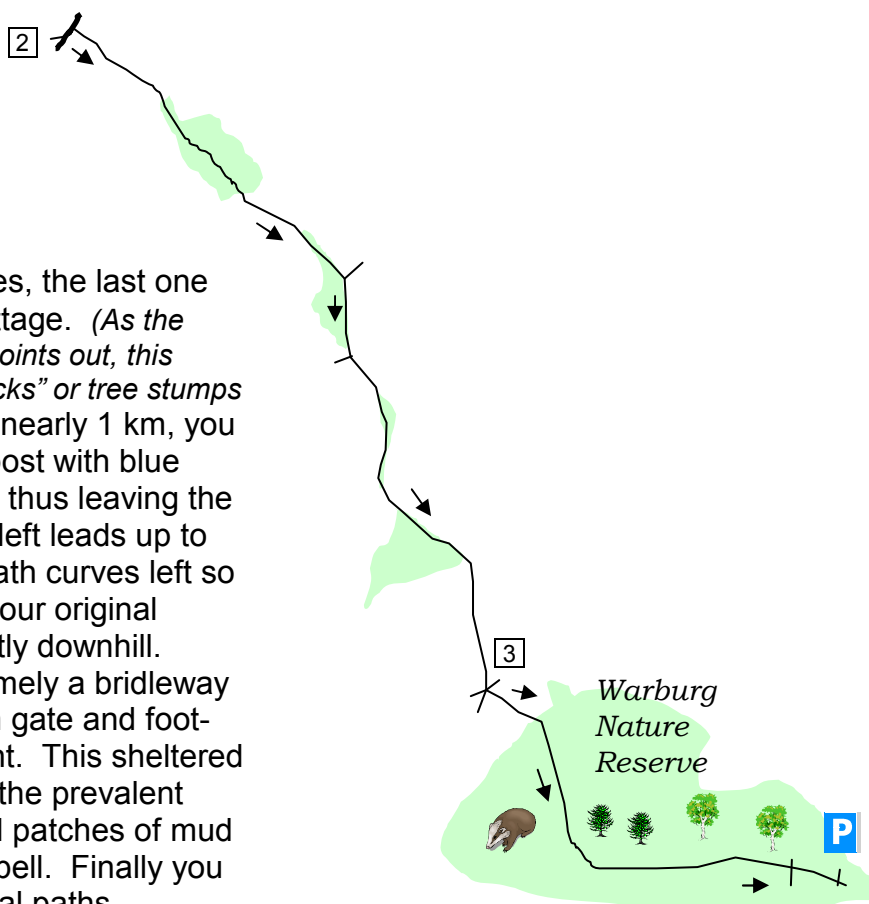
This tiny early Norman church with nave, chancel, semi-circular apse, arched altar but no tower, was significantly restored in early Victorian times. Nevertheless, it retains (literally) its medieval atmosphere. There are two bells, but one is hung in a small tiled cover above the south door. The church comes alive every winter when a large carpet of snowdrops springs up in the churchyard. One Sunday in early February, known as "Snowdrop Sunday", local musicians play in the church whilst gifts, tea and cakes are on sale.

Continue to the other side of the churchyard, going down a path lined with cup-shaped yews, looking back at the bell over the porch. Go out through a gate and veer **left** across the grass. Ignore a path that goes sharp left and avoid a path going down right into woodland. This middle way takes you back to the tarmac driveway you were on, opposite the corner of a fence.

Leg 4: Swyncombe to Bix Bottom 5½ km=3½ miles



- 1 Cross the driveway on a path with the wire fence on your left. Go through a new kissing-gate and go across a sheep pasture just to the right of a circular enclosure of trees. Taking in your final view back over the plains of Oxfordshire, go through a swing-gate into the woods. Keep straight on through Church Wood ignoring all paths leading off. The light ash gives way to dark beech. At the end, turn **right** on a lane into the hamlet of Cookley Green. As you reach the green, leave the lane as it bends away right and veer **left** along the left-hand side of the green, continuing past cottages to meet a main road. Bear **left** on the main road and, in 20m, turn **right** on a drive with a sign for the Chiltern Way.



- 2 You pass various cottages, the last one being Stocking Farm Cottage. (As the *Adventurous Walks* book points out, this name comes from the “stocks” or tree stumps that are found nearby.) In nearly 1 km, you reach a T-junction by a post with blue arrows. Turn **right** here, thus leaving the Chiltern Way. (The path left leads up to Russell’s Water.) The path curves left so that you have regained your original direction, going very gently downhill. Avoid all turnings off, namely a bridleway off to the right, a wooden gate and foot-path left and another right. This sheltered valley sometimes defies the prevalent climate and you may find patches of mud here even during a dry spell. Finally you reach a junction of several paths.
- 3 Avoid a path left over a stile, a path straight ahead over a stile and a path right and take the path that veers left in the direction of a purple arrow, marked as a *restricted byway*. Soon after, you pass a sign for the Warburg Nature Reserve. This may give you heart that the end of the walk is nigh

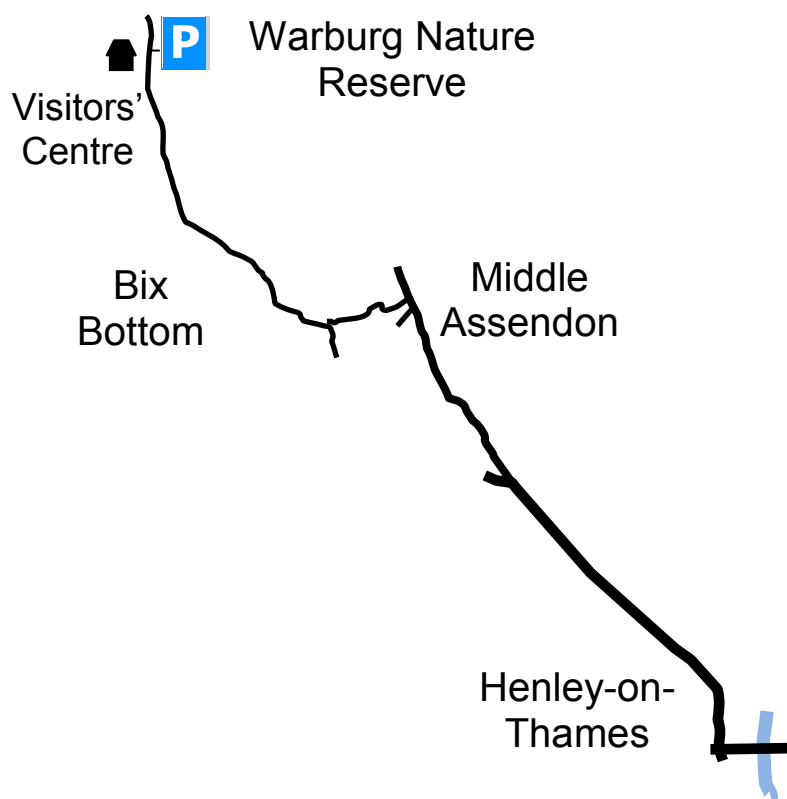
but, remember, Warburg is an extensive nature reserve and you still have well over 1km to go. After some distance, go over a crossing path marked in white on a tree as SW31. (Your path is SW28.) [You can avoid any mud on the path from this point by going through a wooden gate shortly on the **left** and turning **right** on a grassy path parallel to the path you were on. It is in fact the same path that you took at the start of the walk.] Not long after, the Visitors' Centre comes into view with the car park on the left where the walk began.

For final refreshments, the *Rainbow Inn* in Middle Assendon is a short car ride, on the homeward route. It is closed however during the afternoons. There are many fine places for food and drink in Henley.

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Getting there

By car: The Warburg Nature Reserve is near Henley-on-Thames which can easily be reached from Reading, Oxford, Marlow or from junction 8/9 of the M4. From Henley, follow signs for the A4130 signposted *Oxford*, leading to the beautiful tree-lined avenue known as Fairmile. After a mile, at a junction, fork **right** on a road signposted *Stonor, Assendons*. After Middle Assendon, turn **left** on a lane signposted *Bix Bottom*. (This is the *second* of two lanes close together.) In 600m, at a T-junction, turn **right**. After 2km on this narrow lane, you reach a large hut on the left, the Visitors' Centre. The car park is opposite it, on the right.



By bus/train: bus 139 from Henley-on-Thames. Start the walk in Nettlebed. Check the timetables.