



Ayot St. Lawrence and Kimpton

Distance: 8½ km=5½ miles

easy walking

Region: Hertfordshire

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Refreshments: Ayot St. Lawrence, Kimpton

Map: Explorer 182 (St Albans) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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Historic village, churches, woodland, easy field paths, green meadows

In Brief

This is a grand scenic walk in central Hertfordshire with a great variety of features, centred on two contrasting villages. Kimpton stands among open fields with a cluster of red roofs and its church with a distinctive “Hertfordshire spike” perched on top. Ayot St. Lawrence, secluded and hard to reach down narrow lanes, is famous as the residence of the progressive Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (author of *Pygmalion*, the basis of *My Fair Lady*, amongst many others). In between, there are wooded sections and some out-of-the-way paths where you might not meet another soul.



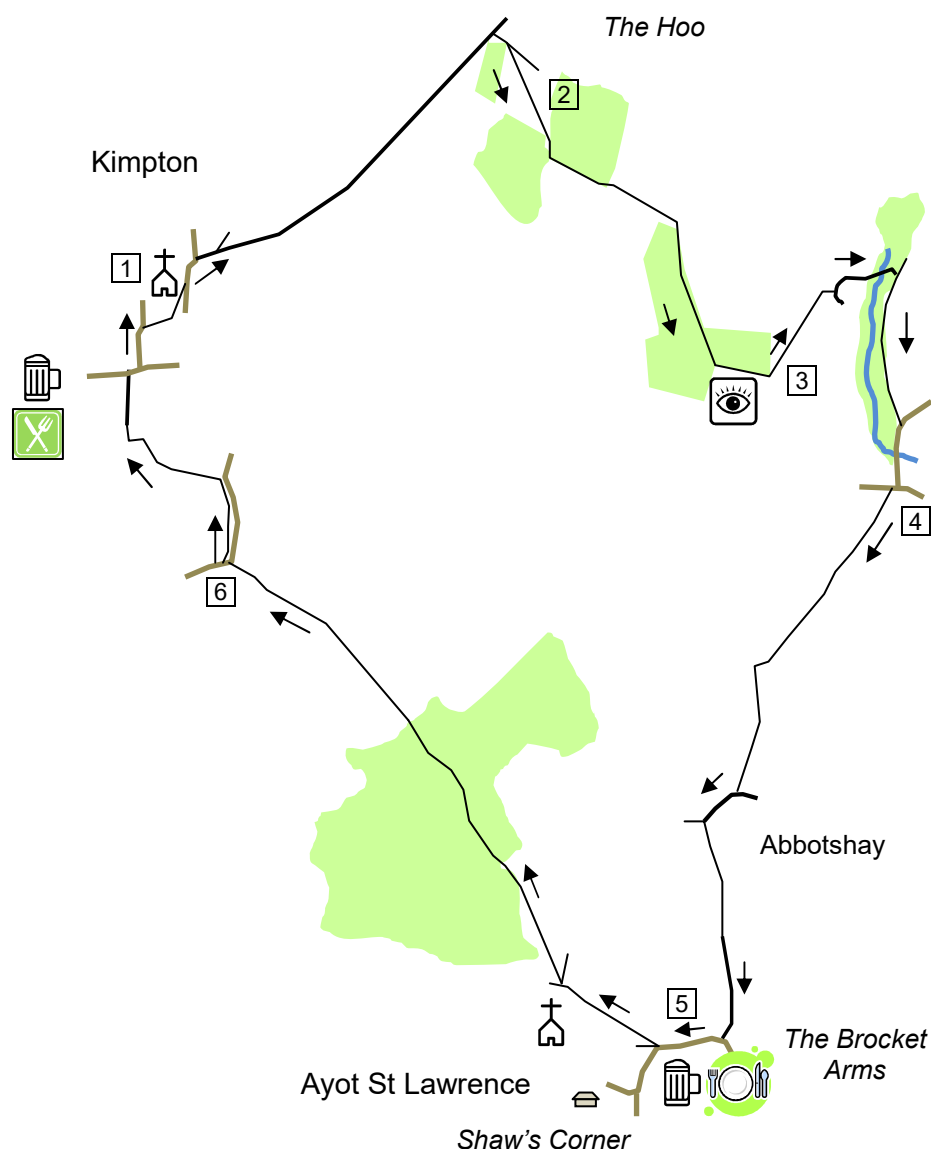
There is just one patch with nettles on this walk, but not dense enough to cause too much discomfort if you are wearing shorts. The paths are generally quite firm and fairly dry so boots are recommended but not essential. There's no reason why your dog should not accompany you.

The walk begins in the village of **Kimpton**, near Harpenden and Welwyn, Herts, in the lane beside the church, www.w3w.co/jolly.land.found, postcode **SG4 8RR**. There is also plenty of roadside parking in the High Street, www.w3w.co/jazz.bounty.gifts, postcode **SG4 8PT**. You could park in Ayot St Lawrence, postcode **AL6 9BT**, but this small village gets crowded with visitors and you would spoil the idea of a round trip with the village as the centre point. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Kimpton gets its name from a Saxon settler "Cyma", the "ton" being his homestead. After the Norman Conquest, Kimpton was a typical feudal village with villeins (who worked for the lord in return for board but also had their own patch of land in the "demesne"), serfs (who just worked) and an absent owner, the warrior-bishop Odo. It was also home to "two Frenchmen", for what purpose is interesting to speculate. Into the 1600s and 1700s, country estates and great houses appeared. The greatest of these was Kimpton Hoo and the Hoo estate.

The earliest parts of Kimpton church date from before the year 1200. It is part Norman and part Early English. The tower has six bells, cast at widely different times in history.



- 1 From the lane beside the church in Kimpton, go into the churchyard and pass to the right of the church. *However, this old church (built before the year 1200) is well worth visiting.* Veer **left** round the church and cross the churchyard to exit via a wooden gate in the corner. Keep ahead on the road and, just after a kink in the road, go **right** on a tarmac drive. The drive is marked *Private Road* but it is also a footpath. Ignore a footpath that forks left across a field and stay on the drive. You now have an easy walk for nearly 1 km on this quiet tarmac, passing no more than an occasional slurry heap.

Finally, you enter an avenue under tall trees, an elegant driveway which would lead eventually to Hoo Park. However, your route is almost immediately **right**, before you reach the large gate, at a marker post, through a large kissing-gate and into a meadow.

- 2 Where the meadow opens out, your path forks. The left fork goes straight across to a small gate visible at the left-hand edge of trees (and it also rendez-vous's with your route but is less interesting). Instead take the **right** fork, a bit to the right. This is less clear and heads for the far recess of the meadow where the corner is enclosed on both sides by dense woods. When you reach it, go past a white-topped post [Feb 2024: uprooted and leaning] and a yellow arrow. Keep ahead, passing a redundant broken wooden swing gate to the right of a metal field gate, into a rough field. Turn **left** along the left-hand edge of the field. This rather rough but quite walkable path leads you into another field where the path continues along the right-hand side beside a wide and very mature dividing hedge. At the first corner, by a white-topped post [Feb 2024: uprooted and leaning], bear **right** along the field edge, with a belt of trees on your right. At the second corner your path enters Hog Wood, with scrawny ash on one side and cypresses skyward on the right. A redundant stile leads into a meadow. Avoid a path straight ahead and instead turn **left** along the top edge. There is a bench seat where you can admire the view of the Hertfordshire countryside.
- 3 Where the field (in 2024 a crop field, currently fallow) opens out, keep straight ahead to a marker post at the corner of some woodland. At the post, keep straight ahead down to a lane. Turn **left** on the lane (which is covered with loose chippings), heading towards the buildings of Rye-end-Farm. [Feb 2024: currently the barn and outbuildings are undergoing reconstruction]. The drive goes left-right round the buildings, giving you a view of the old timbered farm house, complete with crenellations. A bridge over the young Mimram River leads to a T-junction next to *Rye-end Cottages*. Turn **right** here on a wide track beside a field. On meeting a tarmac lane, keep straight ahead (slightly right). On your right are some cress beds before you reach a major road beside Kimpton Mill.
- 4 Cross straight over the road, a fraction right, to a bridleway opposite. Your path goes up the right-hand side of a field. As you cross a farm track in 300m, stay on the edge of the field. Near the top, your path goes along a belt of trees, passing five very clever tree carvings by *Matt*, and emerges to lead you to a tarmac lane in the hamlet of Abbotshay. Turn **right** on the lane, passing a stylish entrance to Abbotshay Farm. You reach a large wooden gate and a signpost. Turn **left** here on a bridleway. *There's a warning for satnav users soon but it's a mystery how any vehicle could reach this point and turn around.* You join a wider path, then a gravel drive as you pass the very swanky gates of the Manor House in Ayot St Lawrence, followed by more gates and a garden. You come out beside pillars (or through the gate which is usually open) and onwards through more pillars to a lane in the village. Turn **right**, immediately coming to the *Brocket Arms*.



Ayot was the name of the manor from Norman times but it's not clear where the name comes from. There are several Ayots (Ayot Green, Ayot St Peter, ...) all small and attractive. Ayot St Lawrence is famous worldwide as the residence of playwright George Bernard Shaw and he lived there from 1906 till his death in 1950. The house now belongs to the National Trust. It is open from noon till 5pm Wed-Sun. Shaw's Corner (the playwright's own name for it) requires only a 200m excursion. It puts on open-air plays.

The old St Lawrence church was built in the 1200s but was allowed to fall into disrepair in 1779 when it was superseded by the new church. Apparently Sir Lionel Hyde who financed the new church (see below) found it obtrusive. Only the tower is now intact and the rest is roofless, a strange and romantic ruin.

The "Brocket Arms" is a gem of a pub, as you can see. It dates from the 1300s as quarters for the monks serving the Norman church until the Reformation. It has a ghost: according to legend, an affable priest was hanged in the building and has never left it. The garden features luxury accommodation for exotic chickens, plus rabbits, canaries and budgies. The Brocket Arms is also a place to stay over, with excellent cooking. Ales are typically Mauldons Silver Adder and Greene King.

- 5 After possible refreshment and a visit to the ruined church, continue a short distance along the lane and turn **right** by *Ruins Cottage* and through a swing-gate into a sheep pasture. Go straight ahead alongside the fence on your right (an electric fence may be on your left), through a wooden swing-gate into the next field, towards the Palladian church. You pass to the right of the church, through an old kissing-gate. Your route is right through a swing-gate but first turn **left** through a small gate to visit the church, which is unmissable.

The new St Lawrence Church was designed in 1779 in a neo-classical style by Nicholas Revett, a great traveller and expert on classical styles. The frontage, looking like a Palladian villa, has four Doric columns.

Having turned **right** through the wooden swing-gate (that is, straight over after visiting the church), continue along the left-hand edge of a sheep pasture, avoiding a path that forks right across the centre. Ignore a path and swing-gate on your left before the trees, and continue along the field edge (an electric fence may be on your right) to pass a water tower on your left among the trees. When you reach the end of the field, go through another swing-gate, leading to a forest path. After 200m or so in the wood, you come past an avoidable stile. Continue onwards on a wide path between shrubs and old tree plantations, and pines on your left, leading you up into a crop field. Keep straight ahead across the crop field on a wide path. At the top, your path veers left along the edge beside a hawthorn hedge on your right. Keep straight on, next to a field on your right, to reach a metal barrier and a road.

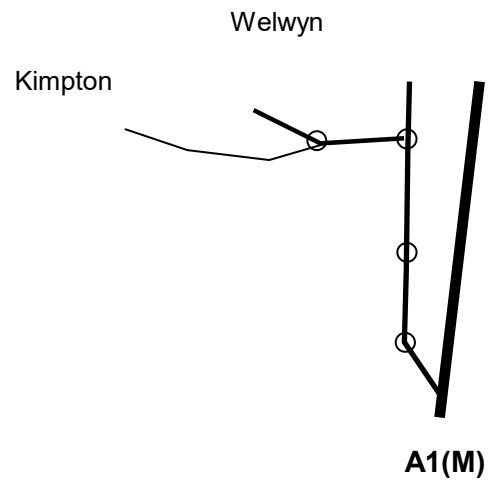
- 6 Cross straight over the road, up steps and turn **right** along the edge of a field. In 250m, at the first corner, keep **left** round the corner. In 250m, as you near another corner, ignore a unmarked path on your right and continue **left** round the corner. In only 30m turn **right** through a wooden barrier, past a bench, to the corner of a playing field. *You now have the best view of Kimpton, with its red-roofed houses topped by the church.* Continue on a track beside the playing field to come out to the High Street. For final refreshments, the Boot Inn is 250m on your left. *The Boot Inn is a friendly country pub with a large patio and rooms to stay overnight; it is open all day Fri, Sat, Sun, traditional hours Mon-Fri; snacks and pub favourites are available.* Turn **right** on the High Street and, in 40m, turn **left** on Church Lane, leading past a little green up to the church where the walk began.



Getting there

By car: Kimpton lies just 5 miles west of the A1(M) motorway. Come off at **Exit 6** (Welwyn) and follow signs for *Welwyn* over three roundabouts. (Note: Welwyn is *not* the same as Welwyn Garden City!) At the next roundabout, go **left**, still as for *Welwyn*. At the next roundabout, your first exit (apart from a *no entry*) is for *Ayot St Lawrence, Kimpton*. You now have pleasant country roads taking you to either destination (but please choose Kimpton as little Ayot St Lawrence gets so congested). You can also get to Kimpton through Codicote, or from the M1 and Luton.

By bus/train: there are several bus services to Kimpton, none running on Sunday. Bus 44/45 from Luton and Stevenage, 304/5 from St Albans, 314 from Welwyn garden City. Check the timetables.



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