



Pheasants and Thames Pasture Hambleden, the Weir, Medmenham

Distance 19km=12 miles or 16km=10 miles easy walking

Region: Chilterns

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Refreshments: Aston, Medmenham, Hambleden

Maps: Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West) & 172 (Chiltern Hills East)
but the maps in this guide should be sufficient

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River, villages, woodland, views

In Brief

This is a walk of great variety beginning at the Thames and then in typically wonderful Chiltern woods. It begins with an exhilarating crossing of the River Thames by a very long weir and passes through two of the most enchanting villages of the region.

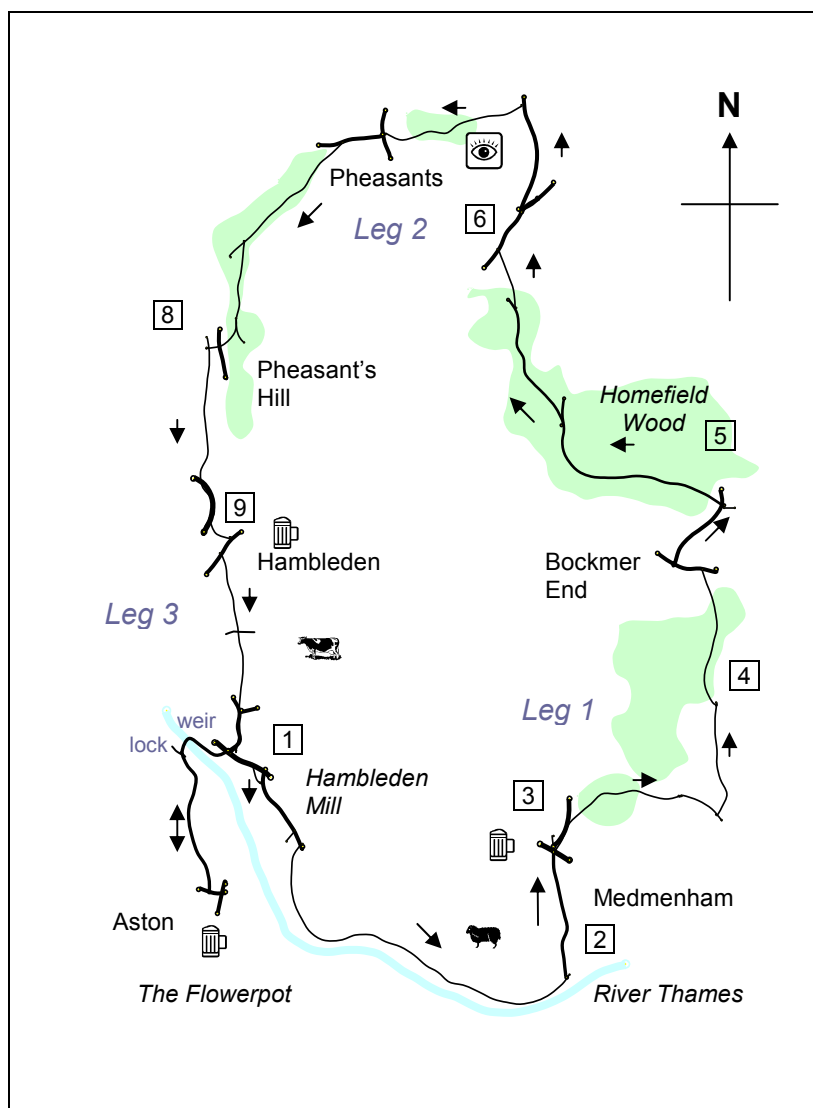


There are some nettles en route so long trousers are recommended. This walk is not recommended for a dog because of the sheep fields and the sensitive woodland sites. The going is easy and good walking shoes are sufficient.



The walk begins next to the **Flowerpot pub** in the tiny hamlet of **Aston** (grid ref 785842, post code RG9 3DG). **You need to park your car before opening time** (11am or 12 noon on Sunday). The Flowerpot is fantastically popular and you can't really use the pub's car parks as a non-patron (unless you can buy Granny a double gin and leave her in the pub all day). The pub is open all day at weekends. There are some spaces on the road outside the pub but they may be all used up if you come late. So arrive before it opens, turn **left** alongside the pub and park close to the wall on the left. Alternative starts are at Medmenham (park in the village) and Hambleden (at the official car park): they cut out 1½ miles (2 km) but you would miss the fabulous double crossing of **Hambleden Weir**. It is also perfectly possible to join the walk from Henley or Marlow. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



Mini-maps are provided for some more intricate sections.

Prelude 1½km (1 mile)

With *the Flowerpot* on your right, go a few metres along the lane and turn **right** on a track which is also the entrance to the overflow car park. Go through a wooden swing-gate and follow the excellent tarmac drive as it winds towards to river, shortly ignoring a footpath right. On reaching the riverside, turn **left** to Hambleden Lock.

Hambleden Lock was built in 1773 but the weir could go back to pre-Norman times (the mill is mentioned in the Domesday Book). The eccentric lock keeper from 1777, Caleb Gould, lies buried in nearby Remenham churchyard. He is remembered for baking bread for bargemen, eating a dish of onion porridge every night, wearing a long coat with many buttons and walking each day to Hambleden, marking a cross on the ground on arrival. He died aged 91, and the epitaph on his grave stone reads: "This world's a jest / and all things show it / I thought so once / but now I know it".

Turn **right** at a fingerpost and cross over the lock, following the long path over the weir that crosses the Thames. On the other side, exit to the road between two white cottages. Turn **right** on the road.

Leg 1: Mill End to Homefield Wood 7½km (4½ miles)

- 1 In 100m, opposite Mill End Farm, turn **right** on a pebbly track by a small car park. Turn **left** with the track, follow a narrow unmarked footpath and join a lane going straight ahead. *The lane is marked CW indicating that you are on the Chiltern Way, a 200 km (125 mile) circular walk. The year 2010 is its 10th anniversary.*

The field on the right is the site of the excavation of a complex many-roomed Roman villa, possibly with a surrounding ditch and mosaic floor and out-buildings which extend to beyond where you are walking now. But the most grisly find is of the bones of 97 infants which appear to have been killed at birth. The excavation was filmed by the BBC for 'Digging for Britain'.

Ignore all turnings off to properties and, at the end of the lane, go over a stile into a field. Turn immediately **right** in the field and follow the field round **left** where it meets the river. Suddenly, where there is a break in the trees, you see Culham Court on the opposite bank.

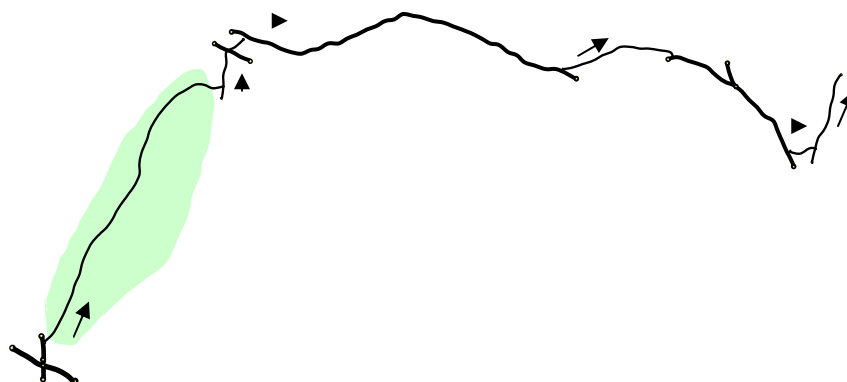
Culham Court was once Britain's most expensive country house because it was up for sale at £35m in 2006. It was the home of the extravagant 5th Duke of Marlborough. When King George III was entertained there, hot bread was brought specially by horse relay, wrapped in flannels, from his favourite baker in London.

Go through a wooden gate into a large sheep meadow and walk the whole length beside the river, finally going through a metal swing-gate and across another similar meadow. At the end, where the river curves left and right, go through a wooden gate to a grassy bank. *On the left is The Medmenham Ferry Monument recording the successful lawsuit that established its public ownership.* Go over a bridge and turn **left** on the lane, leaving the riverside.

The house over on your right is Medmenham Abbey, originally a 13th-century Cistercian Abbey but now really just a folly. It was hired during the mid-1700s by Sir Francis Dashwood of West Wycombe to host the goings-on of the notorious Hellfire Club.

- 2 Follow Ferry Lane through the picturesque village of Medmenham. Soon you pass some wonderful topiary by the oldest half-timbered cottages. *In the front of Fortescue House are two guns that were (they say) dragged 1500 miles to end the siege of Ladysmith during the Boer War.* On the left is the fine church of St Peter and St Paul, worth a visit, and over the road the *Dog and Badger* pub (Whitbread) which is open all day at the weekends. Continue over the road up Bockmer Lane and, within just a few metres, turn **right** at a sign onto a narrow footpath leading steeply uphill.

- 3 See mini-map:



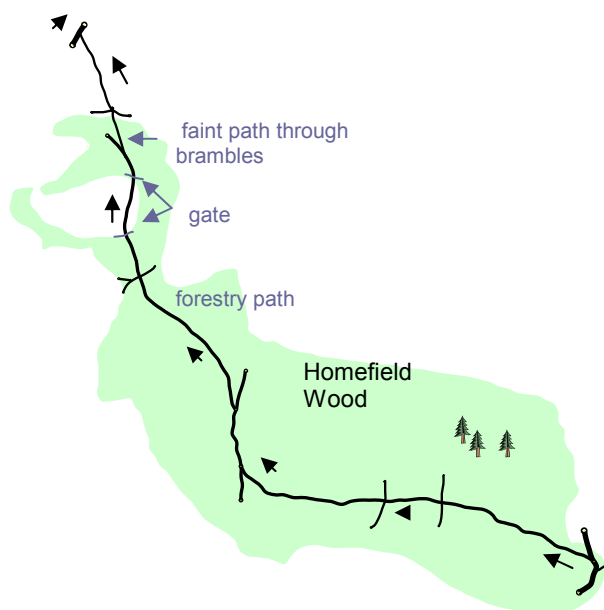
The path leads up through beech woods, indicated by white arrows on trees, to a high area that was once a hill fort. At the end of the path, turn **left** on a track, cross a driveway, go through a metal swing-gate on a narrow path to a house, the *Old Laundry*. Turn **right** on the drive passing the *Old School*. Stay on the drive until shortly before the gates of *The Hermitage*. Veer **left** here across the grass, as indicated by a blue arrow, and follow the fence, finally coming out by *Pheasantry Cottage*. Go down the drive and veer **right** at a junction at the bottom. In 80m, turn **left** on a signposted footpath. Go up a bank and turn **left** on a path that runs parallel to the meadow down on your left. Later keep **right** by a fence, following the yellow arrow. At the end of the fence, at a junction with white arrows, keep straight ahead. Eventually the path leads out of the wood. Turn **left** here through a wooden swing-gate and another wooden gate.

- 4 Keep to the enclosed path between fields and then a route through the fine beeches of Widefield Wood, guided by the occasional white arrow, followed by a laurel grove. Finally the path wheels left, crosses a farm drive and runs diagonally across a horse pasture. In the opposite corner, go over a stile and turn **left** on the lane, going past the house *Widefield*. Soon ahead of you are the red roofs of Bockmer End. Just before the hamlet, turn **right** on a lane signposted *Lower Woodend*. The lane becomes forested and at the bottom passes a footpath on the right. A little further down, turn **left** into Homefield Wood.

Homefield Wood has it all. It is in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is one of only two locations in the UK for the military orchid (Orchis militaris) and it supports other orchids and rare butterflies like the white-letter hairstreak (Satyrium w-album), as well as glow-worms.

Leg 2: Homefield Wood to Pheasant's Hill 4½km (3 miles)

- 5 See mini-map:



Follow the wide path through the wood under tall conifers, including red-woods. In about 350m, avoid a crossing path with white arrows on trees and in another 200m, avoid another crossing path. The path curves right and is joined by a path from the left at a post with yellow arrows. Roughly 150m

further, the wide track forks left with the narrower official footpath continuing straight on. Take the **left** fork, the forestry path, gently uphill. At the top, you reach a multiple junction with various official paths leading off. Keep straight ahead on footpath 21. Soon the path crosses a drive leading to fields on each side. The path enters a plantation of conifers and a pheasant preserve. (Note that the fence over on the right is electric but *not* the gate!) On the other side, go through a similar gate. 70m further, you reach a post with a single yellow arrow and some care is needed. Leave the official path here by forking **right** on a narrow and rather obscure path. The path runs on a diagonal through low brambles gradually getting closer to the field down on your right. Soon it suddenly becomes a much clearer and straighter path going down under trees and reaching a makeshift footpath sign at the corner of the fields. (The sign confirms that you were indeed on a locally recognised footpath, albeit not a national one.) Follow the path between fields and out to a lane by a house. Turn **right** on the lane.

6 This country lane is so quiet that there is grass growing in the middle. At a fork, take the **left**-hand option, running between open fields. Later there is scrub woodland on your left. Just over 100m further, turn **left** at a footpath sign. The path is rather overgrown. As a last resort, you can make use of the field on the right. Go over a stile and along the right-hand side of a field. At the far side, cross a track by a post into Bushes Wood. *This wood also has sensitive flora and nesting birds and you must keep to the path.* At the other side, keep ahead on the left-hand side of a field to a lane at the hamlet of Pheasants. Cross the lane to continue on Colstroe Lane.

7 Follow the lane past cottages, a little pond on the left and a farm. Before the lane begins to go downhill, just after a barn, turn **left** through a metal swing-gate into a fine beech wood. The path curves left and becomes a fine high path with forest below on your right. After a stretch where the path descends gently, you come to a fork. Take the **left** fork, the rising path indicated by the white arrow on the tree. The path crosses a wider path diagonally. *Soon you have fine views below of the Hamble Valley.* Later, near the edge of a field on the left, you come to another fork. This time, take the **right** fork. The path descends more steeply and reaches a lane at Pheasant's Hill. Cross the lane and go down steps opposite on a narrow passage between houses. Cross a track and go down a drive opposite. The route is left at a crossing path. *However you may wish first to walk a little further to the little metal kissing gate. The grassy meadow here under the weeping willow is a good picnic site with a view of the Hamble Brook, the Great Wood on the other side, gentle cow pasture to the right and possibly blackberries if it is late summer.*

Leg 3: Pheasant's Hill to Mill End 4km (2½ miles)

8 Turn **left** on the path between hedges and gardens, as already stated. You are back on the Chiltern Way. Go through a wooden swing-gate into a meadow. Looking back, you have a glimpse of the Windmill at Turville. *Notice too one of the Mr Men carved out of a hedge behind you, gobbling up a hiker so only the boots are visible. Probably Mr Greedy. This amusing piece of topiary was there in 2005 and 2010 but may not last.* Continue through two more swing-gates, wooden and metal, into another meadow with Hambleden now in view ahead, then into the next meadow by another gate. Veer slightly **right**, aiming for just to the right of the church. The gate is rather hidden and is to the left of a little bridge. You do not need to cross the

Hamble Brook. Turn **left** on the lane and, where it bends left, continue ahead into the churchyard of the 12th-century St Mary's. *This cruciform church is definitely worth visiting with its ancient font, its 'Wolsey Altar' and decorated ceiling. Teas are sometimes available in the churchyard, as they are in the post office.* Exit through the lychgate into the centre of the village.

Hambleden is famously the 'pretty village of the Chilterns' because of its old unspoilt streets complete with original shop signs. The Saxon name means 'crooked valley'. Its best-known son was St Thomas de Cantilupe (1218?-1282), Bishop of Hereford and trusted advisor to King Edward I, who led a life beset by religious quarrels. The 'Stag and Huntsman' pub is open all day Saturday and is also a hotel. It offers good real ales such as Brakspear and Lodden and has a pretty garden.



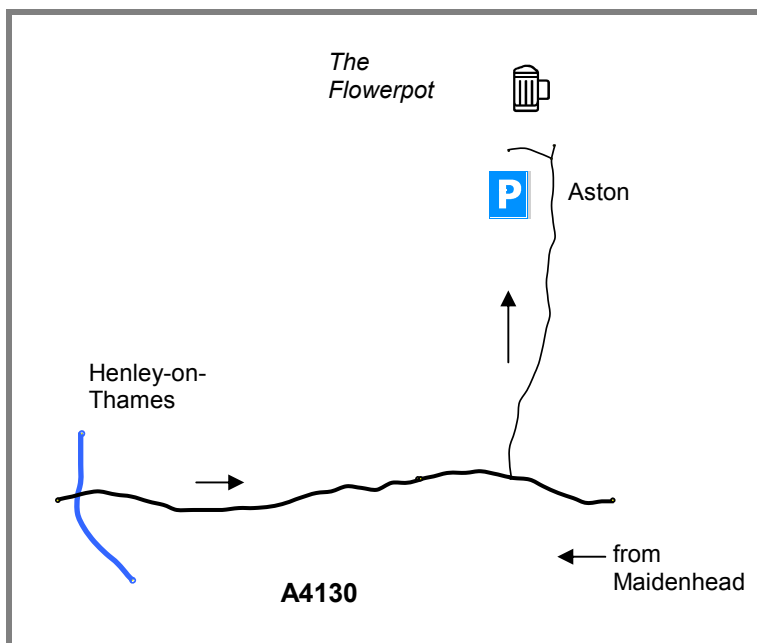
- 9 After visiting the village, turn **right** on the road and, just after the little bridge, turn **left** at a footpath sign through an old metal gate into a meadow. Keep ahead on a path along the length of the meadow. At the other side, go through two small metal gates either side of a farm drive. Continue along the next meadow with the road on your right. The path finally exits through a metal gate at a road junction. Ignore the lane on the left and follow the major road for the rest of the route, down to the main road at Mill End. Turn **right** on the road.

Postlude 1½km (1 mile)

In a few metres, turn **left** between the two white cottages and retrace your steps over the weir to Hambleden Lock. Turn **left** along the riverside and follow the winding lane back to the *Flowerpot*. You will find a throng of people and their cars crowded around yours.

Getting there

By car: If coming from the east (e.g. from the M4) on the **A4130**, this is about 1 mile (1½km) before Henley-on-Thames. Just after a turning on the left for Cockpole Green etc. and a bend in the road, turn **right** signposted **Aston**. Follow the narrow lane to the pub.



By bus: Arriva 800 from Reading or Marlow, Arriva 850 from Reading, Marlow or Henley. Check the timetables.

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