



Sonning-on-Thames

Distance: 12 km=7½ miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire, Chilterns

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Refreshments: Sonning, Playhatch

Map: Explorer 159 (Reading) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Historic village, river, easy field paths, towpath, views

In Brief

Here is a Thames river walk in a legendary village, famed for its simple beauty on a bend in the river by a mill and a lock. Sonning attracts the stylish and famous to live and the occasional more cultivated daytripper to visit its quaint streets and take in the riverside atmosphere. You will also see some of the gentle countryside that borders the river. Sonning is also blessed with legendary hostelryes (for the *Bull Inn*, ring 0118-969-3901).

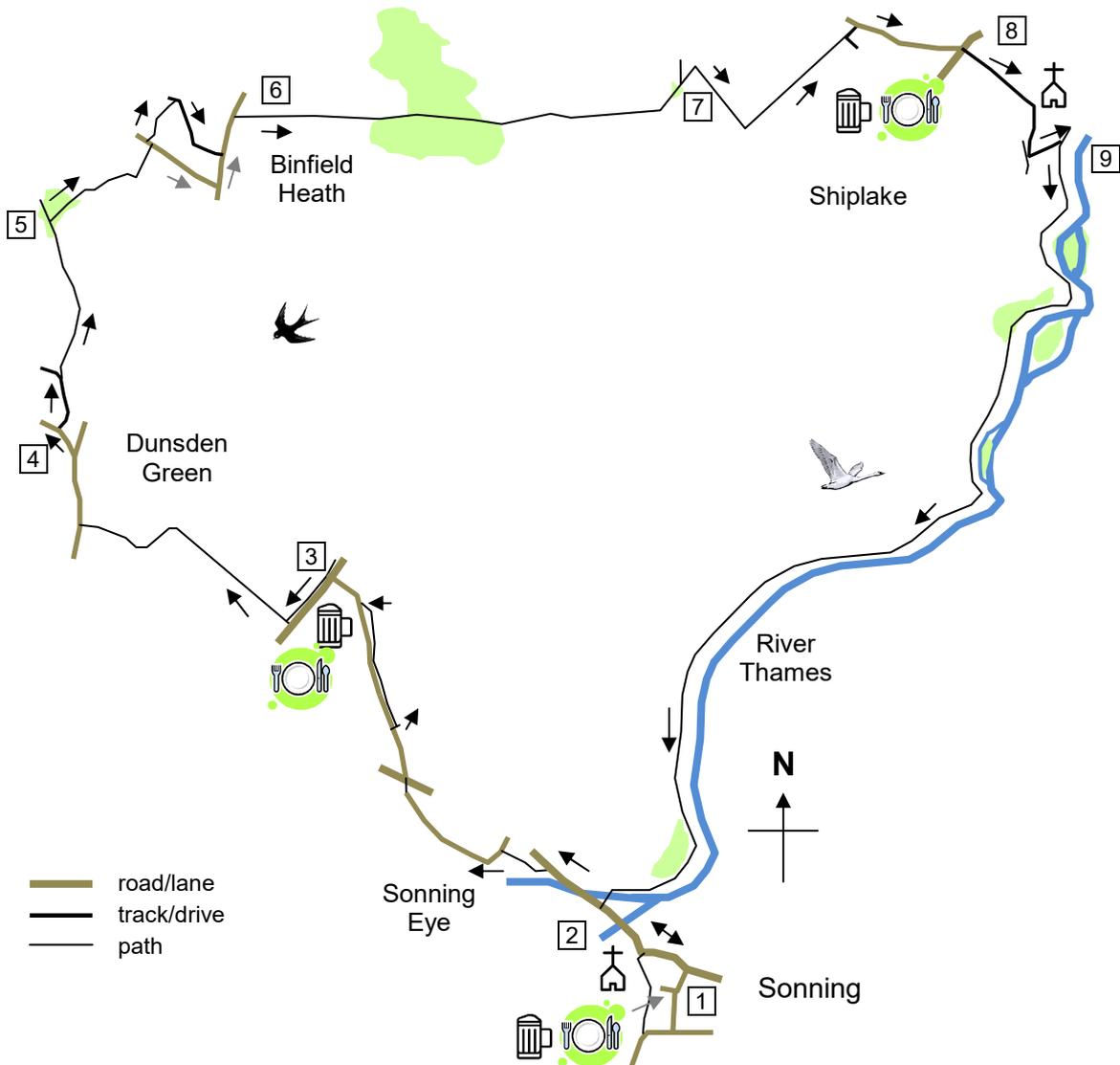


There are just one or two patches of nettles on this walk, enough to spoil it for a bare-legged walker **but** they can be skipped using the tarmac. Underfoot, this walk is fairly dry in the warmer months. One track (coming out of Dunsden) can be a bit muddy in patches, depending on the season.

Hence, sensible shoes or trainers are ok in the drier months. Your dog can certainly come along. There are **no stiles**.

The walk begins in **Sonning**, Berkshire, postcode **RG4 6UL**. There is plenty of roadside parking, especially if you arrive early. On a popular day, you can eventually find space in Sonning Lane where cars stack up as far back as necessary. (Sonning Lane is the B4446 minor road out of the village towards Reading.) You could also park in Binfield Heath (**RG9 4LQ**) or Shiplake (**RG9 4BX**), with mid-walk lunch in Sonning (especially now that the *Plowden Arms* has closed). For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



In Anglosaxon times, Suna's people pitched tent here by the river and Sonning was born. After the Norman conquest the Bishop of Salisbury, looking for a quiet resting place, built his Palace in the same spot beside the Thames. In 1399, a ten-year-old girl came to stay. She happened to be Queen of England. Isabella of Valois had married King Richard II at the age of six (for dynastic reasons it has to be said) and within three years her husband was thrown into prison by Henry Bolingbroke (the future Henry IV). In recent times new royalty have sought residence, but these are kings of rock (such as Jimmy Page), the screen (George and Amal Clooney who live in the Mill House in Sonning Eye), the easel (pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt), TV (spoon-bending illusionist Uri Geller) and theatre (playwright Terence Rattigan). Sonning was once spelt "Sunning" and the older inhabitants still sometimes pronounce it that way but you will sound overly posh if you prolong this practice.

- 1 Before or after the walk, it would unthinkable to miss a short tour of this historic village. Turn off Thames Street, up High Street, passing houses and the village pump. At the first junction, on your right is the *Bull Inn* (Fullers) a historic building, belonging to the church, dating from Shakespeare's time, also a hotel and restaurant. Any excursion up the Thames is incomplete without a visit to the *Bull*. Continuing, kinking left-right, you reach Pearson Road. Turn **right** to reach the entrance to the North Lodge.

Turn **right** on a footpath, passing through a large wooden swing-gate and through the churchyard, past the large church of St Andrew.



The church stands on the site that was once a Saxon minster (a small cathedral) founded in year 909, adjoining the Bishop's palace. The Deanery and its garden, designed by Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll, are on one side (but not open to the public). The church is well-known for its many monuments. It is normally open from 10 till 4.

Exit by a wooden swing-gate, go **right** on a drive and immediately **left** on the main road.

- 2 Cross the narrow road bridge over the Thames into Sonning Eye and Oxfordshire, ignoring a long footbridge on your right, passing the Mill Theatre (a restored 18th-century flour mill), crossing another bridge. Opposite the *French Horn* restaurant, fork **left** on the river bank and take a tarmac footpath. At the end, turn **left** on a tarmac lane and follow the lane as it bends right, passing the historic *Barn House*. The lane joins a wider lane at a curve. Finally, near a long timbered house, keep ahead through a wooden gate leading to the main road. Cross the road carefully to a tarmac lane, Spring Lane, opposite. Follow this quiet, dark country lane for 150m to where there are a pair of large wooden gates on your left. Immediately opposite the gates is a signpost indicating a footpath. *Don't miss this turn: it may be obscured by vegetation.* Turn **right** here, going through a small wooden gate and turn **left** on a path parallel to the lane, along the edge of a field. (You can stay on the lane if wearing shorts because the path may be overgrown.) In the corner, the path goes over a bridge with a handrail and continues alongside the next field. About 20m before the far corner, go **left** and **right** to re-join the lane. You come to a T-junction with the main A4155 road, in the hamlet of Playhatch, with the *Flowing Spring* pub on your left, a worthy stopping-place.



- 3 Cross the main road to go up a short flight of steps. Turn **left** on a permissive footpath beside a field. *The town of Reading is on view ahead; the pointy-topped office building is "The Blade", the town's tallest.* At the corner, turn **right** on a narrow path between two hedges. As the path comes out into the open, you have views over to Caversham Lakes, breeding ground for those countless blue dragonflies in early summer. At the top of the field, turn **left**. At the next junction of fields, bear **right** to go along the right-hand side of the next field. This leads you to a steel barrier and out to a road. Turn **right** on the road. *You may need to cross carefully to the left side soon to avoid the blind bend just before the green!* You quickly reach the village of Dunsden Green with its little green and benches, ideal for a breather.

The war poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) lived in Dunsden Vicarage in 1911. He was shocked by the grinding poverty of the farm workers, living in "wretched hovels". After witnessing a tragic accident with an overloaded cart at Binfield Heath, he suffered a crisis in faith, left the vicarage and enrolled in the Artists Rifles. There is a 3-mile marked-out Wilfred Owen Trail here which takes you round the village. The village's other claim to fame is the Loddon Brewery, a short distance up Church Lane, makers of a range of craft ales, bearing the big blue dragonfly symbol.



- 4 Fork **left** beside the green on a minor road, Church Lane, and, immediately after the green, turn **right** on a gravel or semi-tarmac drive marked as a bridleway. In 200m, the drive bends left towards some very picturesque houses. **Ignore** the houses and keep straight ahead on a rough track. In 30m, ignore a footpath on your right and stay on the track, close to the field

on your right. Your path runs under tall trees, mainly oaks. [Some mud along the track here will soon clear.](#) After nearly ½ km, the field on your right ends. Now look for a yellow arrow on your right and leave the track by turning **right** here on a narrow path. *Don't miss this turn: if you find yourself passing a large semi, you have overshot.*

5 This narrow path goes uphill through trees, with gardens on your left and a field on your right. As you emerge into a field, keep ahead along the right-hand side. In about 50m, a marker post directs you **right** and **left** along the left-hand side of the adjoining field. The path veers right and left and finally reaches a residential road in Binfield Heath. Turn **left** on the road and, in 30m go **right** on a signed narrow footpath hidden in the corner of a hedge. [\(But if you find this path too overgrown and nettly, you can instead turn right on the road and left at the next junction opposite the little church.\)](#) The path soon comes clear of the weeds and nettles and, in 150m, it meets a tarmac drive. Turn **right** on the drive to reach the main road in 200m. Turn **left** on the main road. In 150m, turn **right** at a signpost on a path along the right-hand side of a field.



6 In the corner of the first field, your path goes past an old kissing-gate and along the right-hand side of the next field. In the far corner, your path goes past a redundant stile down into the woodland of Shiplake Copse. You are soon in an impressive mature beechwood with a wire fence on your left. In late spring, the forest floor is covered in bluebells. Soon you have a sloping meadow on your left and you come out into a crop field. Keep to the left side, on a clear path which cuts the left-hand corner. After 200m along the top of the field, your path veers left through bracken and down into another field. An excellent path leads straight ahead across the middle of the field. In 250m, the path elbows left towards a small copse.



7 On emerging from the copse, ignore a path that branches off diagonally on your left and keep straight ahead on the wide clear path. In 80m, your path turns abruptly right. *You may be able to catch a glimpse of the tower of Shiplake church on your left above the trees.* In 250m, at the end of the field on your left, turn **left** as directed by the arrow. This grassy path runs between fields. At the end, keep **left** on a farm track, leading out to a road. Turn **right** on the road, using the footway on the other side. In 300m, you reach a main road next to the *Plough Shiplake* pub. *The "Plough" with its beautiful garden is definitely worth a visit; however it's advisable to check opening hours on their website theploughshiplake.co.uk.*



8 Cross over the main road, a fraction left, onto Church Lane, signposted to *the church*. Soon you pass the cemetery on your left, quickly followed by the church. The churchyard is worth visiting although the church itself is often closed. *Shiplake Church of St Peter and St Paul dates from 1229 (although the sign on the road says "12th century"). The poet Alfred (Lord) Tennyson married his wife Emily here in 1850.* The site on the hill overlooking the Thames is memorable, with the cedars and historic houses, a perfect peaceful place to rest awhile. Stay on the track, past the church, passing Shiplake College on your left. Keep right, downhill, on a dusty bridleway. At the bottom, near a curving farm track, by a marker post, turn **left**. The path runs past the college boatyard and comes down to a grassy landing space beside the River Thames.

- 9 Go down to the river's edge and turn sharp **right** over a footbridge. Your riverside amble has begun! You now have an easy 3½ km (just over 2 miles), following the tow path. Very shortly, you pass the first island in the Thames: The Lynch. *A metal gate bearing the acorn symbol indicates that you are on the Thames Path, a national trail running from the Thames Barrier deep into the Cotswolds.* The next island is Hallsmead Ait. Open flowery meadows alternate with woodland. Little Buck Ait is a smaller island separated from the bank by reed beds. When you come under some low-tension power lines, you have only 800m (½ mile) to go. Finally, the river curves right past the first houses of Sonning and Sonning Bridge comes into view. Your path goes **left** over a long footbridge across the millstream arm of the river. *Directly opposite is the Mill House Theatre where you can have a drink and a snack, whilst watching the mill wheel turning.* Turn **left** over the bridge, into Berkshire and the precious village of Sonning where the walk began.



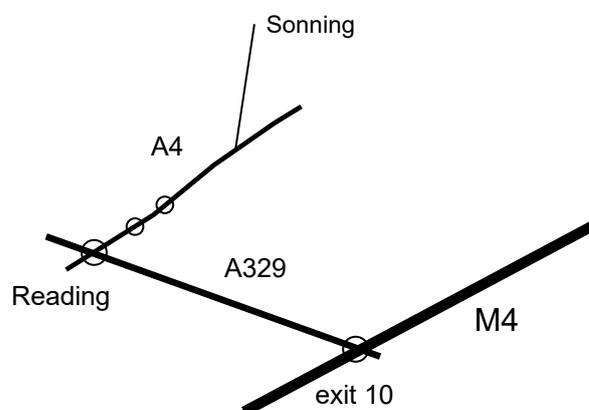
If you would like final refreshments in the *Bull Inn*, turn **right** after the bridge. Shortly after, there is a footpath on the **left** which leads directly to the inn.



The Bull Inn is as famous as the village. It is owned by the Church, was originally known as Church House and probably served as a flop house for pilgrims. Jerome K Jerome wrote in his novel of 1889 'Three Men in a Boat': 'If you stop at Sonning, put up at the "Bull", behind the church. It is a veritable picture of an old country inn, with green, square courtyard in front, where, on seats beneath the trees, the old men group of an evening to drink their ale and gossip over village politics; with low, quaint rooms and latticed windows, and awkward stairs and winding passages.' Nothing has changed.

Getting there

By car: Sonning can be reached from the M4 motorway. Come off at exit 10 (Reading (E), Wokingham, Bracknell). Follow signs for Reading for 4 miles until you approach a crossing with the A4 road, indicated by the sign Reading, Sutton Business Park. Filter **left** here and turn **right** onto the A4, direction Maidenhead. Stay on the A4 over several roundabouts and over a railway bridge. Just after the bridge, there is a sign for Sonning on your **left**. There is space just before the road bends right into the village.



By bus/train: several bus routes (such as 800) from Reading Station to Sonning, Dunsden Green, Binfield Heath and Shiplake, also Sunday. Check the timetables.

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