



Cobham: Woods, Nature Reserve & Meadows

Distance: 11½ km=7½ miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Kent

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Refreshments: Cobham (3 pubs and an ordered picnic)

Map: Explorer 163 (Gravesend) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Village, parkland, woodland, river, country park, wildflower meadows

In Brief

Cobham Woods is a land of brooding giants: mature woodland of great chestnuts, ash and oaks. This walk takes in part of a Nature Reserve which encircles Ranscombe Farm. A good part of the walk is through meadows carpeted end-to-end with wildflowers of every kind. A tiny hamlet of timbered houses is visited along the way. If you enjoy taking a periodic rest, one excellent feature of this walk is the many **bench seats** you find as you walk.

The walk begins and ends in the picturesque village of Cobham, famed for its narrow streets, its historic church and its *three* pubs. Charles Dickens drank here and *The Leather Bottle's* sign portrays Mr Pickwick. The *Darnley Arms* has a line in real ales. For quaffers of Greene King there is also the *Ship Inn*. The *Village Community Stores* (enter round the back) is open all day but closes at 1pm Sunday and B/Hols. You can order a picnic the day before by ringing 01474-813463.

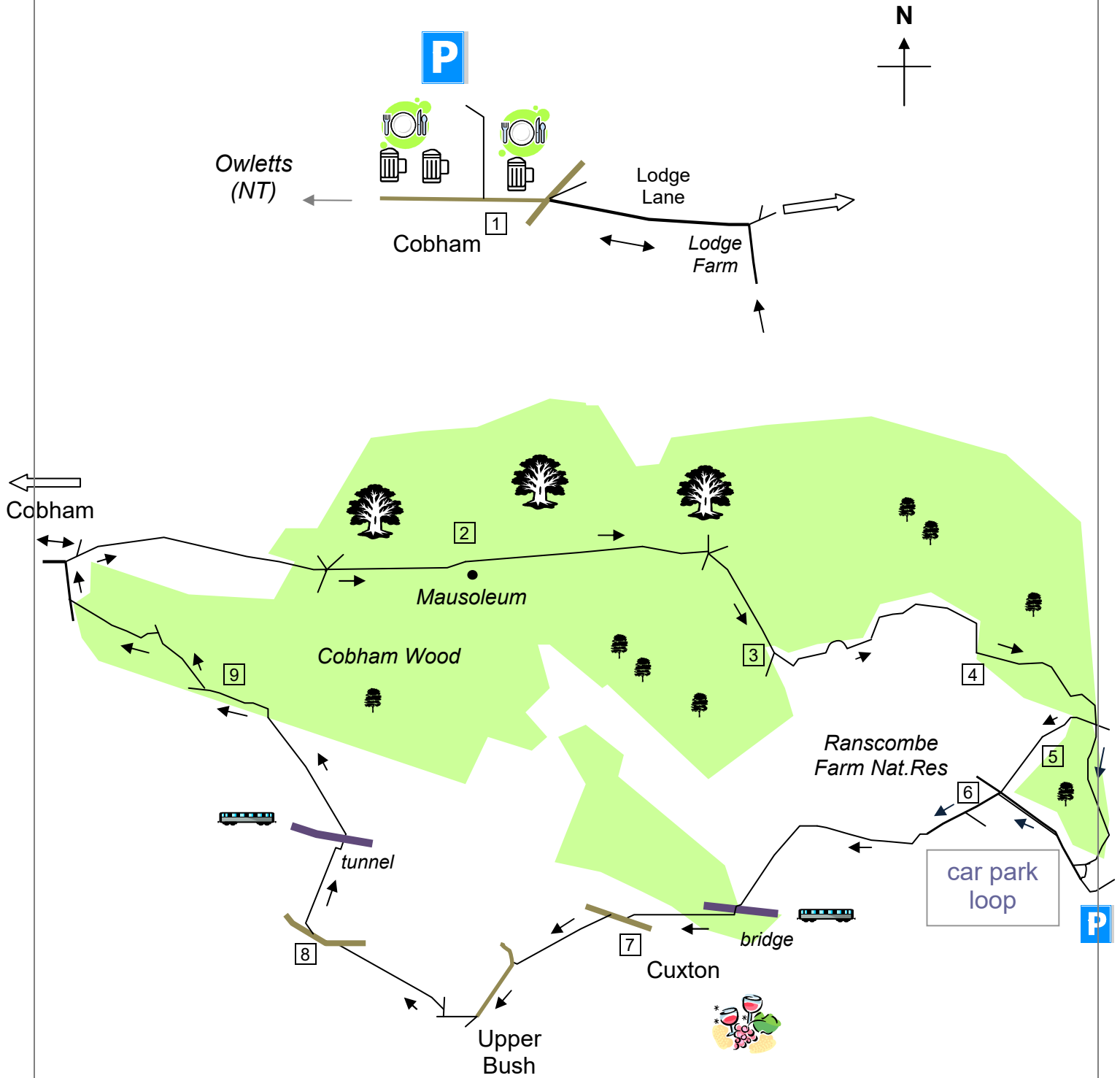


There are negligible nettles and undergrowth on this walk, so any type of clothing is normally fine. Paths are generally dry and many walkers seemed to be wearing just sensible footwear. (This could change in the winter.)

There are **no stiles**, and no major roads so your dog will be in clover.

The walk begins at the village of **Cobham**, near Gravesend, Kent, postcode **DA12 3BZ**, www.w3w.co/bless.urban.stuff. There is a car park which serves the cricket and tennis clubs, marked about half way along the Street. You may see a notice indicating alternative car parks for some of the popular walks, but they are *not* suitable for this walk. An alternative start is the free but very small *Ranscombe Farm Nature Reserve* car park which is situated close to the M2 motorway (come off at J2 A228 *Rochester, West Malling*), go under the motorway round two roundabouts and at the third roundabout follow signs for *West Malling, Snodland, Cuxton*: the car park is on the right shortly after). For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Map of the Walk



The Walk

Cobham was one of the great manors of Kent, with its own baronage. Cobham Hall is one of the greatest houses of the county (not on this walk unfortunately as it is now a private boarding school for girls). It was the principal seat of the Bligh family, Earls of Darnley. Confusingly, the Blighs came from Devon but were based by marriage in Ireland, and served in Westminster, whilst Darnley is part of Glasgow. The Darnley Arms (built in 1196!) was renamed in their honour. Cobham is a great centre for more leisurely walks than the one described here and is worth exploring another day, by visiting Ashenbank Wood, Jeskyns Country Park and the Roman Villa. Cobham once had a coal mine. The name also persists in the Navy: HMS Cobham, a minesweeper.

*The sheer size of Cobham church testifies to the importance of the village in history. It was built in the 1200s and contains nineteen memorial brasses, including that of Sir John de Cobham who lived in the 1300s and founded the New College which you can see outside, beside the massive ancient walls. Only 500m east of Cobham church (you may have passed it) is **Owletts**, a large mansion, run by the National Trust, built in the late 1600s for a yeoman farmer, the birthplace of architect Sir Herbert Baker who designed Woldingham church (see that walk). Owletts is normally open to visitors but recent years have been difficult.*

If you are starting this walk in the **Ranscombe Farm Nature Reserve** car park, skip to near the end of this text and do the section called *Ranscombe Start*.

- 1 Walk along the main road (The Street) with the pubs on your left until you reach a road junction. Cross over the junction, keeping straight on past the War Memorial, on Lodge Lane, an “unadopted road”. [The new wooden gates on your left \(not on your route\) are the start of The Avenue which leads to Cobham Hall, now a school.](#) After passing houses, you reach Lodge Farm. Ignore a bridleway on your right here and keep straight ahead through a large modern kissing-gate, passing a National Trust sign for Cobham Wood.

Cobham Wood consists of 190 acres (=77 ha) of wood and pasture, part of the larger historic Cobham Park.

The wide path runs between fences and soon under trees. Just after a wooden gate on your left, ignore a kissing-gate on your left and a path on your right, keeping straight on as always. You come through another kissing-gate and pass another NT sign, passing a bench seat. (This walk is amply supplied with such places to rest awhile.) Cobham Wood reveals a dramatic treescape. There are signs beside the path for various species of tree (ash, field maple, hornbeam) but they don't mention the oaks and the widespread chestnuts. At the highest point you meet the *Mausoleum*.

The Darnley Mausoleum, built in the 1700s and owned by the National Trust, stands at the highest point. This rather grim monument was designed by architect James Wyatt (see brown Candover in Hampshire). It was needed to house the mortal remains of the Earls of Darnley because the vault in Westminster Abbey was full !! (Compare Mad Jack Fuller's mausoleum in East Sussex & the one at Wisley.) You can see those great stained glass windows of the interior on certain open days.

- 2 Continue onwards along the main path, ignoring a signed path on the right after 200m. You pass another NT sign and come through another large modern kissing-gate. Avoid paths left and right here and shortly another on the right, keeping straight on as before. You will see many distinctive

waymarkers along this walk today: the one you pass soon directs you onwards to *Five Throws*. You finally reach *Five Throws* almost 1km from the *Mausoleum*. This junction is easily identified from the five paths that meet here, with two bench seats. Take the **second** path on the **right** here, beside the **second** seat. Your path runs downhill for 400m through narrow clearings, under overhanging chestnuts. You finally come through a modern kissing-gate and meet a path at the corner of a large field.

- 3 Turn **left** on the path that runs beside a fence on the edge of the field on your right. The path follows several twists at the field edge and, after 250m, enters trees. Shortly, you come to a 4-way junction with large field gates ahead and to your right. Keep **straight ahead** going through a small metal gate beside the larger one, keeping a large field on your right. Keep to this path, following several bends in the field edge, for over 500m. On the way, you pass another of those distinctive waymarkers, this time for *Clay Pond Wood* (on the left) and the *Car Park* (straight on – your route). You are walking part of the *Cuxton Community Heritage Trail*, also a section of *Ranscombe Farm Nature Reserve*, which you will see more of.

Ranscombe Farm is a Plantlife Nature Reserve as well as a working farm. If you buy wildflower seeds (popular nowadays to replace those manicured lawns) it is quite possible that they were sourced in Ranscombe. At the time of writing about 30 species were currently found here. (See end for a list.)

You have traversed half of the entire perimeter, reaching the opposite side of the field. You are in the far edge of the field when suddenly your path turns **left** at a marker post and a sign with white-on-green arrows. *Don't miss this turn – there is no way ahead!*

- 4 The path takes you through woodland, passing a marker post for *Upper Barn Wood* and *Merrals Shaw* and a seat for a welcome rest. Your path runs in a narrow clearing and into more trees. Turn **right** at a marker post (*don't miss!*). Shortly another marker post points you **left**. *You must have become aware of the sound of a motorway: it will be a very brief encounter and it's worth remembering, you probably owe much to that modern invention to get you to this wonderful place!* Turn **right** on a path that gives you full view of the railway and the M2. A flight of steps takes you down into woodland, shutting off most of the noise. You come through a wooden barrier and down to meet a 4-way junction.

*If you parked in the Ranscombe Farm Nature Reserve car park, skip to the end of this text and do the section called *Ranscombe Return*. Otherwise ...*

- 5 Avoid the steps ahead and instead turn **right** at the 4-way junction. Your path runs through woodland and soon curves left and out into an open crop field. Follow a well-marked path across the centre of the field (carpted with wildflowers at the time of writing). In 350m the path ends at a tarmac drive. Cross straight over, passing a seat, onto a wide straight path running between fields, signposted *The Valley*.
- 6 You have joined part of the North Downs Way (NDW). Avoid a footpath on the left and stay on the track, soon going through a band of trees. The path bends right past a slanting info tablet. Just after a seat, at a marker post, keep ahead through a modern kissing-gate. Your path shortly curves left to run across the centre of a meadow (at the time of writing crowded with wild flowers of every imaginable kind). About half way down you meet a crossing path by a marker post. As the notice says, this is where the White Stag of Cuxton used to stand.

The White Stag was real. It had a rare genetic variation of the red deer, known as leucism, lacking the usual pigment. It roamed in and around this spot for several years. But the story is a sad one: killed by poachers (probably as a valuable trophy).

Continue straight ahead, reaching a seat at the other side and going up steps. Keep **left** over a railway bridge and turn **right** on a path through Mill Hill Wood, ignoring steps on your left. In nearly 400m, towards the end of the path, ignore a swing-gate on your right, continue ahead through another swing-gate to come down steps to a road in Cuxton.

7 Turn **right** on the road for nearly 50m and the **left** at a fingerpost going diagonally across a field on a wide grassy path. *The vines on your left are part of a new project for a “world-class winery” in Cuxton, with a space-age structure designed by Norman Foster (the architect behind the Gherkin).* You come out beside metal gates to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane, soon arriving at the pretty hamlet of Upper Bush, with its two Grade-II listed buildings. Turn **right** to stay on the tarmac lane, thus leaving the NDW. Go round a large metal gate and keep ahead on a track. Just before a metal field gate, turn **right** on a cinder path, bearing **left** just before a field gate. Your path goes down through woodland and out into a large meadow. Go straight across the centre of the meadow on a faint but distinct path, with views to your left of Red Wood. Once again you have a rich variety of natural flora to enjoy. Not all the yellow flowers are common ragwort: near the end, in summer, you will notice the yellow five-petal flowers of St John’s wort, a pleasant contrast. The path comes out to a road.



8 Turn **left** on the road. In 100m you see a signpost pointing right to a private house and a stone waymarker. However, the entrance to the footpath is 5m *after* the gates of the house. Turn **right** on it, **left** through a metal gate and **right** up the side of the meadow. At the end, turn **right** at a yellow arrow and **left** through a tunnel under the railway. The path leads out to a wild meadow with another dazzling display of wild flowers in summer. Keep straight ahead on a faint but distinct path (made by a tractor), heading just to the left of the woods at the top. When you reach the top, go straight over on a narrow path into the woods.

9 Turn **left** on a wide path which runs just inside the wood. In 250m, at a signpost, fork **right**. Ignore the kissing-gate ahead and instead turn left on a path which runs deep into Cobham Wood. Your path gradually ascends and, after 250m or so, you see a redundant kissing-gate on your right. Turn **left** here on a wider path which winds through woodland. After 150m ignore a signed path on your right and keep straight on. At the end of the path, keep right to go over two stepovers and through a metal gate to meet a wide track opposite *Home Farm Cottage* and a barn. Turn **right** on the track, quickly coming to a T-junction by Home Farm, familiar from your outward journey. Turn **left** on the drive (Lodge Lane), soon arriving at Cobham Village to enjoy a wide choice of refreshments and, if you set out from here, the place where the walk began.

Ranscombe Start

Do this section If you are starting the walk in the Ranscombe Farm Nature Reserve car park.

With the road on your left, walk to the end of the car park where there is a large wooden gate. Take a path on the **right** just before the gate, steeply up. Go through a wooden swing-gate and up the hillside. Just before some trees, shift left-right to join a tarmac drive. At the top of the rise, make use of the parallel footway on the left. You pass an info board shortly which lists the species of wild flowers currently found on this nature reserve. At a junction by a seat, turn **left** on a wide straight path running between fields, signposted *The Valley*.

Now re-join the main walk from Section [6](#).

Ranscombe Return

Do this section If you are returning to the Ranscombe Farm Nature Reserve car park at the end of the walk.

Go straight ahead at the 4-way crossing, going up steps. You are in a dense historic coppice of *Merrals Shaw*. In 100m and 200m you meet one of those distinctive waymarkers. Always keep straight ahead. Your path winds through the woods for another 400m, taking a right bend in stages. Towards the end of this stretch, look to your left, where the main path forks **left** and **left** again down to the open hillside and a seat. This is your route. (If you miss it and take the narrower path straight ahead, you will quickly meet a tarmac drive: simply turn left here.) After possibly pausing to admire the view of the Medway Crossing, follow the path down, through a swing-gate, keeping left to come down to the car park where the walk began.

List of wildflower species found at Ranscombe

At the time of writing, the species that were currently found here were (prepare for a long list!): wild basil, broad-leaved cudweed, narrow-fruited cornsalad, wild marjoram, common centaury, vipers bugloss, creeping thistle, bramble, marsh thistle, common spotted orchid, dense-flowered fumitory, common milkwort, field pansy, rock rose, rosebay willowherb, nettle-leaved bellflower, greater knapweed, white clover, corn mint, field scabious, common poppy, ground pine, yellow and blue pimpernel, agrimony, red clover, chamomile. On other days you might find hairy mallow, meadow clary, and several orchids.

Getting there

By car: Cobham can easily be reached from the A2 trunk road. Come off at the *Gravesend (E)* exit, go round roundabouts in the direction *Sole Street* and/or *Jeskyns Community Woodland*. Cobham is in less than 2 miles. If you come from south or west of London, another way is via the M25/M26. Come off at *Wrotham* and follow signs for *Gravesend, Meopham*. *Sole Street* is signed right, just after Meopham, and Cobham is signed from there.

By bus/train: buses 416 and 417 run from Gravesend railway station to Cobham, not Sundays (?). Check the timetables.

It is feasible to extend this walk to/from Sole Street railway station, about 2km distance. Cuxton station is less than 1km away but the best route is unclear.

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