



Downe, Halstead and Knockholt

Distance: 20 km=12 miles or 14 km=9 miles

easy walking

Region: Kent, Greater London

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Refreshments: Halstead, Berry's Green, Downe

Map: Explorer 147 (Sevenoaks) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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Villages, nature trails, woodland, meadows, hills, views, country lanes

In Brief

This is a peaceful and enchanting walk in the green hills and meadows of north west Kent. This area is a large oasis of unspoiled country, as far as can be imagined from the busy Metropolis: all the harder then to believe that one half of this walk is actually within the London borough of Bromley.

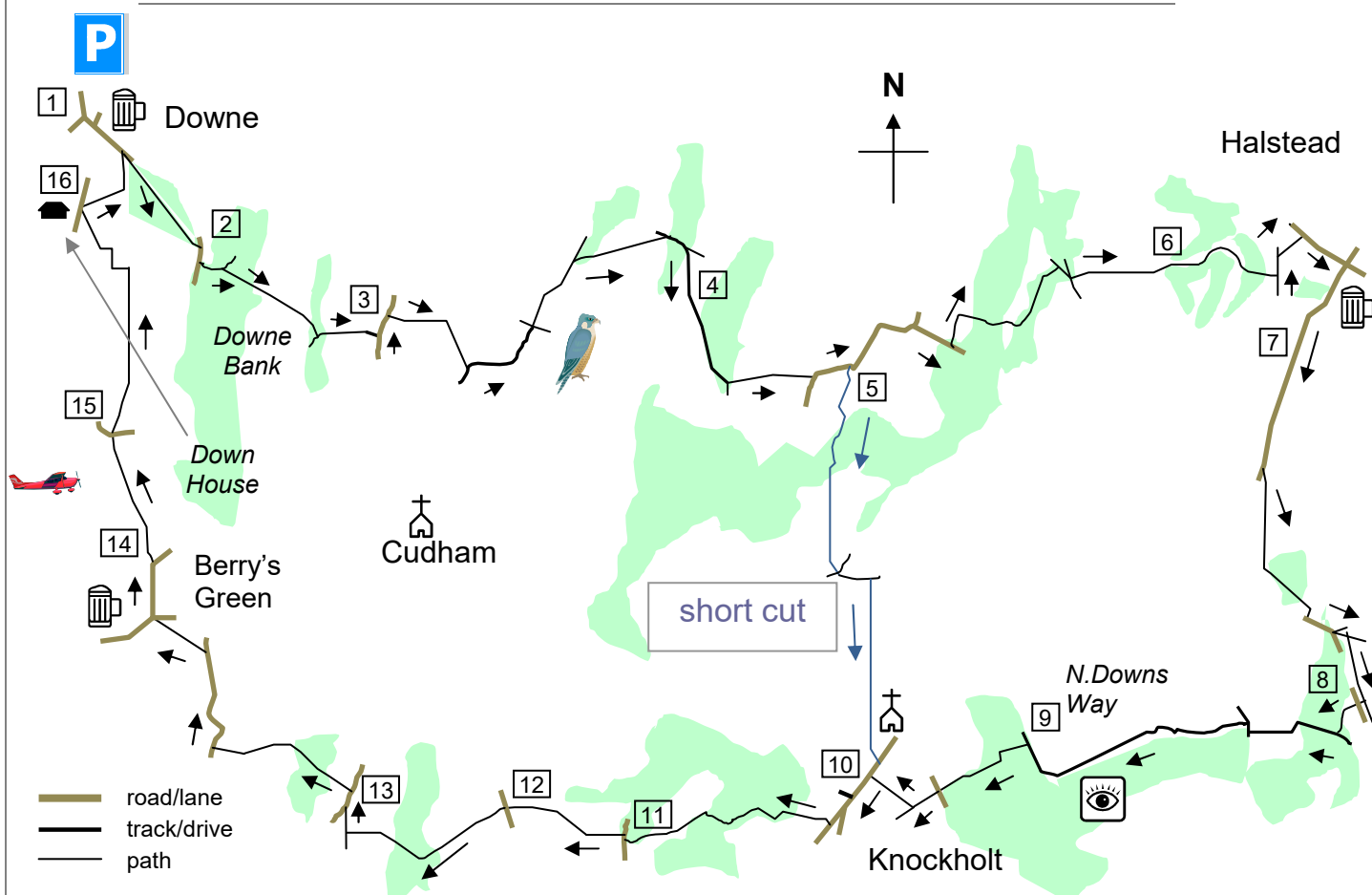
This walk can be shortened from 12 to 9 miles by omitting Halstead and taking a short cut direct to Knockholt.



There is just one short scratchy section where shorts might be uncomfortable. Some of the walking is along quiet country lanes, but walkers may need to beware of those "middle-aged men in lycra" who career about on two wheels! As always, boots are recommended if there has been any rain, although walking shoes are adequate at other times. A large dog will have difficulty with some of the stiles.

The walk begins at the village of Downe, postcode **BR6 7US**. Park considerately on the roadside in the High Street. For the full-length walk, another good place to start is Halstead, postcode **TN14 7EA**, where the on-street parking is relatively easy, especially now that Downe is getting rather crowded. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



Leg 1: Downe to Halstead 8 km=5 miles

Downe is not listed in the Domesday Book, but it was included by Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1039 to 1109, in titles granted from the Manor of Orpington to the Bishop of Rochester. The church of St Mary the Virgin began as a modest chapel in the late 1200s. Downe Court (see later in the walk) was the seat of the powerful Manning family and Queen Elizabeth I came here to attend the baptism of Henry Manning's daughter Margaret (Henry being Knight Marshall at that time).

- 1 From Downe village, walk up the high street, past the church, ignoring High Elms Road on your left, on the Cudham Road, going past *Downe Hall* on your left. *Throughout the day, you may see (or hear) small aircraft flying to and from Biggin Hill airport next door. A busy commercial airport, it takes small-to-medium jets, up to Boeing-737 size.* About 200m from the village, as you pass Xmas Tree Farm, ignore the first footpath on the right but take a footpath on the right just after some large metal gates, next to a large oak, running above the road. You have a sizeable sheep meadow on your right, before the path crosses a track and continues beside a horse pasture. When the path rejoins the road, 20m further on, turn **left** on a footpath, near a house, marked $1\frac{1}{4}$ Cudham.
- 2 Go past a wooden gate and continue downhill. Shortly, at a wooden bench, turn **right** as indicated by the fingerpost. The path goes down steps between fences. *Be careful in wet or icy conditions as these steps can be slippery.* You go through a small wooden gate and down more steps until,

on your right, is a noticeboard for the Downe Bank Nature Reserve, run by the Kent Wildlife Trust.

Just a half-mile walk from Darwin's home, Down House, which you will see near the end of the walk, this was a favourite spot for Charles Darwin and his family, named the "Orchis [sic] Bank" because many wild orchids grow there. This bank appears in the "Origin of Species" as a site of so many related species, all different but dependent on each other. Further work by Darwin resulted in the book "Fertilisation of Orchids" and the theory of coevolution. Today there are rare specimens to be found here, with names such as adder's tongue fern and squinancywort.

On the left is a gate into the Nature Reserve which is worth a look when it is open. Continue on the fenced path through another small gate. The path goes over a farm track and gradually up steps on the other side of the valley on what can be a rather arduous climb. At the top, go through posts to a T-junction with a wider path. Turn **left** on this path. This path joins a tarmac drive and continues ahead to meet a road. Turn **left** on the road. *Because of the blind curve, it may be better to vary the approved discipline by staying on the left.*

3 In 100m, turn **right** on a footpath marked *Pratts Bottom*. Cross the drive to *Hostye House*, go over a stile [[Dec 2019: lying on the ground](#)] and along the right-hand side of a field. In the first corner, turn **right** and take a path across the centre of the next field. The path ends at a quiet tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane. Ignore a footpath soon marked *Cudham Church* and continue round a curve, eventually reaching houses by Mace Farm. Ignore a footpath on the right and keep straight ahead on a concrete track marked as a bridleway to *Green St Green*. *The field on your right is used by nearby Countrywide Falconry for demonstrations of birds of prey.* As soon as the track enters woods, turn **right** by a yellow arrow on a narrow path, up steps and diagonally left across a meadow. At the other side, as your path enters woods, turn **right** at a T-junction on a path running in the woods.

4 In 50m, at a post with arrows, avoid a marked footpath on your left and keep round **right** on the bridleway. The bridleway descends gradually across the valley and rises gently again, up shallow steps through trees. At the top, on reaching a T-junction with a wide path, turn **left**. The path narrows and runs for some way through trees, eventually coming out to a lane. Turn **left** on the lane. In 180m, you reach a signpost on the right pointing to a footpath. Here you have a choice.

Decision point. If you would like to take the shorter option to Knockholt, go to the end of this text and do the **Knockholt Transfer**. Otherwise, resume from the following section.

5 Ignore the footpath and stay on the rather rough Washneys Lane, past a house, ignoring a footpath on the left, and onwards till you reach a road junction in another 300m by *Little Washney's*. Turn **right** on quiet *Parrys Lane* downhill. In 200m, you will see a signpost. Turn **left** over a stile. The narrow path runs beside a paling fence with woodland on your right. At a stile, go **right**, down into the wood. The path goes down, down through the wood of yew and beech, finally ending at another stile leading into a sheep meadow. Keep up the right-hand side and, at the top corner, go **right** over a stile and **left** on a grassy path. Stay beside the sheep pasture on your left until this nice wide grassy path curves right to a swing-gate. Go through the swing-gate and **right** on the lane, *Hookwood Road*. In 80m, cross a

road, Rushmore Hill, to a footpath opposite. The footpath follows a tiled drive where you have a good view on your right of the topiary of *Finstock House*. The path takes you over a low stile and then on a straight and narrow course under field maples. Sometimes visible on your right is a huge garden centre. A stile takes you into woodland. At a yellow arrow, fork **right**.

- 6 You are now entering one of the spacious open areas of grass (a little-used private golf course) that flank the village of Halstead on the west side, between Halstead Place School and Deerleap Wood. [\[Care! some walkers go wrong in this section.\]](#) When entering the area of open grassland, turn **left** downhill but keep to the centre of the beautiful wood fringed grass. Where the trees on your right curve away, avoid a grassy slope on your right and keep straight ahead down the main slope till you reach the bottom of the valley. Turn **right** here up a wide grassy space. (*The official footpath takes a left turn shortly through the bushes but there is a green route...*) Keep ahead up the left-hand edge of the grassy space until it sweeps round to the right. Here, turn **left** over the grass uphill to the top where you will see a large cedar. Turn **left** along a wide grassy strip and, in about 80m, turn **right** over a stile just before the cedar on a footpath marked with yellow arrows. The fenced path leads to a road in Halstead. Turn **right** to the main crossroads in the village. But the *Rose and Crown*, an establishment with entirely positive reviews, is about 100m straight over; the route, after refreshment, is **left** at the crossroads.



The “Hal” of “Halstead” (which is pronounced to rhyme with “pal”), means “shelter”, hence “place of refuge”. Indeed, this small village on the Downs (only about 2000 people) is a place of comfort. Famous residents included E.Nesbit, author of “The Railway Children” and Anna Atkins, botanist and early photographer.

Leg 2: Halstead to Knockholt 5 km=3 miles

- 7 Walk through the village, along the Knockholt Road, soon passing a big green on the right with modern houses. Eventually, about 200m after the end of the 30-mph sign, at a right bend, go **left** over a stile. Follow a path across the centre of two meadows. Just before the far corner, go **right** over a stile (2012:currently broken), **left** on a path and through a barrier into woods. At another barrier and crossing path, go straight ahead across a meadow, passing two houses, and turn **right** between fences to a road. Turn **left** on the Old London Road and continue for 100m. Just before a right bend, go **left** at a fingerpost and take the **right**-hand of two footpaths, going into the trees. Just before you reach some bollards and a metal bar, turn **right** on another path. This path has a fenced-off area on your left and as you go you will notice that there are sections of the fence that protrude. (The grounds belong to the MoD research site known as Fort Halstead.) Just after the **fourth** protruding section, turn **right** on a narrow path and through a metal kissing-gate to a road.
- 8 Cross the road directly opposite to another kissing-gate and a footpath. The path turns left round the corner of a field and curves right to meet two wooden swing-gates. Ignore the gate that leads straight ahead and go through the gate on the **right** to join the North Downs Way (NDW), a long-distance path. At first the path runs between woods. Next, you enter a field, go **left** through a wooden swing-gate and **right** along the right-hand

side of a meadow with great views south (summer foliage permitting). The NDW now goes through a metal gate, **right** on a drive and, in 15m, **left** through a metal kissing-gate. You now have a large rough meadow on your right. A large modern kissing-gate takes you alongside a smaller meadow. At a pair of gates, keep straight on through the wooden gate avoiding the gate to its left. (However, a short excursion through the **left-hand gate** will provide immediate access to a long bench seat with a stunning vista down an avenue cut through the woodland of the Chevening Estate towards Chevening House and the M25 beyond. A great spot to take a break at this half-way point.)



After another large field, the NDW bends **right** round the corner. You pass an old entrance gate with two rounded brick walls and in the corner, go **left** through a metal kissing-gate.

- 9 The NDW follows a rather muddy course (short-lived fortunately) with a left-right double bend at a marker. After bracken and birch, the path bends right and left through a wooden swing-gate and along the left-hand side of a meadow. Finally a metal swing-gate takes you down to a lane, Sundridge Lane. Cross straight over the lane, up some steps into a crop field. Turn **left** and follow the field edge to the corner. (In Jun-Sep this path is very overgrown with rape, almost 2m high, although at ground level, the path is still well defined.) Turn **right** and again follow the field edge for about 80m before turning **right** at signs on a post by the hedge. Follow a signed path across the middle of the field, skirting the edge of a wood in the centre of the field, before continuing on the same line to the far side. Go over a stile into a small meadow, over another stile and down between fences to a road. The route is **left** on the road. However, the church of St. Katharine is only 50m to the right and is a *must visit*.

The **Knockholt Transfer** short cut rejoins the main walk [here](#).

Leg 3: Knockholt to Downe 7 km=4 miles

The name "Knockholt" probably comes from "nok" (i.e. "nook") and "holte", meaning "corner copse". The centre of the village is St Katharine's church, built in the 1200s under Henry III, that great church builder. The nearby "Knockholt Pound" was just that – a pound for stray animals (and no doubt a fee was charged for their release). The old village lay on The Trackway, an ancient route over high ground used by travellers to avoid robbers (real or imagined) in the forest. Knockholt was home to landscape painters such as H.J. Boddington and W.F. Wells, with frequent visits by Turner, and writers such as Dr Johnson. Knockholt was in the Greater London borough of Bromley but moved back to Kent (Sevenoaks district) in 1969.

- 10 Continue along Main Road, avoiding a junction on the right. Ignore a left fork, where the two radio receiver towers can be seen as you go past a small triangular green. At the end of the green, by the driveway of *Windy Ridge*, go **right** at a signpost into a sloping meadow and keep to the left-hand side. Your path goes between posts into a woodland of dense hollies, then between fences. More woodland ensues and on your left are the large back gardens of the houses of Main Road. Keep to the path, down through dense beechwoods, then over a stile and **left** along the left-hand side of a horse pasture. Keep to the main path as it enters the edge of woods and go over a stile in the corner of a small paddock. You need to go over another stile immediately in the right-hand side and continue alongside a wire fence on your left and over a stile to a lane, Burlings Lane.

- 11 Cross straight over the lane to a footpath opposite. Shortly, go over a stile and follow a line of oaks between pastures. Your path now veers right across the centre of a meadow. After the next stile [June 2020: broken], continue across a large paddock keeping the grand house, *Cedar Farm*, on your right. Finally you come out, via an avoidable stile, to Cudham Lane South.
- 12 Cross the road to narrow Thrift Lane opposite. After *Thrift Farm House*, your path continues between fences where you have views right on a good day as far as central London. You now continue down through trees. At a T-junction with yellow arrows, turn **right**, going rather steeply down a winding path where you need to take care. After more trees, your path takes the right-hand short end of a rather long meadow and rises again on a wide path of crushed builders rubble. Before the top of the wide path, turn **right** on an enclosed crossing path to proceed to Newbarn Lane via an unneeded stile. Turn **right**, passing *New Barn Manor*.
- 13 Opposite the little clock turret, go **left** at a fingerpost, up steps and over a stile. Immediately go through a small metal gate on a path between fences. *Cudham Church is visible up to your right*. A narrow stile takes you into the dense wood of Blackbush Shaw. Follow the yellow arrows, past a redundant stile, over a bank and gradually up, curving left in front of a bank. The path gradually descends with a meadow on your left, down through woodland and up again, finally out to a lane in the village of Berry's Green. Turn **right** on the lane, going past some attractive properties and then some of a much more lowly stature. Ignore a stile and footpath on the left opposite a side road. Just before *Homeleigh Farm*, turn **left** on a tarmac footpath past a metal barrier. This path takes you to a road junction at Jail Lane. Your route is straight ahead over the junction, along Single Street. However, one of the best pubs in the area, the *Old Jail* is only 150m to your left. You need to retrace your steps after refreshments.



Visitors who "go to Jail" for the first time have found one of the secrets of this area of Kent. This pub is the cosiest imaginable and oozes atmosphere. It is also, according to many reviews, a great place to eat, with some dedicated kitchen staff. As you might expect from an old jail, built in 1800, it has a series of small rooms and low ceilings. Ales are rather predictable, with London Pride and Doom Bar, but well served.

- 14 Continue along Single Street until, in 200m or so, it bends right. Leave the road here by continuing ahead on a drive for Greatfield Farm, going through a small wooden gate and over a stile into a horse pasture. This section is often rather muddy and you might need to edge your way close to the fence. Keep ahead along the right-hand side and, at the next corner, avoid a stile on the right and go over a stile ahead into the next pasture. Your route is now through a metal kissing-gate, along a fenced path. The next stretch is along a boardwalk or shorter remnants, indicating that this was (or still is?) a marshy area. At the end of the path, go straight ahead on a driveway by *Luxted Farmhouse* to a road in the hamlet of Luxted.
- 15 Turn **right** on the road for only 10m and go **left** on a signed footpath between paling fences, continuing under hollies. The path leads you along the left-hand side of a large meadow. At the first corner, the path continues straight across the centre. On meeting a hedgerow, keep to the left of it and, at a 4-way signpost, keep straight ahead over a crossing path. At the next corner, go **left** and **right** round the sides of the meadow to join a concrete drive. Leave the drive in 20m where it bends left to continue on a

grassy path beside the new development of *Downe Court*. Before a fence, turn **left** into a meadow and cross it by going round two sides (as indicated by a notice erected by the landowner). The cream-coloured house on your left is Darwin's house *Down House*, a fascinating living museum of natural science and a Victorian time capsule. [You can reach Down House, via a large metal swing-gate leading across the road.](#)

Down House (the "e" in the village name is a recent addition) probably dates originally from the 1600s and passed through many hands until Charles Darwin and his wife Emma bought it, together with 33 acres (13 ha), for around £2000 in 1842. The Darwins lived here until his death in 1882, raising a family and making many additions. Here he developed his theory of Evolution by Natural Selection, making studies of earthworms, barnacles, orchids and much else. Emma is buried in Downe churchyard and, significantly perhaps, Charles is buried in Westminster Abbey. (See other walks in this series "Westminster" and "Abinger and Wotton, Surrey".) Down House is open every weekend with more days in summer. It is run by English Heritage and has a tea room.



- 16 At the far side, by a fingerpost, go into trees and then into a large pasture. Cross the pasture to the opposite corner by going straight ahead and **right** in the corner alongside a fence (many local people take a path diagonally across). On your left is Xmas Tree Farm with its children's zoo. At the other side, go through a wooden swing-gate and along the grass beside a track with a dense pine plantation on your right. Leave by a stile, out to a road, the same road as you used on the outward journey, and turn **left** back to the village where the walk began.



WC

Xmas Tree Farm, when open, has a café and WC. Downe village is blessed with two pubs: The Queens Head has a restaurant and a good selection of ales. It was built in 1565 and named in honour of Elizabeth I. The George and Dragon is a somewhat larger affair, which also does a comprehensive menu.



Knockholt Transfer 2 km=1¼ miles

[Take this short cut if you want to reduce the length of the walk by missing Halstead and the North Downs Way.](#)

- 5 Turn **right** at the signpost, through a metal kissing-gate and continue along the left-hand side of a charming meadow. At the corner of a wood, go **left** over a stile and follow a narrow path through the wood. The path, which needs some care, curves right to regain your previous direction. As you near the end of the wood turn **left** on a wide track, pass some shipping containers, and go over a stile into a large meadow. Keep to the **right**-hand side, avoiding a gap. [In the distance you will see the two receiver antennae at Knockholt, your next destination.](#) Keep going to the far corner, where you have a wire fence on your left. [Ahead is a view of one of the loveliest valleys of this area.](#) Ignore a stile and signpost on the right and continue down a steep slope where care is needed. At the bottom, go over a stile and cross a track.
- 10 Go over another stile and up the right-hand side of a meadow. About ⅔ of the way up, go **right** over a tall stile. *You are on part of a Shepherd Neame walk: this Kent brewer sponsors a number of them.* Go over a bank and across the centre of a meadow on a faint path. Aim just to the right of the tallest in a line of trees straight ahead. When you reach the other side, you will meet a jutting corner. Continue past it and go over a hidden stile a few metres further tight in the corner. Your path now goes along the left-hand side of two meadows



with a stile. Keep ahead beside a wall, on the other side of which you can glimpse some of the topiary in the garden of *Court Lodge*. Another stile takes you along the left-hand side of a garden of pines and other ornamental trees. Go a fraction right to find a stile into the churchyard of St Katharine's, Knockholt. After a visit to the church, turn **right** on the main road.

The walk now continues at the start of Leg 3.

Getting there

By car: from London, the usual way to Downe is via Croydon. Follow signs to Bromley, Addiscombe and stay on the A232 through Shirley and West Wickham, with a right turn and a left turn at various points, always following signs for *Biggin Hill* and the aeroplane symbol. (At the Shirley roundabout with the pointed modern church, the unsigned route is slightly right, along West Wickham High Street.) After a green section, take a right turn by a filling station at a sign for *Biggin Hill, Downe*. The road to Downe, forks off left after about ½ mile.

If coming from the M25, come off at exit 4 (*Bromley, Orpington*). Follow signs for A21 *Bromley*, also for *Biggin Hill* with an aeroplane symbol. Eventually, at a roundabout half way along Farnborough Way, you will see a sign pointing left for Downe. (There are also signs to Knockholt and Halstead from this road.)

By bus/train: bus 402 from Sevenoaks or Bromley stations to Halstead. Bus 146 from (either) Bromley station to Downe. Check the timetables.

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