



Offham, Old Soar Manor, Platt

Distance: 18 km=11 miles

easy walking

Region: Kent

Date written: 13-jul-2011

Author: Malinovka

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Refreshments: Offham and all the villages

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Map: Explorer 148 (Maidstone) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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Woodland, medieval manor, orchards, good field paths, quiet meadows

In Brief

This very varied walk begins with a long woodland stretch through the vast Mereworth Woods. It then takes you through Kentish orchards and quiet meadows, visiting some almost-forgotten villages, lost in time, before returning through more woodland. This walk is a tribute to the *Adventurous Walks* books and follows one of those routes, with some major changes.

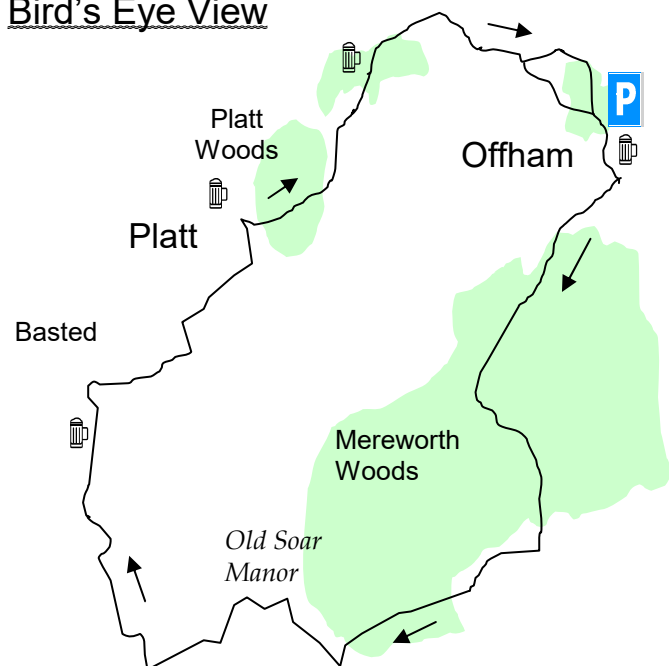


There are several patches of nettles along this walk, so bare legs are *not* advisable for this walk and, in high summer, there are some heavily overgrown sections. Any strong footwear and sensible clothing is fine.

Your dog could come too.

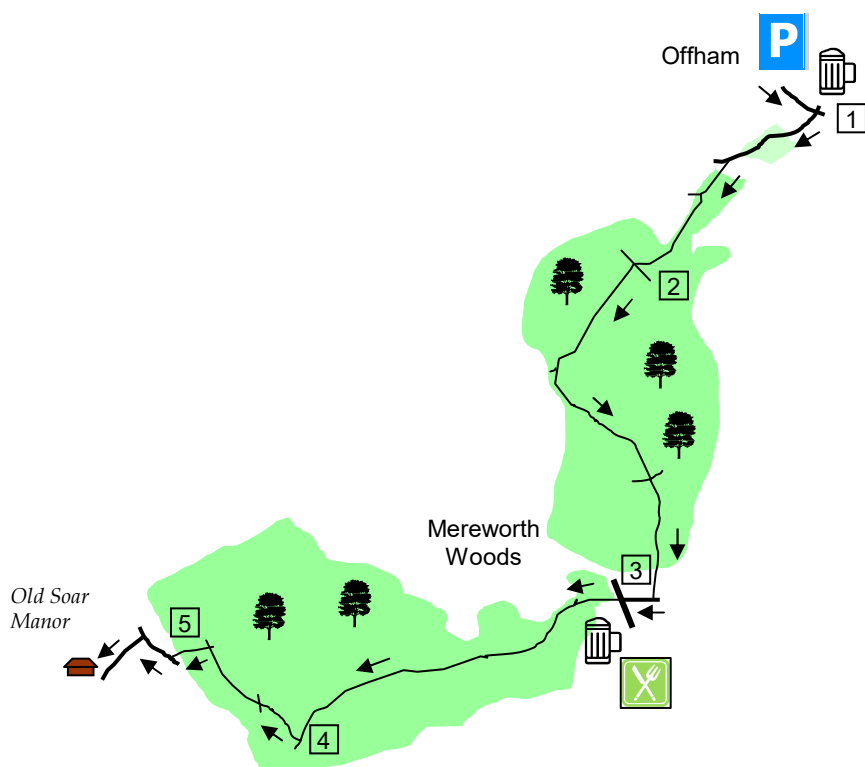
The walk begins in the small public car park in the village of **Offham**, Kent (postcode **ME19 5PE**), near the playground. This is by the main road just 200m north-west of the quintain and pub, opposite the small Methodist church. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Bird's Eye View



The Walk

Leg 1: Offham to Old Soar Manor (7½ km=4½ miles)



- 1 From the car park, go **left** along the main road to the centre of the village, passing the *Kings Arms*. On the green is the famous *quintain*, a source of huge pride to the village.

Offham is named after a Saxon chieftain Offa (not the same man who gave his name to Offa's Dyke on the Welsh borders). Its wealth came from the local ragstone quarried here and from the fruits of the fields and orchards in which it sits. Two famous names originate from this village. Jack Straw, one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was born here ("Jakke Straw and his meynee / ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille" – Chaucer, Nun's Priest's Tale). Sir Richard Culpeper (see under "Old Soar Manor" below) lived in the Manor (on the left just past the quintain) and was grandfather to Catherine Howard who became fifth wife to Henry VIII. Offham has one of the oldest churches in Kent, a ten-minute walk from the village.

The Quintain is a jousting instrument, hugely popular in its time. One arm is flat and the other held a heavy bag of sand. Young bloods from the village would tilt on horseback at the flat end (known as the "eye") and try to avoid receiving a clout from behind from the sandbag. Hoots of derision were hurled at anyone who missed outright or got thumped. The quintain is the centre point of annual Mayday celebrations.

Turn **right** on a lane signposted *Platt, Mereworth*. Immediately ignore a track on the left and stay on this quiet lane, passing a little pond and a "slow" sign for ducks, until after 400m it emerges into the open by a field. Just before a house with a red roof, fork **left** on a tarmac drive and immediately ignore a track leading off left. Follow this drive under trees until you reach a house and a marker post. Fork **left** here on a bridleway running alongside the fence of the house. The (rather overgrown) path runs by a field on the right and woodland on the left and soon enters

Offham Wood, the beginning of Great Leybourne Wood. The woodland you traverse at the start of this walk is part of a huge forested area known as Mereworth Woods. You pass through mixed wood with the occasional tall oaks. In 200m the path crosses a very straight cinder pathway called the *Long Walk*. Cross straight over.

- 2 The woods here show evidence of an old chestnut coppice with some birch and oak. This path periodically becomes a wide rutted path for forestry vehicles before the grass and bracken grow back. Consequently, you may have to skip round some muddy sections. After more than ½ km, the path passes beneath some tall oaks. Avoid a path forking right here and stay with the main path as it curves slightly left and runs behind houses and gardens on your right. The path winds a bit and goes up a rise into a more open area where a track joins from the left. Soon the open area on your left gives way to woodland again, first oaks and beeches, then birch, chestnut, rowan and tall pines. Nearly 1 km after the houses, another track joins from the left at a crossing. In another 200m, you reach a major junction with a track sharp left and a curving wide track to your right. Avoid them both and keep straight ahead on a narrower track. You now pass through beautiful mixed woodland, followed by an area of ancient coppice. Your path becomes narrower and stony and it soon becomes enclosed between fields. Exit to a lane by metal barriers and turn sharp **right** on a road (Beech Road), reaching the A228 Seven Mile Lane opposite the *Moody Mare* restaurant. *This pretty weatherboarded establishment is a useful watering hole but the food, which is available all day every day, predominates. After a recent change of ownership, you will no longer fail the dress code. Nevertheless it's worth a return visit, partly to hear the live music on a Friday evening.*



- 3 Cross the road carefully on the **right** of the restaurant to a concrete patch and an enclosed stony track. Stay on the track, ignoring a minor track on the left. It runs through plantations of chestnut and pine and into a lighter area with views south, followed by some deep woodland. Nearly 1 km from the road, you pass a heavy metal barrier on your right, followed by a felled area and oak woods. In a further 600m, you come to a markerpost at a junction with a green metal gate on the right and a track on the left. Keep straight ahead through tall pines and some tall beeches. Nearly 400m further on, you reach a junction of several paths. Keep to the main wide path as it curves up **left** past a huge beech. Just over 100m from the beech, you reach another junction by a dark concrete post with faded arrows. Turn sharp **right** here. *Don't miss this turn!*

- 4 This winding path through the woods has one or two muddy patches all easily skirted through the trees. In roughly 150m, ignore a path branching right by another muddy patch and keep **left** on the main path. Soon another path joins from the right as you pass a felled area. After 300m on this path, you meet a very wide crossing track with arrows on a post. *This is the Wealdway (WW), a long-distance trail from Gravesend to near Eastbourne.* Cross straight over on a much narrower path. The path runs straight across a junction with scattered forestry equipment. It immediately curves **right** on a fairly straight course through a chestnut coppice and a bluebell wood. In 250m, you reach a crossing path at a post with arrows. Turn **left** here downhill. *Don't miss this turn!*



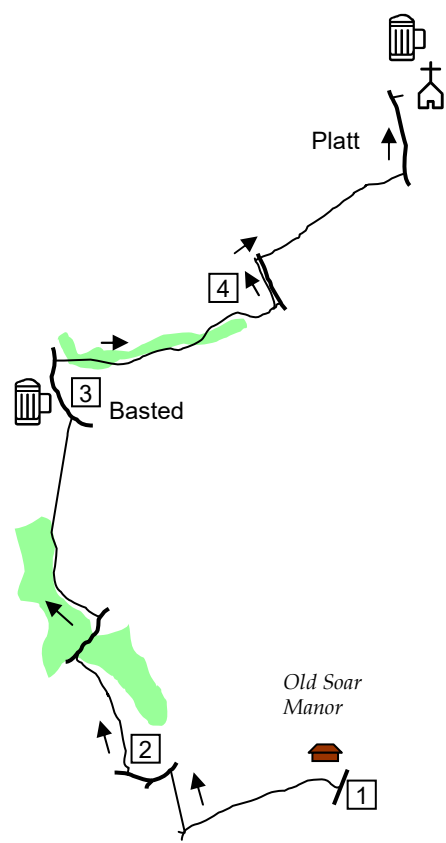
- 5 At last you begin to emerge from this apparently endless forest as you see breaking light ahead and have views across the valley to Plaxtol. Finally the path reaches a lane in the centre of a fruit-growing area of Kent.

Turn **right** on the lane. On the left the apple orchards belong to the Fairlawne Estate, a historic mansion based in Plaxtol (see the “Knole and Ightham” walk in this series). At a junction, turn **left** on Old Soar Road. In 350m, on the right, you reach Old Soar Manor. You can go through the wooden gate into the grounds and keep left over the grass to a wooden door leading, via the undercroft and spiral stairs to the rooms above. It’s usually unattended and there is no entry charge.

Old Soar Manor is a rich family dwelling from the 1200s, built of local ragstone and comprising a large hall and two small wooden-floored rooms above the storage cellars. The family was the enduring Culpepers, rich and powerful in the county, who also resided in Offham Manor. Life revolved around the great hall which was also where servants slept. The lord and his family had their separate quarters on the south side, now demolished, where you can now see a red brick house has been built immediately adjacent. Windows were properly glazed and warmth provided from the fireplace: this was a comfortable dwelling. Old Soar Manor belongs to English Heritage and is run by the National Trust. It is closed in the cooler half-year and on Fridays.

Leg 2: Old Soar Manor to Platt (5½ km=3½ miles)

- 1 Continue down the lane and shortly, just past a long barn, turn **right** through a small wooden gate into a little orchard of various fruits. Keep to the right between a tennis court and a converted barn. Go over a stile and cross a field, a fraction left, on a faint path straight down the grass. The path takes you through a pleasant wilder area of brambles and tall grass, with occasional fruit trees, hazel and willow, with a stream running along on the left and then over a wide foot-bridge with railings. Continue along the left-hand side of the field. At the far corner, ignore a stile on the left and a path ahead over a bridge and instead turn **right** along the side of the field, with the three oasts on Long Mill Lane visible ahead. On your left is the River Bourne, your companion for some distance yet. In the corner, exit to a road and turn **left**.



- 2 In 50m, turn **right** on Dux Lane. Just before the first house, misnamed *The Hollies*, turn **right** on a track which becomes a path beside the field. In 40m, at the corner keep straight ahead on a narrow but clear path across the centre of the field, heading towards the tall Wrotham Radio Mast in the far distance. **At the time of writing, the bean crop is heavily infested with docks.** At the far side, continue along the right-hand edge. Soon the path descends and becomes an enclosed path, leading down to a lane. Turn **right** on the lane, crossing the River Bourne. At the top of a rise, just before three-oast Bourne Farm, turn **left** onto a grassy footpath running along the left-hand side of a field. In the corner, keep left carefully down a narrow path and via steps to a lane. Cross the lane to a signpost opposite

and another path along the left-hand side of the next field. In 100m or so, the path veers **right** across the centre of the field. *At the time of writing, the barley crop is heavily infested with yellow thistles.* At the far side, a narrow path runs by garden fences and down steps to a road. Turn **left** on the road, immediately reaching *The Plough* at Basted.



This family-run freehouse offers several ales (St Austell, Larkins, Belhaven) and some pub favourite snacks, with a comfy fire in winter and sometimes a large dog. Basted (not to be confused with nearby Brasted) is only a hamlet but it is known through history for its mill which produced paper for nearly three centuries despite being burnt down in 1917. The paper was used to make postage stamps.

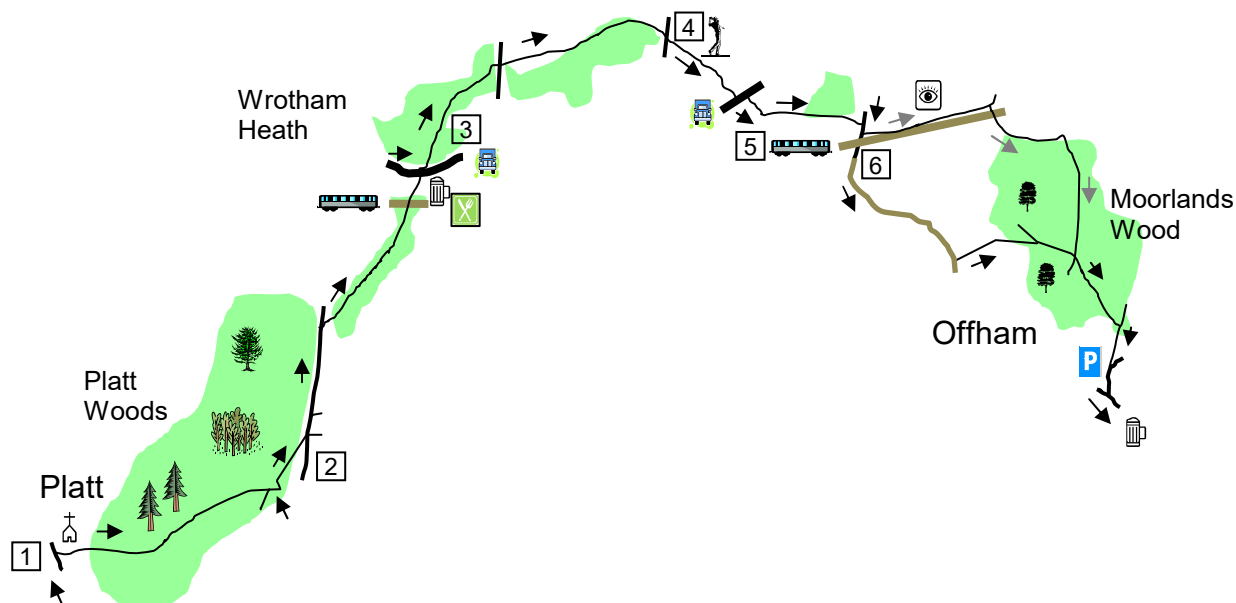
3 Continue on the lane passing a wellhead under an arch and going over the Bourne again. *This is the centre of the hamlet, restored by tasteful development. The mill stream and pond are still there and the old whiteboarded Grooms Cottage stands at the junction.* Just before the wall of the cottage garden, by a bridleway marker, turn **right** to go over the river and alongside wooden railings onto a wide woodland path. The path runs beside a long disused field on the right and fine woodland on the left. In 400m, ignore a stile on the right. The path curves left uphill, zigzags and runs straight with open grasslands and sparse trees on your left, woodland on your right. There is another double bend and soon you have a small house on your right. Shortly after, you reach a junction with a fenced path ahead leading to steps up to a road. Avoid the fenced path and instead turn **left** on a wide path that runs parallel to the road.

4 Go past metal gates on your left and walk another 90m looking out for a small markerpost and a gap in the hedge. *At the time of writing, the post is just a stick and only has one arrow pointing back.* Turn **right** through the gap, cross the road and take a bridleway on the other side, passing a metal barrier. This wide tarmac drive ends at a large open field. Keep straight ahead here, avoiding a farmer's path off left. The path runs along the right-hand side of the field with the houses of Platt visible ahead. In the first corner, keep straight on up a stony track to a residential road. Turn **left** on the road soon reaching Platt village.

The word "plat" means a "plot of land" and it was used especially to refer to the nut orchards that abounded here (one notable one being by the pub). The village crest features a bunch of cobnuts. Before the Church of St Mary the Virgin was built in 1846, Platt was just a hamlet of a few scattered cottages. The brickworks, main road and, most importantly, two public houses fuelled the expansion. Only the "Blue Anchor" (Greene King) now remains. This is a friendly and unpretentious pub with benches in the garden under trees and a separate dining area serving unsophisticated food of good quality. The interior of the church is striking with its blue and grey painted organ, doors and altar backing.



Leg 3: Platt to Offham (5 km=3 miles)



- 1** Turn **left** at the main road in the village and, after possibly visiting the village for refreshments, turn **right** up steps to the church. Pass to the **right** of the church and, just past the far corner of the church building, veer **right** to join a path that runs between the churchyard and a stone wall on the right. The path runs through the cemetery, through a wooden barrier and into beautiful Platt Woods. The path takes you up steps with a railing between areas known as Fox Bank and The Dell, to a junction by a small noticeboard with a map. Keep ahead here, still uphill, through an area of rhododendrons. About 200m into the woods, ignore a path on the right and keep left. The path levels out, passing tall cedars, oaks and birches on Nevill's Bank, soon with Potters Hole on the right. For a walker, this path is a joy to tread because of the springy smooth surface. In another 400m, you reach a junction with a bench on the left and the Wealdway's wide track joining from the right along a fence border and an island of trees. Following the bench and, slightly obscured by the tree island, you will see small wooden barrier marked with the "WW" symbol on a yellow arrow, taking you into a narrow enclosed path. Follow this path till it discharges you into a lane. Turn **left** on the lane, ignoring a footpath straight ahead.
- 2** Follow this quiet lane, ignoring another footpath on the right soon after and, after a total of 250m, just before the start of a wooden paling fence, veer **right** at a fingerpost with another "WW" symbol onto a wide track into woodland. You will be following the WW for over ½ km to the main road. *On your left soon is a garden antique centre.* Later you pass a footpath at a wooden gate on your right and go under the railway to reach the car park of a Chinese restaurant at Wrotham Heath which offers a promising Peking menu. Next to it is the *Royal Oak* and a *Beefeater*. The Esso filling station has a small shop. Cross the busy A20 using the road island and regain peaceful Mother Nature on the other side at a signed footpath into woods, next to a bus stop, still on the WW.
- 3** At first, the path is rather overgrown with bracken, but this soon clears. In 150m, at a post with yellow arrows, ignore the left fork and stay on the WW next to a fence on your right, amidst fine woodland. Follow the path to a road. Cross the road to an enclosed footpath opposite running between hedges. The path runs by a fence with small meadows on your left yielding



good views of the North Downs. It leads you down through a chain stile and up beside more pasture, then through a metal kissing gate beside a house. Go down steps to a lane and turn **right**, thus leaving the WW.

4

In just 30m, turn **left** at a signed footpath, over a plank bridge and through trees to a golf course. You need to cross dead straight over four fairways but fortunately the crossing is quick and quite pleasant because of the grass and ornamental trees. (But you need to be careful as some walkers go astray here. Your target is just to the left of the *Big Motoring World* on the A20 road.) Fairway 1: aim between two silver birches on the right and a Christmas-tree-shaped conifer on the left. Fairway 2: veer a fraction left and aim between two more Xmas-type conifers. Fairway 3: aim just to the left of an Xmas-type conifer. Fairway 4: aim just to the right of a large silver birch to find a narrow hidden path just 10m to the left of an electricity pole with a transformer. Exit cautiously, via a broken stile, to the main A20 road. **Caution! Immediate fast traffic.** Cross the road *very carefully*. Take a signed footpath, slightly to your left, leading to a real surprise.

5

You are in an arboretum of quite magnificent conifers, copper beeches and other trees that fringe a driveway. Cross the driveway and continue up the fenced path through the arboretum to the gate at the end. Go straight ahead over a patch of rough grass, passing two cypress trees on your left, to reach a pair of crumbling fence posts. Follow an enclosed footpath with a wire fence on your left, hollies and pasture on your right. Go over a stile and down a track to a lane. Turn **right** on the lane.

6

In just 20m, there is a bridge over the railway ahead. (In 2017, this route was changed because of a (fenced) compound with fierce dogs. If you wish, you can still take the old route as follows. Turn **left** on a footpath before the bridge, through a metal gate, down a meadow close to the railway. Go through a metal kissing gate and, 400m from the bridge, at a marker post, turn **right** under a railway arch. Go up the short end of a meadow on a narrow path and turn **left** along the long side. 180m from the corner, at a marker post, turn **right** into Moorlands Wood. In 350m, at a crossing path with a metal gate on the right, turn **left**.) Go straight ahead **over** the little bridge and follow the very quiet Aldon Lane. The lane curves left past *Aldon House* and other buildings of Aldon Manor, including three oasts, a converted granary and the *Apple House*. Continue, passing an apple orchard on your left, until in 250m the lane bends right. Go **left** here, beside a large wooden gate, on a new yellow-arrowed and fingerposted footpath leading into the apple orchard. (This route is new, as from winter 2018, when previously the path went through a barrier immediately before Barfield Farm.) The path cuts straight across the orchard, weaving amongst the trees, and finally leads straight into Moorlands Wood. In 50m, at a 3-way junction, keep **right**. In 250m or so, you reach a wide crossing path. Continue straight over. *These woods are decked with bluebells in late spring.* In 200m or so, you reach a crossing path by a red doggy bin. Turn **right** here. The path runs by a fence and gardens, through a wooden barrier to a residential road. Keep straight ahead to meet the main road next to the car park where the walk began.



For refreshments, the "Kings Arms" (Greene King), just along the road, is an unpretentious pub serving three ales and food, locally sourced. It began life as two cottages in the time of Elizabeth I and was owned by a saddlery and harness maker until 1680 when it was granted a licence.

Getting there

By car: If coming from the **London (North or East)** direction, take the M20 south and come out at junction 2; follow the A20 south signposted *Maidstone* through 3 roundabouts and continue from point **A** below. If coming from the **London (South or West)** direction, take the M25 east and M26 and come out at junction 2a. **A** Follow the A20 east signposted *Maidstone* through one roundabout and the traffic lights at the junction where it meets the A25; take the **next** turning **right**, the B2016 Seven Mile Lane signposted *Paddock Wood*, go under the railway and turn first **left** after 50m onto Teston Road; Offham is 1 mile=1.5km further. If coming from **Maidstone or the east**, take the M20 to junction 4. Take the A228 south signposted *West Malling*. Stay on the A228 for nearly 3 miles (5km) till at a small roundabout Offham is signposted **right** and reached in about 1½ miles=2½ km. The car park is on the **left** before a minor road junction just **before** the centre of the village.

By bus/train: bus 81 from West Malling station to Offham. Check the timetables.

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