



Claygate, Ashtead Common, Prince's Coverts

Distance: 10½ km=6½ miles

easy walking

Region: Surrey, London

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Map: Explorer 161 (London South) and 146 (Dorking)
but the map in this guide should be sufficient

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Woodland, commons, nature reserve

In Brief

This is one of the most unexpected and unusual walks on this site. It takes you through a succession of beautiful woodland paths with very little to mar the enjoyment. Three things make it unique:

- *Chessington World of Adventures* which you pass close by briefly (but mainly unseen).
- The distant traffic. It feels quite surreal knowing you're not far from the city trunk roads and yet, apart from two bridge crossings of the A3, not seeing any trace of "civilisation". In fact, the meadows and woodland here are as fine as anything you will find deep in the Sussex Weald.
- *Prince's Coverts*. This wild nature reserve is a well-kept secret gem: there are people who have lived in this area but don't know about it. Yet it is large and wide-ranging, and slap bang in the middle of the Surrey stockbroker belt; it will give you enjoyment over the years. Till recently (2014) you needed a key to get out of this secret place. There's more info in the text below. Do a web search and download the brochure!

Another gem along the way, Ashtead Common, will open your eyes. This is a wild and complex expanse of woods where you can easily lose yourself, by accident or design. Claygate too has some good stretches of woodland. Central to the walk is an excellent pub / restaurant, the *Star*, hugely popular with motorists, ideal for walkers (ring 01372-842416 for info).

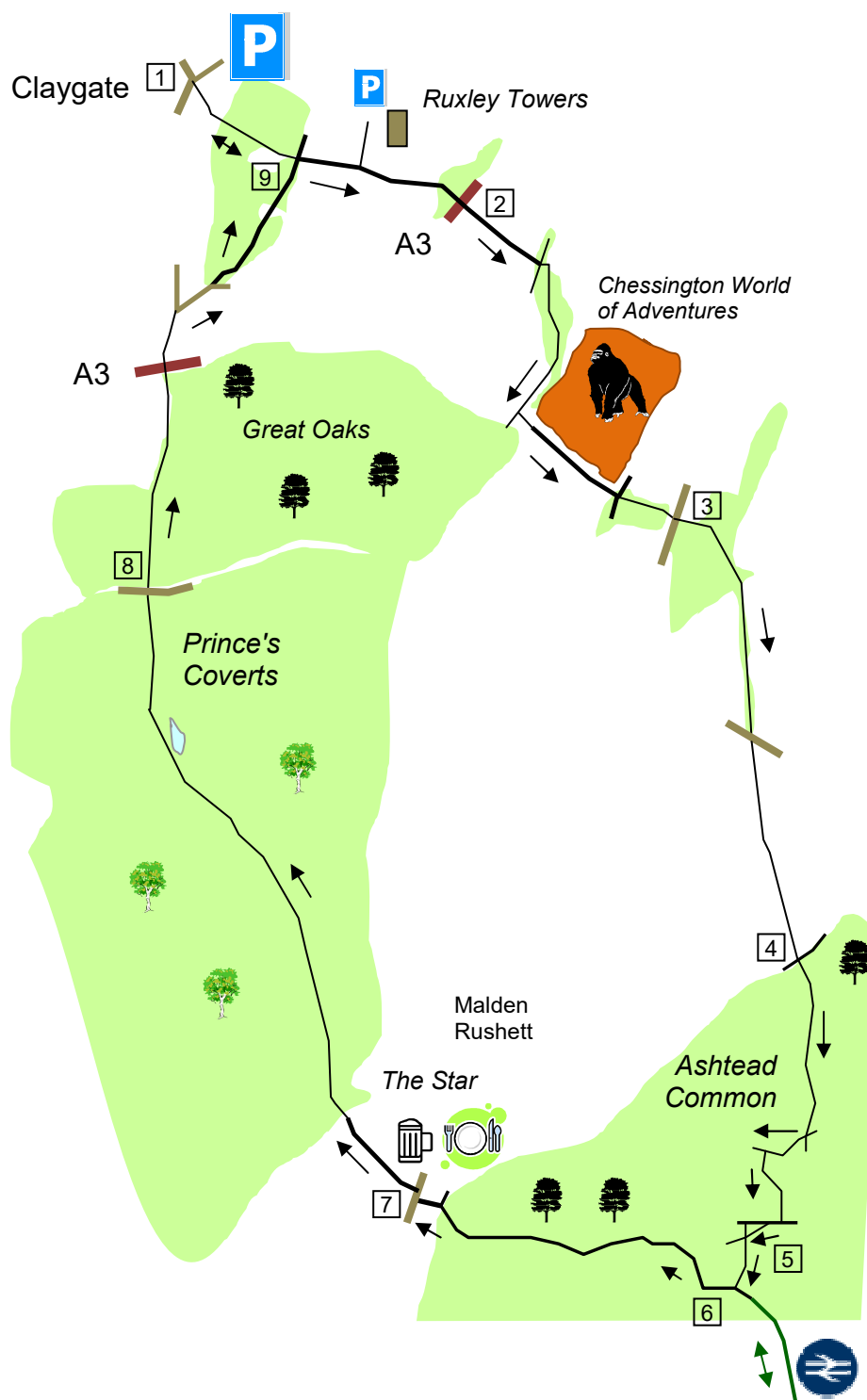


There are a few patches of nettles and brambles on this walk but there is one path with thick undergrowth (after the Leathehead Road), so shorts are a big problem in high summer. But this is a very good walk for summer and early autumn when strong sensible shoes or trainers are adequate, except after heavy rain. But you can still do this walk in the winter or wetter seasons provided that you are prepared for quite a bit of mud and moisture, especially on the bridleways and at periods throughout, when ankle-high

boots are essential. This walk is perfect for a dog with masses of open woods and only two crossings of the Leatherhead Road.

The walk begins in **Claygate, Surrey** where there is oodles of parking space. The researcher parked next to **Ruxley Towers** (the tall white tower) **postcode KT10 0HA**. For easier access to facilities in Claygate, the nominal start of this walk is the junction with The Causeway and Coverts Road, **postcode KT10 0JU**. You can also begin the walk at **Ashtead Railway Station** with a midday break in Claygate. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



If you are beginning the walk at **Ashtead Station**, skip to the section **Ashtead Station Approach**, near the end of this text.

In medieval times Claygate was a tiny village, well away from the main roads (as it still is), valued at only a ½ hide (not enough to support one household) and with woods “worth one hog”. The clay in its name which had bogged it down proved to be its fortune when brick manufacture produced a valuable product that went into, amongst other things, nearby Hampton Court Palace.

The sugar-iced fairytale castle of Ruxley Towers was built in the late 1800s by Henry, 5th Baron, Foley, for his wife. But the Ruxley Estate was once much larger with a hunting lodge used by Henry VIII. In the 1700s it was owned by England's richest man, William Beckford, plantation-owner, novelist, travel writer, politician, art critic and scandal-ridden bisexual.

If you parked near **Ruxley Towers**, go up a side road (also called Ruxley Ridge – you may have parked here) with Ruxley Towers about 50m away on your left. As a guide, this side road begins next to no. 16 Ruxley Ridge, known as *March Hare*. At the end of this short cul-de-sac, keep straight on along a path, through a metal barrier and turn **left** at a T-junction on a path; join the walk at point (a) below.

- 1 Starting at the junction of The Causeway and Coverts Road, take a gravel private road Fee Farm Road, also marked, by a sign on a lamppost, as a public footpath. At the end of this smart residential road, go through a barrier into woodland. Continue along the left-hand side of a grassy open space and continue to a wooden barrier, a small parking area and a crossing track. Go straight over the track onto a rather narrow bridleway, past a metal post. In 180m, ignore a path on your left. (a) In another 300m, your path passes an entrance to Barwell Honey Farm and goes over the A3 road by a wide bridge. You are now in part of Greater London.
- 2 At the other side, keep ahead on a straight path through a fine rural landscape. *In wet conditions the worst of the mud is here.* At a junction of paths go straight over through a kissing-gate into a sloping meadow and immediately turn **right** along a wide grassy strip. Your path winds its way through trees and, in about 300m, goes through a wooden swing-gate to follow a narrow path between fences. *Ruxley Towers is visible again and, much further west, to its left, the neo-classical façade of Claremont House (now occupied by the Fan Court School).* At a signpost, turn **left** over an avoidable stile. (The path straight ahead leads to a part of Prince's Coverts now a “Go Ape” centre for adventurous kids.) This path quickly leads to a driveway by the overflow car park for *Chessington World of Adventures*. Turn **left** on it, beside the theme park on your left and passing a camping village and a peak-time side entrance.

Chessington began as a zoo in 1931 on the grounds of what had been a historic mansion, the “Burnt Stub”, going back to 1348, later a royalist stronghold destroyed by Cromwell's troops. The zoo is still a major part of the resort with gorillas, Sumatran tigers, a sea life centre and much else. The transformation to theme park took place in 1987 with white knuckle rides, shows and adventure areas.

Continue to the end of the track and here go straight ahead past a redundant stile on a grassy path between trees. A redundant stile takes you to the Leatherhead Road.

- 3 Cross the road carefully, using a traffic island, and take a narrow bridleway directly opposite into trees by a fingerpost. Your path curves right through thick woodland, in what may be dense undergrowth, and goes over a bridge across a stream. The wood becomes a woodland strip between distant

fields. Follow this pleasant straight oak-fringed path for ½ km and, at a junction of farm tracks, keep straight ahead to cross Rushett Lane, 20m to the left. After a metal gate, follow a wide path ahead across the field. At the other side, go through a gap, veer a fraction right and continue up the right-hand side of the next field, heading for two fingerposts, keeping straight on when you reach them. Your path now runs between two fields and, at the other side, a metal gate near a white coal post takes you into Ashtead Common and back into Surrey.

Ashtead Common is a great area (200 ha) of undulating woodland, much used by horse riders, a site of special scientific interest and a nature reserve. It is run by the City of London Corporation, as you see from those large sign boards.

4 There are shorter and easier routes across the Common, but it would be a shame to miss the chance to sample some of this natural wonder. Warning: you need to concentrate more during the next two sections! Avoid a wide path on your right (which would take you direct to Epsom Gap if you are in a hurry) and go straight ahead into the centre of the Common. In 150m, at a marker post, avoid a footpath that forks left and stay on the main wide grassy path. In another 250m, you pass on your right the Flag Pond and a convenient bench seat. Keep following the main winding path, avoiding minor side paths until, after 200m, you come to a diagonal crossing path with a one-bar wooden barrier on both sides. Fork **right** here past the barrier. The path curves right and right again to reach a marker post. Just before the marker post, turn **left** on a much narrower path through a fine area of silver birch. After 200m, fork **right** in front of an oak tree and keep right again between two wooden posts, immediately reaching a T-junction with a very wide path. Turn **right** on this wide horse path.

5 In only 15m fork **left** on a much narrower path, keeping the big oak trees just to your left. (Nov 2016: Care! the margins have been mowed and some walkers missed this fork.) In 100m, you reach a clearing in the woods by a rather rotten bench seat. Just 2m after the bench, turn **left** on a narrow crossing path. This path immediately takes a dark, narrow course between dense young oaks and thorn bushes. Avoid several minor junctions on both sides and stay on this fairly straight path for another 100m where you come to a T-junction with a very wide horse path. If you are ending the walk at Ashtead Station, skip to near the end of this text and do the “End” section of the **Ashtead Station Approach**, otherwise... Turn **right** on this path.

6 Follow this wide snaking ride for 1 km [navigating round the wetter patches in winter]. As you go, the surface gradually becomes semi-tarmac and the path finally swings right to meet a shed and a noticeboard. Veer **left** on a gravel track, through a metal barrier and out to the main Leatherhead Road. Turn **right** on the road, cross it carefully using the traffic island and, after 30m, turn **left** on a hard track marked *Crown Estate, Access to d’Abernon Chase, leading to Prince’s Coverts*. First, however, you may wish to take some refreshment at the *Star Inn*, just beyond.

*The Star Inn stands back from the noisy road and is surprisingly snug with a small but attractive garden. As part of a chain, it serves a comprehensive range of dishes, some with an oriental twist. It’s worth noting that they also serve tea and coffee. Best of all, the Star Inn is open (and serves food) **all day**.*



- 7 Follow the track, soon going past the untidy settlement known as World's End on your left. The path rises to meet a large wooden gate with two houses of d'Abernon Chase visible on your left. Keep straight ahead to go through a large metal kissing-gate gate (sometimes skipping a puddle, depending on the season) beside a metal barrier with a sign indicating that you have entered Prince's Coverts.

A "covert" is a thick area of undergrowth where animals can hide. Prince's Coverts are named after Prince Leopold of the Belgians who lived in Claremont before he became king in 1831. This area, previously known as Stoke Common, was his shooting patch. It later passed to Queen Victoria and thence to the Crown Estate. Most of Prince's Coverts is open to the public. However, it has always been rather secretive. Pedestrian visitors can enter through Prince's Gate in Oxshott, or at the gate you entered, or from the exclusive closed communities that border the east side of Oxshott village. The gate at Fair Oak Lane, your exit, used to be padlocked until 2014 so that you needed to duck through it or apply for a key from the Crown Estate. (Should there be any queries, you can ring them on 01753 860222.) The area known as Great Oaks north of Fair Oak Lane is accessible on public footpaths.

There are various routes through Prince's Coverts and exploring it is hugely rewarding. The route taken here is the most straightforward. Keep straight ahead on the main surfaced path and stay on it all the way to the other side. After about 1 km you pass the Upper Gravel Pond on your right. On your left, a short distance away, is Jessops Well, a little 18th-century brick spa house. You pass a picnic area on your right and a grove of oaks where there is a waymarked walker's route if you want to spend more time here. Eventually you meet a junction with a track coming from the left. Continue ahead here on a straight path through an avenue of trees. At the end is a barrier and a wooden gate (now unlocked). You pass *Highgate Cottages* and reach Fair Oak Lane.

- 8 Cross straight over the road into another part of Prince's Coverts known as Great Oaks. Follow this path, beside a ditch, through the dense forest. At a 3-way fingerpost, avoid the left turn and keep straight ahead. Soon the path rises to go over a wide bridge across the A3 trunk road. Continue on a track to a barrier into a residential road at a bend. Turn **right** immediately on Holroyd Road. Where, in 150m, the road curves right, leave it by keeping straight on along a path across the Common. Avoid paths forking left and stay on the main path not far from houses on your right. In nearly 300m you pass the entrances to two large houses. In another 150m you reach a junction of paths which may be familiar from your outward journey.
- 9 If you began the walk near Ruxley Towers (or simply want to view it), turn **right** on a narrow bridleway, past a metal post and, in 180m, turn **left** on a path back to the start. Otherwise... Turn **left** through a wooden barrier and follow a path along the right-hand side of a grassy space popular with families and dog walkers. After more trees and a wooden barrier, keep ahead on Fee Farm Road leading to the junction where the walk began.



For final refreshments, there are the "Hare and Hounds" and the "Greek Vine" restaurant straight ahead in 300m on Church Road.

Ashtead Station Approach

Follow these directions if you begin and/or end the walk at Ashtead Railway Station.

Start: Come out of the station on the north side (away from the main building). Cross Woodfield Road onto the large square green, passing a barrier, and follow a wide path along the right-hand perimeter. In 250m your path goes over a bridge and enters the Common. There are four possible wide paths ahead. Ignore the one with the barrier on your left but take the **second** path from the **left**, almost straight on, a wide sandy horse ride. (If this path is muddy, you can take a narrow drier parallel path on your left after 60m, but when the path curves left you need to turn right shortly to rejoin the original wide path.) After ½ km, your path is joined by the main walk. Continue now from section 6.

End: Turn **left** on the wide horse ride and follow it for ½ km. Cross a stone bridge and continue along the left-hand side of the square green to reach the station.

Getting there

By car: Claygate is reached from the A3 road near Esher. If coming from the London area, the easiest way is to go under the Hook underpass (the *Chessington, Dorking* turn-off) and then immediately fork **left** onto the A309, signposted *Staines, Esher*. Immediately after crossing over the A3, turn **left** signposted *Claygate*. In ½ mile, keep **right** at a T-junction. In ⅔ mile, as you enter the town, fork **left** on Stevens Lane. In ½ mile, where Stevens Lane reaches a junction by a little white house, Ruxley Towers is on your **left** whilst, by turning sharp **right** with the major road on Common Road / Cornwall Ave, you reach a junction with The Causeway.

If coming from the south-west on the A3, come off at the exit for Esher, turn **left** as for *Esher* and, in 1 mile, at traffic lights, turn **right** on Milbourne Lane. Follow this road past the *Swan Inn* and under the railway. At every junction and mini-roundabout keep to the major road or go straight on. After 1½ miles in total, you are in Coverts Road and you reach the junction with The Causeway.

By bus/train: Claygate Station is 1 km from the walk. Turn **right** at the end of The Parade onto Hare Lane. Follow Hare Lane as it bends left and then right, becoming the High Street and Church Road, leading to the junction at the start of the walk.

Train to Chessington South on the Waterloo main line (SW Trains).

Bus 465 to the Chessington theme park and *The Star* inn from Surbiton Station, including Sundays.

Ashtead station is 700m from the walk. See the **Ashtead Station Approach** in this text.

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