



Merstham and St Margaret's Well

Distance: 11 km=7 miles

easy walking

Region: Surrey

Date written: 8-feb-2016

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Last update: 29-apr-2018

Refreshments: Mugswell, Merstham

Map: Explorer 146 (Dorking) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Green meadows, views, pub, woodland, bluebells

In Brief

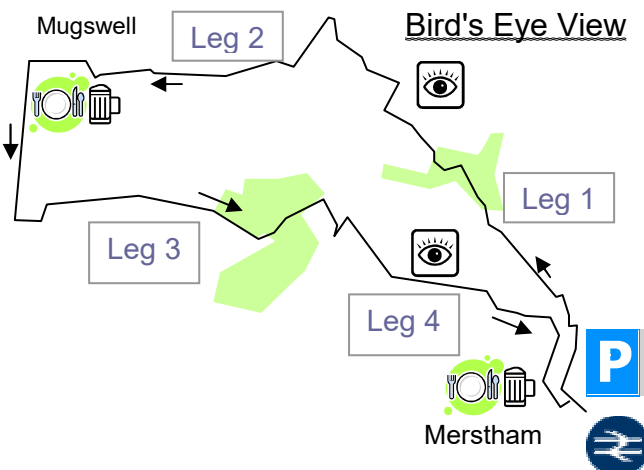
This walk is a lovely saunter across the open fields, pastures and woodlands of Surrey, just north of Reigate. Once away from the busy historic town of Merstham, you are suddenly in extremely peaceful country, with few built-up areas and views for miles around. The meadows are pleasant and mainly grassy so you do not have to cross a lot of ploughed-up fields. There was no livestock at all when the walk was planned.

The small town of Merstham is at the start and finish of the walk, with excellent connections by train and good parking, as well as some features of great interest. At the centre of the walk is an excellent pub/restaurant, which people come to from some distance away. (To book or enquire at the *Well House Inn*, ring 01737-830640.)



?? In summer some patches of brambles and nettles grow high, making shorts inadvisable. In winter, when the walk was planned, there were some muddy sections along the narrow paths near Mugswell, and one claggy field, making boots necessary, but it did not spoil the walk in any way. Stiles generally have a wide gap, making this walk fine with a dog.

The walk begins at **Merstham Station**, or in the town (postcode **RH1 3EA**). All-day parking in the huge station car park on Sunday costs only £2 (as at 2016) and there is also free parking. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk

Merstham's name is Anglosaxon meaning "settlement by the marsh" and the marsh-dwellers here were a highly independent race known as the "Mearsoeti". The Mearsoeti controlled all comings and goings, built one of the first churches in the land and saw off the invading Danes who caroused across southern England pursued by the ultimately triumphant Edward the Elder, son of King Alfred. After centuries of obscurity, Merstham gained new fame for quarrying and tunnelling. The quarries (long since worked out) supplied grey-green limestone for Windsor Castle and the like and later the stone was shipped on the first public horse-drawn railway (years before Stockton-Darlington) to Croydon. A section of the rails is still on view. The Merstham Tunnel was built in the late 1830s, over a mile long, to carry the London & Brighton Railway. It was illuminated by gas lamps to reassure the travelling public (who sat in partially open cars) but the draught from the trains blew them out.

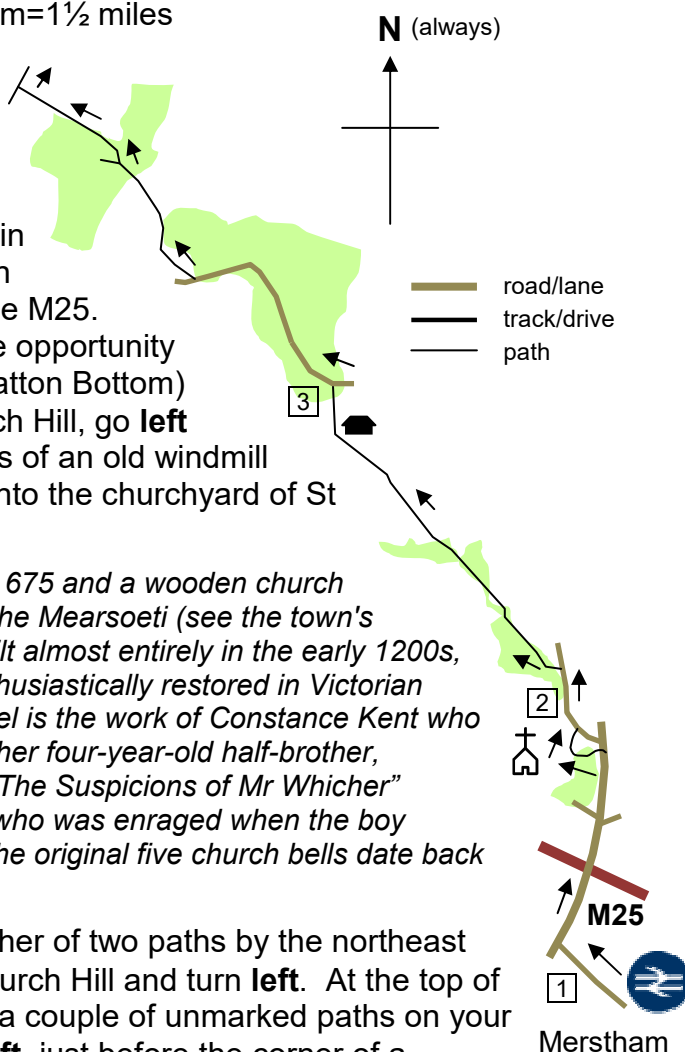
Leg 1: Merstham to Long Valley 2½ km=1½ miles

- 1** Coming out of the Merstham Station building, turn **right**, passing the car park, and follow a minor road till you reach the main road, opposite the *Railway Arms* pub. Turn **right** on the main road, which offers parking spaces on both sides, soon going across a bridge over the M25.

Cross carefully to the other side when the opportunity arises. Avoid the first road on the left (Gatton Bottom) and, just before the next side road, Church Hill, go **left** through a lichgate (made from the timbers of an old windmill pulled down when the railway was built) into the churchyard of St Katharine's.

The parish was listed as early as the year 675 and a wooden church was built here just after the Conquest by the Mearsoeti (see the town's history above). The stone church was built almost entirely in the early 1200s, in the reign of Henry III, but rather too enthusiastically restored in Victorian times. The mosaic floor in the north chapel is the work of Constance Kent who confessed in 1865 to the grisly murder of her four-year-old half-brother, although Kate Summerscale in her book "The Suspicions of Mr Whicher" proclaims the real culprit to be her father who was enraged when the boy interrupted him tugging the nursemaid. The original five church bells date back to 1483, now augmented to eight.

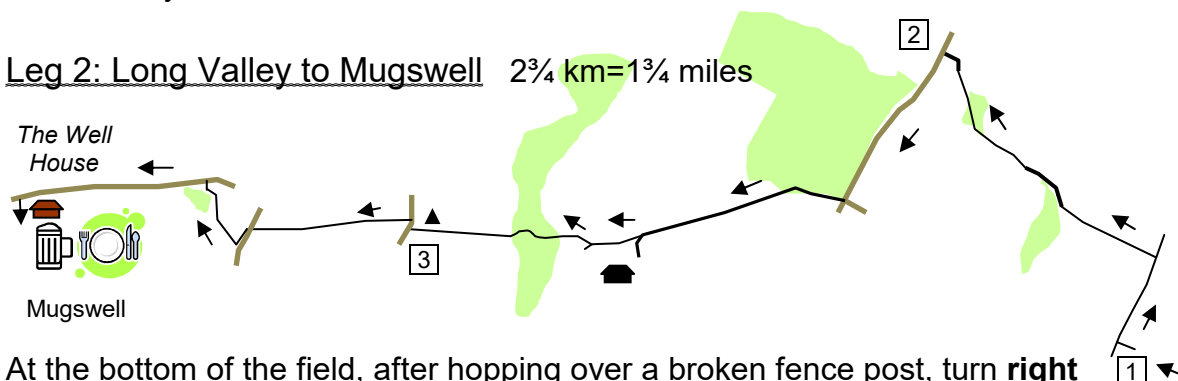
- 2** After viewing this ancient church, take either of two paths by the northeast corner under yews leading back up to Church Hill and turn **left**. At the top of a rise, before the "private" section, avoid a couple of unmarked paths on your left but take the signed footpath on the **left**, just before the corner of a fence. Follow the path beside the fence and, on reaching a meadow, keep ahead along the right-hand edge under trees. As the meadow curves away to your left, the path continues straight on beside a wire fence and over an (avoidable) stile into a crop field. Go straight across the field, a fraction left, heading for a marker post and stile in the low hedge on the far side, half-way between two pairs of trees. In 2016 the field was overplanted with crops and the stile broken. In 2018 it was deeply ploughed over. In such cases, go **left** and **right** round two corners of the field and through a large gap into the next field, keeping a large sloping field on your left. Head for the left-hand corner of a small house and garden which has a pergola, a summer house, a little clock and a swimming pool. Keep to the edge of the field with the garden



on your right and go out through a large metal gate (better than the stile) and along a short track to a tarmac lane.

- 3 Turn **left** uphill. The lane bends left and flattens out a bit. Immediately beside the entrance to *Woodfield Place*, go over a stile on your **right**. (*) Remove and replace the chain and keep ahead along the right-hand side of a small meadow. Follow the path through trees to a stile. *The bluebell wood on your right belongs to the same house*. Cross a field to another stile, go through trees and cross a wide farm track. Immediately ignore a tempting grassy left fork (a horse circuit) and stay on the rough track. It curves round to a metal gate, or swing-gate, into a field with open views ahead. Immediately turn **left** down the left-hand side of the field.

Leg 2: Long Valley to Mugswell 2¾ km=1¾ miles

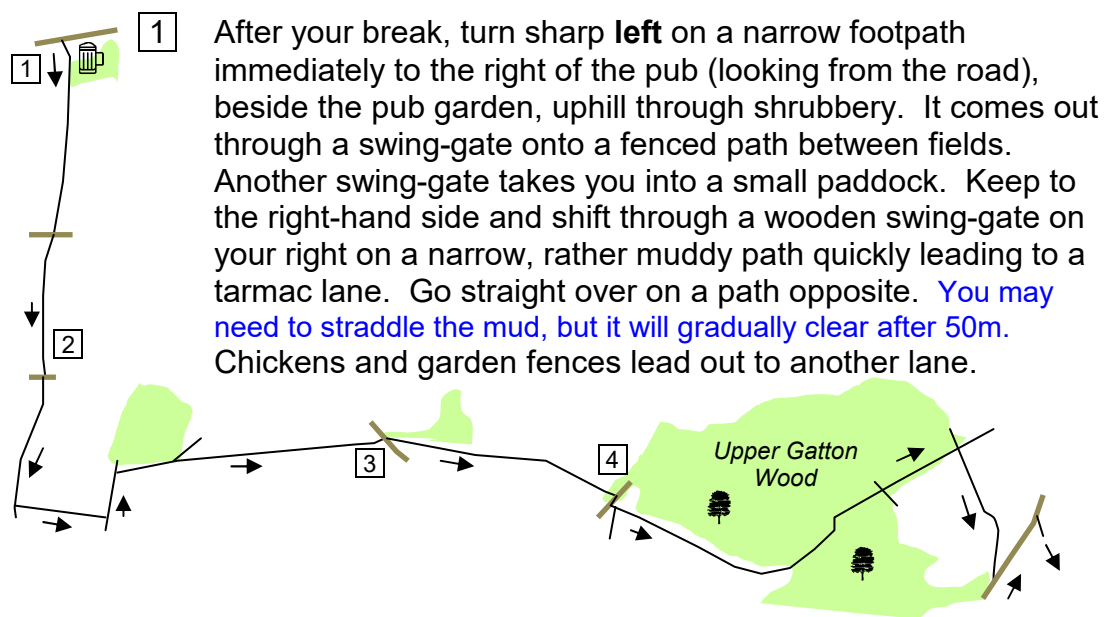


- 1 At the bottom of the field, after hopping over a broken fence post, turn **right** on a pleasant straight level valley path. At the first corner, by a fingerpost, turn **left** between fields. At the top, your path veers right on a stony trackway. As you near a farmstead, keep straight on, as directed, over a wooden barrier. This nice straight path leads out to a driveway with a motley collection of cottages, then out to a road.
- 2 Turn **left** on the road, using the footway, passing some flint cottages. Tickners Wood on your right has no usable paths and you need to stay on the road for another 200m. At a junction opposite Markledge Lane, turn **right** on a drive for *Reeves Rest*. This smart drive elbows left and is embellished by some noble tall conifers. Where the main driveway goes left towards the house, keep straight on. As you approach a bungalow and some garages, go **right** through a small wooden gate into a field. *The field may be muddy but your encounter with it will be short*. Turn **left** in the field and head for a small wood, staying on the left but cutting the left-hand corner of the field. In about 70m you will find a stile on your **left**. Go over the stile into woodland which, in late spring is ablaze with bluebells. Be careful not to stray from the path which curves left, down a bank, meeting another path from the left, through a wooden swing-gate into a splendid grassy meadow. Follow a path straight across the centre. At the other side, go through a wooden swing-gate and straight ahead to a tarmac lane.

- 3 Turn **right** on the lane and immediately **left** before a bungalow, up steps on a narrow path. This path takes you over two stiles and straight on along the top of a large meadow with excellent views. As you come over the crest, drop down gradually to your right to go over a stile in the hedge, leading down to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane and immediately fork **right** through a wooden gate on a shingle track. In only 20m, go **right** over a stile (*possibly obscured by a horsebox and unmarked*) into a sloping meadow and cross it diagonally right to head for the far left-hand corner of the field, to the right-hand side of a small beechwood. Here, go **left** over a stile and **right** through a metal gate to a road. Turn **left** on the road, quickly leading to the *Well House Inn* in Mugswell.

St Margaret's Well, in the pub garden, is believed to be the original well, 42m deep and still used today for assessing the water table. The small village, called Mag's Well, hence "Mugswell", is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. The Well House Inn has a resident ghost called Harry the Monk who tried to evade Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and perished in a secret tunnel. The Well House was originally just a group of cottages with the inn higher up in the village. It now serves a good collection of ales, with Surrey Hills and two guests. Regulars give it high marks for food which can be enjoyed on the patio or in the sloping rose garden.

Leg 3: Mugswell to Lodge Farm 3½ km=2¼ miles



1 After your break, turn sharp **left** on a narrow footpath immediately to the right of the pub (looking from the road), beside the pub garden, uphill through shrubbery. It comes out through a swing-gate onto a fenced path between fields. Another swing-gate takes you into a small paddock. Keep to the right-hand side and shift through a wooden swing-gate on your right on a narrow, rather muddy path quickly leading to a tarmac lane. Go straight over on a path opposite. **You may need to straddle the mud, but it will gradually clear after 50m.** Chickens and garden fences lead out to another lane.

- 2** Cross the lane, taking the path a fraction to your left, then over a stile into a small pasture. Go over a stile and keep straight on along the right-hand side of a large crop field. *The aerials on Reigate Hill can be seen straight ahead.* At the end of the first field, avoid the stile and metal gate in front of you and instead turn immediately **left** along the right-hand edge of the same field. At the bottom turn **left** again, along the *third* side of the same field. In only 70m, at a 3-way fingerpost, turn **right** up the left-hand side of a crop field. As the wood on your left ends, avoid a path that forks left at a fingerpost and keep straight on. A wooden swing-gate, shortly a stile and a small wooden gate lead you out, beside a flint cottage, to a tarmac lane.
- 3** Cross the lane, over a stile, on a footpath opposite and walk along the left-hand side of a large green meadow. As you go down a dip and up again, veer off right, passing just to the **right** of two scrawny oaks. Head for a stile by the road in the treeline ahead which gets clearer as you approach. Go over the stile to a road.
- 4** Cross the road, turning **right** and immediately **left** on a signposted footpath by the entrance to *Upper Gatton Park*. Your path shifts right over a stile. Continue along the open parkland for 350m, staying within a stone's throw of the boundary fence and woodland on your left. You pass near the remains of a small square brick shelter. Shortly after this, your route veers left and takes you over a stile, near another brick shelter, into Upper Gatton Wood. Follow the path through the wood, spectacular for its bluebells in late spring. The path zigzags left-right past a marker post and takes you out of the wood via a stile. Continue ahead along the left-hand side of a large meadow.



After 150m, you will see on your left a small metal gate and a 4-way fingerpost. Turn **right** here across the meadow (*don't miss this turn!*). Go round a substantial new property (in progress of construction, 2018) exiting finally to a road. Turn **left** on the road, quickly reaching the entrance, to the new building your left. Locals and visitors remember this as site of Fanny's Farm Shop in days of yore.

*Fanny's Farm Shop used to be the most colourful place on the walk, an eccentric collection of plants, crafts, farm produce, jams and relishes, gardening books, etc. It had a teahouse and was used as a wedding venue. It had a vineyard and a nursery, obviously the creation of one energetic personality. But Fanny's Farm Shop **was** Fanny. In the years before her death in 2015, she and her daughter agreed that it should be closed and sold.*

Leg 4: Lodge Farm to Merstham 2¼ km=1½ miles

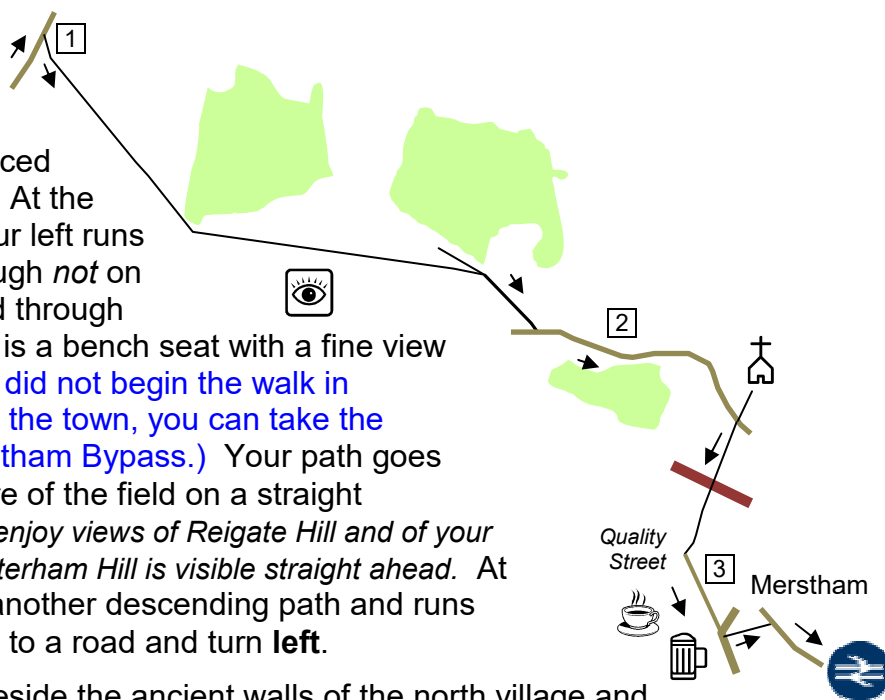
1

Turn **right** opposite Lodge Farm onto a signed footpath, up a bank, **right** and **left** on a grassy fenced path beside a large meadow. At the top, the woodland path on your left runs through Furzefield Shaw, though *not* on your route. Go straight ahead through a gap into a field where there is a bench seat with a fine view of the M25 motorway. (If you did not begin the walk in Merstham and prefer to avoid the town, you can take the section below called the Merstham Bypass.) Your path goes diagonally **left** down the centre of the field on a straight descending course. You can enjoy views of Reigate Hill and of your next destination, Merstham. Caterham Hill is visible straight ahead. At the far edge, your path joins another descending path and runs down to join a drive. Follow it to a road and turn **left**.

2

Very soon, you are walking beside the ancient walls of the north village and there is an intermittent footway. After a tree-lined section, on your left is the knoll on which St Katharine's church stands and soon there are steps up to the church, in case you missed the chance to visit it before. Opposite the church steps, turn **right** on a tarmac footpath [2016: closed 12sep-23sep for "inspection" – return over main bridge but don't miss Quality Street!], signed as part of the North Downs Way. This path runs between a pond a small sheep meadow, then over the M25 motorway, a time-warp experience. The path ends at the bottom of Quality Street, well-named for its stylish houses, some dating back to the 1500s.

This was once part of Merstham High Street. It was renamed after the J M Barrie play of the same name¹ which had scored such a hit on the London stage in 1902 (before Peter Pan) thanks to the celebrated theatrical couple Seymour Hicks and Ellaline Terriss who lived here at the end of this street.



¹ Like many other of Barrie's plays, such as *Peter Pan* and the *Admirable Crichton*, *Quality Street* shows a person transformed into someone totally different, as a startling comment on social manners.

- 3** Turn **left**, away from the stone pillars of Merstham House, to reach the main road. Opposite is *The Feathers* inn, a worthy stopping place offering good vittles and ales. Cross the road to a passage just on the right of the pub, follow it through the car park and turn **right** on a minor road leading back to the station where the walk began.



Merstham Bypass 1½ km=1 mile

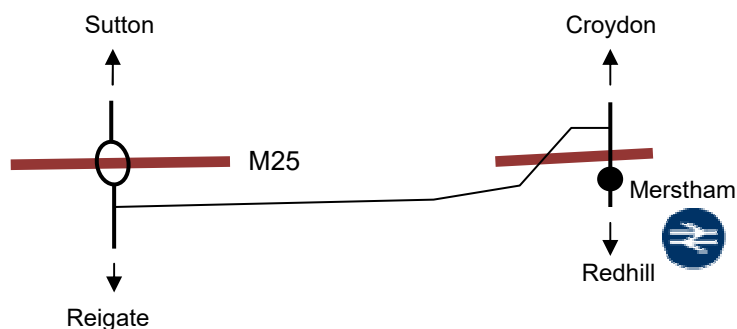
Follow this optional route if you want to avoid Merstham town.

Don't descend the field but turn **left** along the edge, with the wood on your left. In 300m, you notice a path going down the field on your right. Go **left** here through a swing-gate, following the yellow arrow. Keep straight ahead on a grassy path, over a crossing path, to a swing-gate into a meadow. Go along the left-hand side, through a swing-gate and **left**, as directed, on a wide grassy path. Before some farm sheds, go **right** through a swing-gate and along the left-hand side of a pasture. In the corner, go through a swing-gate, left and then right on a grassy track coming from Boors Green Farm. Exit through a small wooden gate to a tarmac lane. Turn **right** on the lane for 150m and go **left** over a stile next to *Woodfield Place*.

Now re-join the main walk at Leg 1 section **3** at the point marked (*).

Getting there

By car: Merstham cannot be reached directly from the M25 or M23. You can reach it via the A23 from Croydon (fork **right** for *Redhill*). Or, if you are coming from the M25, come off at the **Reigate** exit. At the big roundabout, follow the signs for Reigate but in 300 yds, fork **left** as for *Merstham*. The road, Gatton Bottom, goes under the M25 and reaches the A23 road (London Road North). Turn **right** for the town.



Park in the station car park, if Sunday, when it is cheap. There are other road-side spaces in town, including on the main road, above the M25 (look out for any new restrictions). It is also possible to park at the end of Quality Street, by the wall (but don't touch the wall!). As a last resort, go down Rockshaw Road, crossing both railway bridges, postcode **RH1 3BZ**, where there is oodles of space. Alternatively, park anywhere along the route.

By train or bus: frequent trains daily on the Victoria-Croydon-Redhill line; or Bus 405 from various locations.

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