



Pirbright

Distance: 5½ km=3½ miles

easy walking

Region: Surrey

Date written: 28-nov-2021

Author: Botafuego

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Refreshments: Pirbright

Map: Explorer 145 (Guildford) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Village, pubs, church, woodland, heath, war cemetery, moorland

In Brief

This is a short but adventurous walk for any season with all-year-round colour from the abundant heath and pine trees. It includes several surprises, such as the resting place of a famous explorer and the largest cemetery in the UK.



Pirbright is blest with four superlative pub/restaurants, two of which are on the Green close to the walk. In keeping with the prosperous locality, these are quality inns with prices to match. To book the *Cricketers*, ring 01483-473190; for the *White Hart*, it's 01483-799715.



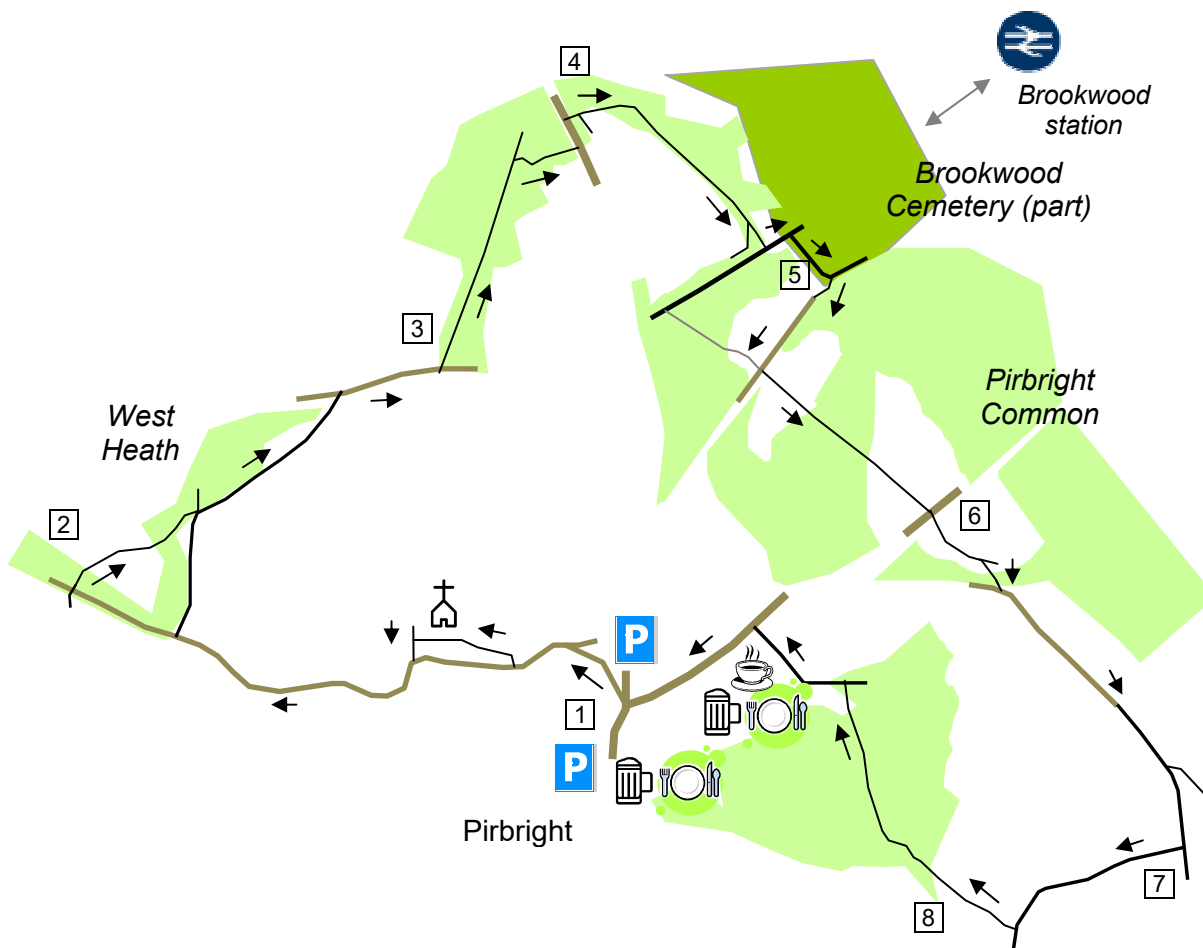
There is very little undergrowth on this walk which is entirely on good clear paths, so any clothing should be fine. Boots are highly recommended because of several marshy sections. This walk is not suitable for your dog.



The walk begins by the Green in the village of **Pirbright, Surrey**, postcode **GU24 0LP**, www.w3w.co/pans.rocket.party. There is a parking strip near the *White Hart* and room to park around the Green. You can also come by train, from Brookwood Station, starting the walk with a stroll through the Cemetery. (This is not described in detail in this text but it is a simple matter of turning **right** along the winding Pine Avenue aiming for the round white Memorial referred to at the end of Section [5](#).) For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Pirbright was called "Pirifright" in the 1200s which seems to come from pear trees and woodland (the "f" changed to "b"). The Basingstoke Canal, as visited on two walks in the Hampshire section of this site, runs just north of the village. Pirbright's railway station is actually Brookwood, which also leads onto the huge cemetery, visited on this walk. This quiet village has other military connections with the training grounds north of the railway. The Pirbright Institute does research into diseases in farm animals.



- 1 Starting at the corner of the Green in Pirbright, on the other side of the road from the *White Hart*, take a tarmac lane that runs along the side of the Green, signed to the church. Keep left on Church Lane, soon passing the cemetery on your right. One tall granite stone stands over the grave of Henry Morton Stanley. (For a closer look at the grave and the church, you could enter the churchyard through a wooden gate and proceed on a path to the church, exiting through the lichgate or turning left on a footpath at the far end.)

Henry Morton Stanley had a most extraordinary life. Born in Wales of unknown parentage, he took his surname from a trader in New Orleans who offered the boy drifter a job. He fought in the Civil War on the side of the Confederates. As a journalist, he sent back accounts of wars in Ethiopia and Spain. He is best known for finding missionary-physician David Livingstone in 1871 in present-day Tanzania and for the famous line "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?". He undertook the first trans-Africa expedition and founded the Congo Free State. Back in England, he married, became a Liberal Unionist MP and settled in Pirbright.

Pirbright Church of St Michael and All Angels dates back at least 800 years. It has a lively history. In the 1300s the chaplain had a fatal brawl with a local man and had to be pardoned by King Edward III. In 1617 the curate noticed that the church was only half full, so he ordered a very long psalm to be sung and meanwhile left the building to fish the wayward parishioners out of the ale houses. Pirbright was dirt poor and in the 1700s the building was unusable. Luckily King George III happened to be passing through the village when his carriage overturned. He was so grateful for the help and hospitality of the villagers that he organised a full repair job (via a petition on view inside). Also inside is a memorial to Ross Mangles, the first civilian to receive the Victoria Cross.

Stay on the tarmac lane, avoiding all footpaths on your left. Just after *The Old Schoolhouse*, ignore a footpath on your right along West Heath (which misses the wilder parts of the heath) and continue on the lane for 100m or so where you meet a crossing bridleway with *West Hall Farm* on your left. Turn **right** here.

- 2 Your path takes you through a wooden gate and for 250m across this gorsey West Heath. As you approach houses, keep straight ahead through a similar wooden gate. Avoid a left-forking footpath and keep to the track ahead, close to houses on your right. [On your left are a seat and some little swings, best left to the children. The pasture on the right shortly is used by baby alpacas when they appear after their mother's 11-month gestation.](#) The track ends at a road, School Lane.
- 3 Turn **right** on the road, using the footway. In 150m, just after *Elm Bank*, turn **left** on a signed footpath. The path runs fairly straight through hollies and hazels, then under tall oak trees. As you go, ignore a marker post with yellow arrows near a children's adventure playground. Your next turn is 350m from the start of this path: look to your right for a post with a lot of yellow arrows (**six** at the time of writing). *Don't miss this important marker!* Turn **right** here on a woodland path, which soon curves a fraction left and runs beside a garden fence on your right. You come out to the main road, Dawney Hill. Turn **left** using the footway for just 50m and cross the road to a small parking area next to a bus stop.
- 4 Go through a wooden swing-gate onto the radiant heath which is Pirbright Common. Immediately avoid a path on your right and keep straight ahead into the depths of the Common, on a path with birch trees on your left and gorse on your right. Your path curves right and you shortly catch a glimpse of war graves on your left. Keep straight ahead past some low huts, entering a band of pine trees and coming out through a small swing-gate beside a large wooden gate, onto a driveway lined with tall pines. Turn **left** on the drive to go through the pillared gates, or a metal swing-gate, into Brookwood Cemetery. Your route is immediately **right**, with the beautiful circular Brookwood Memorial on your left. But, every visitor will want to spend more time walking around this wonderful place. [As far can be seen, Brookwood Cemetery is open daily from 8am to 4.45pm. In the unlikely case that you find all the gates closed, turn right on the drive and, in 200m, turn left on a crossing footpath; this path runs through woodland, finally zigzagging through houses and coming out to the residential road marked with a "*" in the next section.](#)

Brookwood Cemetery is the largest in the UK. It was built in 1850 to solve a crisis of London's older cemeteries being overfull. A dedicated railway was built with a terminus in Waterloo. Travellers would buy a Coffin Ticket and trains had separate compartments to make sure that corpses did not mix with others

of a different social class or denomination. The Cemetery has several sections, dedicated to groups such as actors or others in the same occupation. The big Southeast section is the Anglican cemetery whilst the opposite part was the "Nonconformist" section. There are still acres of wild woodland available for burials long into the future.

Freddie Mercury, who had a Zoroastrian funeral in West London, is rumoured to have had his ashes placed in Brookwood. There are many more certain occupiers, from Edward the Martyr (978) to architect Zaha Hadid (2016), too many to mention.

The Military Cemetery which you see on this walk contains over 5,000 burials from both World Wars, mainly Commonwealth (e.g. Canadian) but also American and even some Germans. The beautiful Brookwood Memorial commemorates the fallen who have no known grave. The American Cemetery with its tall white square Memorial has graves marked with a cross or another sign, but a large part of the main cemetery is independent of faith with simple upright stones.

- 5 Having turned **right** after entering the Cemetery, walk to the first corner and exit through a tall metal gate. Keep **right** to continue on a long straight driveway, passing a line of houses on your right. In 150m, just after the last house, turn **left** on a crossing footpath*. You come through a small metal gate into another part of Pirbright Common. Keep straight ahead across the centre of the Common. This wild stretch of the Common has some marshy sections, hence the need for boots, but you can usually skip around the worst of them and use the wooden logs that are so helpfully placed athwart the path. The path runs over a flat bridge and then through a band of woodland. The rather boggy and uneven path is lined each side with planks, although they are now (2024) hardly visible. After two more flat bridges, you come out onto a wide space of heather. Two metal gates lead onto a road, Cemetery Pales. *This road is named from the fences ("pales") that border the North and South Cemeteries.*
- 6 Cross the road carefully to go through two metal gates onto a bridleway, back on the Common. Again, keep straight ahead across the centre of the Common. *Ponies sometimes graze on the Common and you may be fortunate enough to see some today.* The path winds its way through gorse. Stay on the main path for 100m, ignoring a couple of minor branches. Here your path forks: take the **right** fork, heading for a large nearby metal gate* that you can see near some houses. [*Care! the fork is rather indistinct; don't mistake the gate for a metal swing-gate visible on the right shortly after your gate.] Turn **left** after the kissing-gate on a residential road, *Chapel Lane*, of neat clipped hedges. In 250m, after the last house, keep ahead on a somewhat narrower tarmac lane through woodland. In 100m or so, avoid a rougher left fork to stay on the tarmac. Follow the lane round a bend for 150m, passing more houses in their own grounds. After *Birch Grove*, at a yellow arrow, turn **right** on a track labelled as *Whites Lane*.
- 7 The track becomes a rural gravel highway with pastures on your left. Stay on Whites Lane as it bends **left** by *Nuthurst*, becoming tarmac. In only a further 50m or so, the lane approaches the great timbered 16th-century house of *Whites Farm*. Just before the house, turn **right** at a fingerpost onto a flagstone path. The path runs beside a wooden fence and comes out through a small metal gate into a grassy meadow. Keep **left** in the meadow, following a well-established path heading for a small metal gate, leading over a 3-plank bridge into woodland.

- 8 The winding path runs through laurels and later between great stands of brooding conifers. Finally, after about 400m in the woods, your path ends at a junction with paddocks just ahead. Turn **left** here, as directed by a fingerpost, passing a large wooden gate onto a tarmac drive. Go through the smaller of two wooden gates to emerge finally on the main road next to the *Cricketers on the Green*, the first of **two** pubs beside the Green, giving you an enviable choice.



*The Cricketers, which re-opened recently adding the words 'on the Green', is a gastropub of some renown, owned by Grosvenor. There are two restaurants – the Pig Shed and the Block, not to mention the Garden Room. The menu is resoundingly British, best described as pub classics raised a couple of levels, as in 'English grass-fed beef tartare, seasoned with Colchester oysters'. The Cumberland scotch egg is made from black pudding with brown sauce and a St. Ewes free range egg (which **must** be runny!). If you are looking for an apéritif and wonder about the 'discarded vermouth', this is flavoured from left-over coffee berries.*



If you only want teas, coffees and snacks, the Cricketers has its Yurt Café, closing at 4, with seating indoors and outdoors.

Continue along the road to the *White Hart* where the walk began.

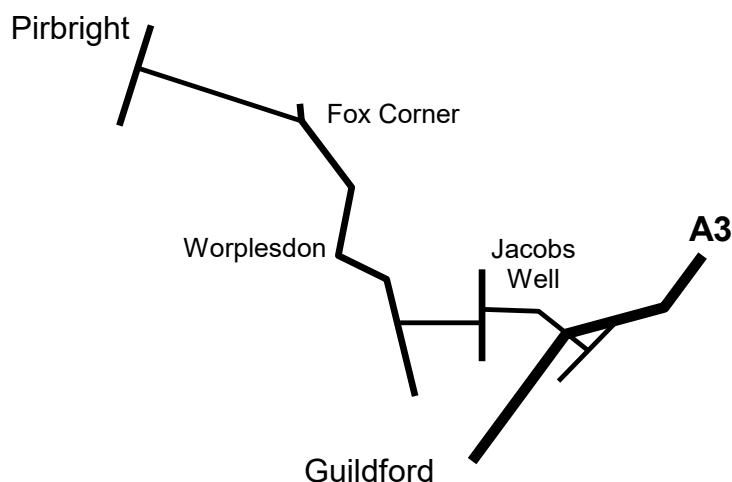


Like its neighbour, the White Hart is a pub-restaurant with a wide-ranging menu, a wine list, a gin bar, a cocktail bar – not a haven for real ales.

*There are other pubs close to Pirbright. The "Fox Inn", **GU3 3PP**, a short distance southeast along the road at Fox Corner (which you may have driven past), is a traditional local, a more modest pub with a great collection of real ales. The "Royal Oak" in Stanford Common, **GU24 0DQ** is a Greene King foodie pub which also offers some good ales. It is visited by people walking the "Normandy" walk on this website.*

Getting there

By car: Pirbright is just west of Woking. It can be reached from Woking, or from the M3 at Bagshot, or from Guildford. The author, who arrived on the A3, avoided the big towns by going through Jacobs Well (**GU4 7NW**), Worplesdon and Fox Corner.



By train: frequent trains to **Brookwood station** from Waterloo, with a short connecting walk – see text.

By bus/train: bus 28 or 91 from Woking station. Check the timetables.

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