



Savernake Forest from Great Bedwyn

Distance: 18½ km=11½ miles easy walking with navigational challenges
reducible down to 9 km=5½ miles

Region: Wiltshire

Date written: 3-sep-2018

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Refreshments: Great Bedwyn

Map: Explorer 157 (Marlborough).

This map is not required if you follow the guide exactly. However, if you choose to explore the Forest or take a short cut, you need this map or possibly a downloaded map/guide to Savernake Forest.

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

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Village, vast forest, long woodland trails, church in the wood, hidden paths

In Brief

Savernake Forest cries out for adventure, a wonderland of ancient great oaks, some twisted into nightmarish shapes, noble beeches, sunny glades and green pathways. Most visitors come from the northern car park near Marlborough, but this walk finds a remarkable circular route through the centre and south of the Forest itself, beginning in the little country town of Great Bedwyn. So large is the Forest and so unusual the route, you may well spend the entire trip without meeting another walker.



Great Bedwyn is easily accessible by car **or rail** and offers refreshment. This walk also offers a shorter option which takes you from the town to the church in the wood (St Katharine's) and the smaller woods but omits the main Savernake Forest. You can also reduce the length by taking a shorter route through the Forest. (Although not formally written up in this guide, it is possible to spend the whole trip in the Forest by basing your walk at St Katharine's, postcode **SN8 3BG**) where there are parking spaces – see end – and doing the brief short cut in reverse.)

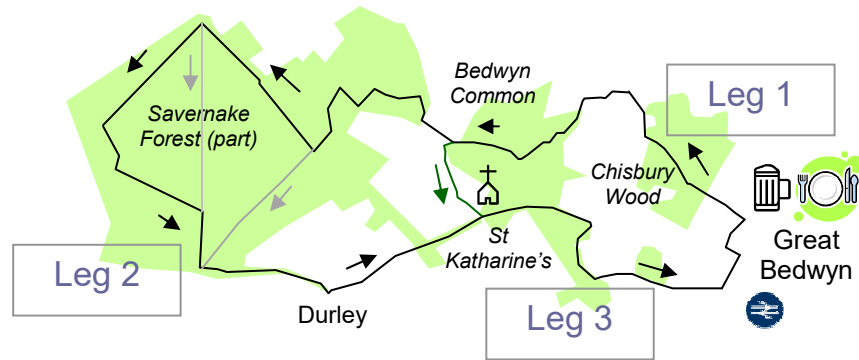


There are some nettly paths, so shorts are not advisable. The paths are generally easy underfoot, so good shoes or trainers are adequate in summer, although most walkers will opt for boots. With very little livestock, few stiles or main roads, this walk should be fine for your dog too.

The walk begins in **Great Bedwyn**, near Marlborough, Wiltshire, postcode **SN8 3PL**. There is always room to park roadside in the town, possibly in a side road, near the *Three Tuns*. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Bird's Eye View

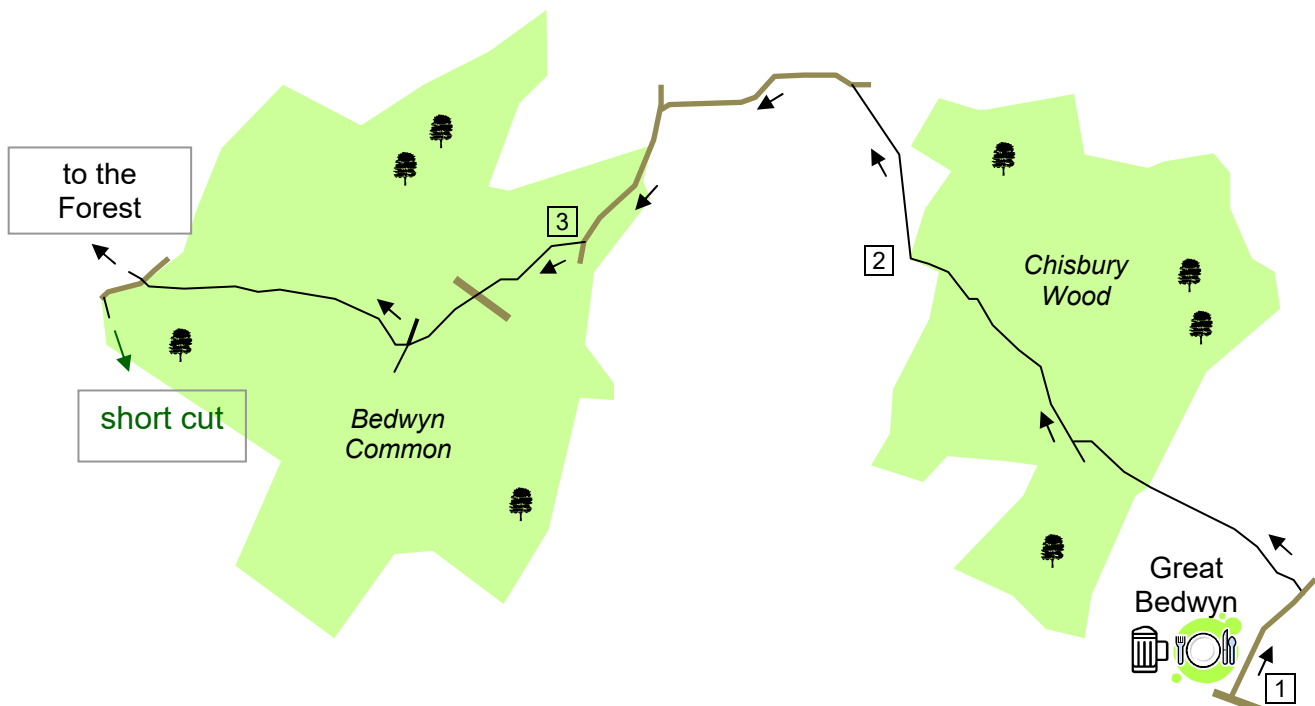


*Savernake Forest is the only privately-owned ancient forest in Britain (all the others are owned by the Crown). It is one remnant of a vast area of forest owned by the Normans since 1066, covering 390 km², south of the Kennet River. Savernake Forest has remained with the same family ever since and has never been bought or sold. It covers 18 km² (4,500 acres) and is famous for its broadleaf trees. Part of the forest is grass and scrub (as per the original meaning of "forest": an area for hunting **outside** the king's estate). The Forest is leased to the Forestry Commission, but it is overwhelmingly pristine mixed woodland and you will see no forestry work, such as felling or planting, on this walk. Unlike almost all the other woods explored on this site, the Forest is "dry": notice that there are no streams or bridges to cross.*

It is quite probable that Henry VIII met his future wife Jane Seymour as a result of hunting in the Forest, since her father, Sir John, was its warden. (See the "Twyford" walk in the Hampshire series.)

Maybe because of those dark nightmarish oaks and their darting shadows, several ghostly legends have sprung up around the Forest: a headless woman who rides a white horse along one of the avenues, eerie sounds coming from deep within the blackness of the forest, witches covens and other "dark" practices.

Leg 1: Forest Quest 4½ km=2¾ miles

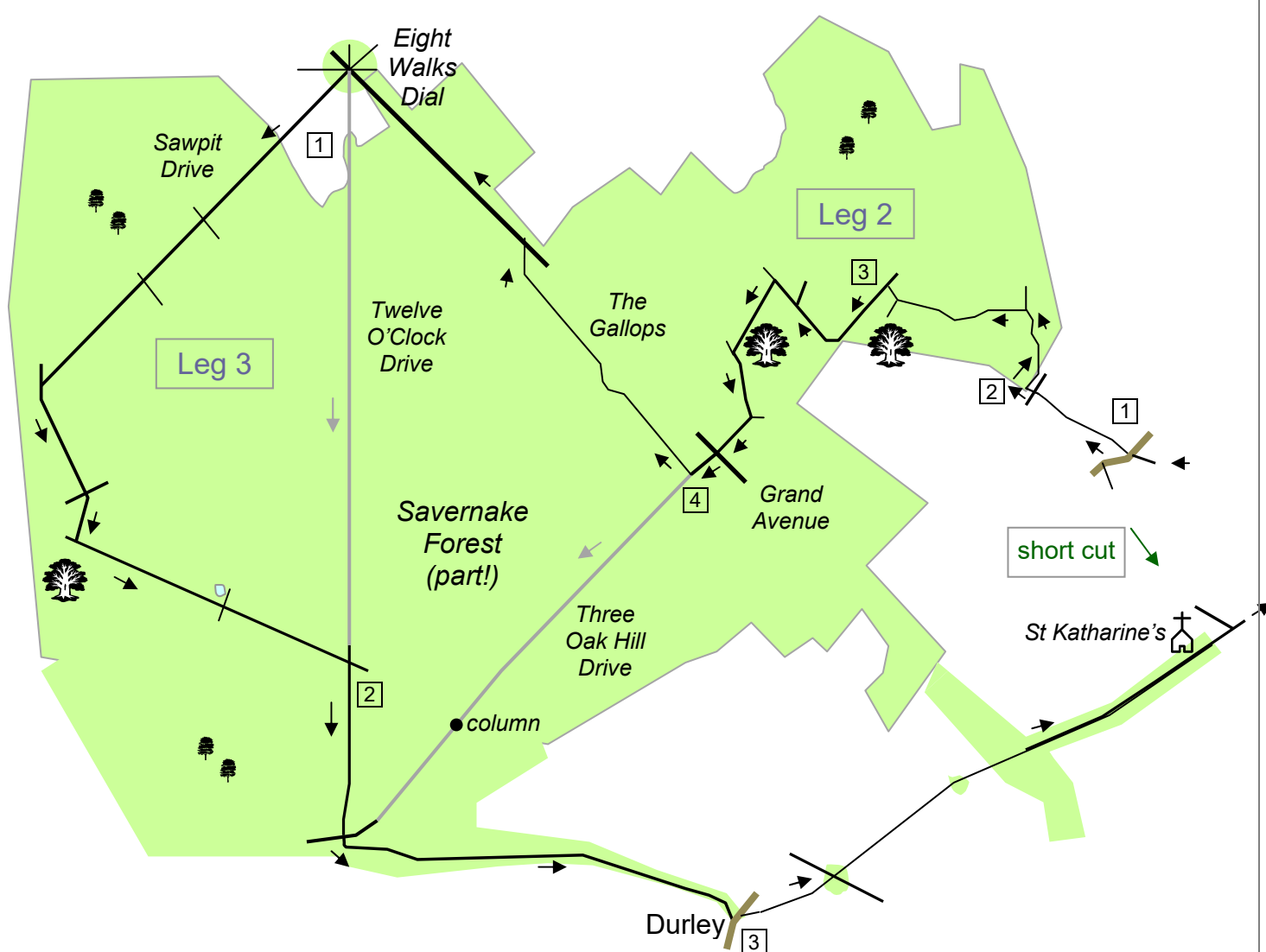


- 1 From the little town of Great Bedwyn, near the top of the main street, take a side road, Brown's Lane, next to the *Three Tuns* pub, signposted *Froxfield, Little Bedwyn*. Ignore a signed footpath just after a thatch on the left, and continue on the road downhill for another 200m to a road junction. Opposite a road (Copyhold), turn **left** on a signed bridleway across fields, finally entering woods near a transmitter tower. (*Note: the small marker stone marked 'BBC' refers to Bedwyn Boro' Council of course.*) Keep to the excellent main path through Chisbury Wood, ignoring any arrows since the marked bridleway is rather overgrown and disused. In 250m, after a left bend, your path reaches a nice wide crossing path. Turn **right** on this woodland path. In 200m or so, where the main forestry path wheels right, continue straight on along a slightly narrower path. 30m further, avoid a path that forks away to your left, and keep straight ahead, as indicated by the blue arrow. You are now on a much rougher wide forest path under low trees. Finally you enter a grass space by a small house. Continue straight ahead, soon going through a small wooden gate with a blue arrow and into an open pasture.
- 2 Your route is **right** along the edge of the pasture, veering **left** to cut the corner and past the next jutting corner where there is a wooden post. (At the time of writing, there was a "high chair" lookout here but it looked ready to crumble.) Keep the same direction now, slightly more to the left, heading for a stile about 30m to the left of a large metal gate. (The stile is invisible at first but it is marked by two thick posts. Some people simply go through the gate.) Turn **left** here on a very quiet tarmac lane, ignoring a stile on the other side. Follow the lane, passing Chisbury lane dairy farm with its wide brick farmhouse, between high hedges. After a total of 500m, fork **left** and turn **left** at a T-junction onto another lane. You pass, on your left, the thatched *Buckwood*, another long house with a well-manicured hedge, then a small brick house. Shortly after this last house, after a total of 400m on this lane, at a crossing track, turn **right** as directed by a public footpath sign. You immediately pass a wooden barrier, onto a woodland path marked with a yellow arrow. Welcome to Bedwyn Common!
- 3 Your path becomes quite narrow and grassy, but clear enough so as not to risk straying. In 300m you come between two posts to a major road. Cross straight over to a footpath opposite. Again, your path runs fairly straight through the Common. In 200m or so, you come up to a junction in an open space with several paths leading off. On your right is a very wide straight track, known rather optimistically as the *London Ride*. On your left, the official footpath burrows into the woods. But your path is *neither* of these. Instead, go **straight ahead**, over the open space, onto an unmarked path. This good, fairly straight path runs through the centre of Bedwyn Common. Although narrow, it is easy to follow and has obviously always been a well-used path, since it is stone-surfaced in places. But be careful after 350m, where a faint crossing path joins you from the right. The path ahead *seems* to curve away to your left. But this is only a forestry path. Your route is **dead straight** ahead on a narrower course. Soon, your path becomes much wider and, after a total of 700m, you come out past a wooden barrier to a road.

Decision point. If you are doing the shorter **Great Bedwyn Circular** walk, omitting the expedition into the main Savernake Forest, skip to near the end of this guide and do the **St Katharine's Shortcut**.

Leg 2: Deep Into The Forest 4 km=2½ miles

- 1 Cross straight over the road to a yellow arrow and go over a stile. Keep straight ahead up the grassy slope, keeping well to the left of a wire fence. Once over the brow of the hill, veer **left** a fraction so as to gradually merge with a long line of oaks and follow them all the way to the edge of the forest where you find a farm track made from artificial grass. Duck under the one-string fence (or lift the hook) to cross the farm track to a large rusty metal gate. This is your way in to Savernake Forest! There is a crude stile on the right of the gate made from a wood block and a wire fence shielded by plastic sleeves. Cross the "stile" and go straight ahead over woodland debris for only 20m passing a plane tree and stop immediately before a bank of dense undergrowth. Now turn abruptly **right** on a narrow grassy woodland path [2018: round the remains of a fallen tree]. This path is not waymarked but it really is a perfectly walkable path and it appears on all maps of Savernake Forest.



- 2 This is the most desolate part of the forest and you may get that lost-in-the-woods feeling. The path is quite clearly defined and fairly straight. You may need to concentrate during this section more than usual – so walk slowly, looking down at your feet in case the path is overgrown. The path runs through sparse nettles and brambles. It passes close to a huge chestnut tree and some more mighty oaks and beeches. All the while, your path gradually veers away from the field that was visible on your right and

you find yourself in the depths of the wood. After just over 250m on this path, you arrive at a definite 3-way junction. (As a guide, there is a large dark yew tree at the right fork.) Turn **left** at this junction on a beautiful green path which runs straight through a fresh botanical area. The green surface gives way to grass, the path curves right a bit and becomes more stony. After a total of nearly 500m, you pass a junction with a path on the left. (For a short there-and-back diversion, just 100m down this path is the most famous tree "King of Limbs"; Radiohead's first album is named after it, as it was partly recorded at the nearby Tottenham House.) Your path arrives at a T-junction with a wide track. The tricky part of the navigation is now ended! [Ambitious walkers with a knowledge of the forest can vary the route from here on.](#)



- 3 Turn **left** on the track. You will be following this extremely bendy track for nearly 1½ km. All turnings off are minor so you only need to stay on the main track. In 250m the track bends right. In 200m, ignore a junction on your right. In 100m, stay on the track as it bends sharp left. *You pass the Crockmere Oak, one of the many "named trees" of Wiltshire. This fine specimen is about 500 years old.* 250m from the turn, the track elbows left, so it is now going due south through wonderful beech woods. In 200m, you come to a 3-way junction. Keep **right** here, still on the main track. In 150m, you come past a wooden barrier to a major crossing of forest highways. Across your route is the Grand Avenue (planned in the 1700s by "Capability" Brown). Straight ahead is another wide freeway, Three Oak Hill Drive.



[The plan of this walk is to go right \(albeit on a more interesting path\) to the central **Eight Walks Dial** and from there on a **round trip** to the exit way. You can shorten the route by going straight ahead on Three Oak Hill Drive \(a rather dusty driveway which passes the *Ailesbury Column*\) to the exit way. Or you can take a direct route from the Eight Walks Dial. See the mini-map for an outline of these options.](#)

- 4 Cross straight over and walk along Three Oak Hill Drive for only 100m. Turn **right** here past a wooden barrier on a woodland path. This path is known for historical reasons as *The Gallops*, the most beautiful path in the forest, in complete contrast to the dusty Grand Avenue. You walk under great old oaks and beeches. In 350m, you go over a crossing path, after which your path curves around a deep pit. In another 400m, you pass a ruined monumental gatepost, followed by a wooden barrier at the corner of a meadow. Your path curves right back to the Grand Avenue. Turn **left** on the Avenue. In about 750m, after passing between meadows, through woodland and more meadows, you reach the Eight Walks Dial. Congratulations on reaching the very heart of the Forest!

[Apart from the feeling of achievement, reaching the Eight Walks Dial comes as rather an anti-climax. The author \(who did not previously know the Forest\) was expecting a monument or at least a notice or plaque showing a map of the Forest with the principal paths marked, and perhaps a series of nature trails. Of course, this is all because the Forest is not run by Wiltshire or any organisation: it is *privately-owned*. \(In fact, it is closed one day per year to prevent paths through it entering the public domain by common law.\)](#)

[Surprisingly, the main forest highways can be cruised by private cars and you may have felt the dust they throw up. You will see "no thru traffic" notices to prevent them entering in certain places, to no avail it seems.](#)

[The path first \(sharp\) left, known as Twelve O'Clock Drive is a pleasant green track which re-connects with the route given in this guide \(simply skip the next section\). But this guide takes you a little further around the southern edge to see more of the Forest before departing.](#)

Leg 3: Escape from the Forest to St Katharine's 6½ km=4 miles

1 **Same map as for Leg 2.** Take the **second** path on the **left**, i.e. *squarely left*, known as Sawpit Drive, an easy very straight track through wonderful woodland. After a wooden barrier, you have grassy spaces on both sides (the one on the left being open to families). In 600m, you pass a minor junction with a “high chair” lookout and, in 300m, another similarly. In another 200m or so, the track goes through a circle of great beech trees. 250m further, you come down to a wide crossing track. Avoiding the grass path straight ahead, turn **left** on the crossing track. In 300m, you meet a crossing track. Cross straight over (angled slightly right) onto a track opposite. In 150m or so, you meet another crossing track. Directly opposite is another famous oak, the Cluster Oak. *This is a separate slow-growing species of oak, planted in 1796, so called because the leaves form tight clusters.* Turn **left** on the crossing track, another very straight artery. In a little over 150m, the stony surface changes to grass. You are in an austere part of the forest with tall larches mixed with grotesquely shaped oaks. 500m since you turned onto this track, on your left is the Bittam Pond, a quiet little pond, hidden by bracken. (To see the pond, you need to turn left at the first crossing path you come to.) Continue, as you were, along the woodland track. 400m after the pond you reach a second crossing track. This is a wide natural track, similar to the one you are on and quite unmistakable. It is the Twelve O'clock Drive, one of the paths radiating from the Eight Walk Dial. Turn **right** on this track.



2 This wonderful green straight path leads past more of those monstrously-shaped oaks. It only curves to avoid a marshy bit. Finally, after more than 500m, you come through a wooden barrier to a junction of wide tracks. The track that crosses your path is one you encountered before, Three Oak Hill Drive. But your route is **straight over** to a track opposite, a wide semi-tarmac drive which curves away to your left. This is your exit way. You pass through more woodland until on your right, then on your left, green sheep meadows appear and the corridor gets narrower. **In late spring there are bluebells in profusion.** You pass the entrance to a house, *Durleigh Watch*. *On your right soon, you will see in the centre of a meadow a little rat-proof barn.* You see another house entrance and finally after nearly 1½ km on this driveway, you come out to the road in the tiny hamlet of Durley.



3 Cross straight over the road and turn **left**. In 20m, just after a signpost to St Katherine's, turn **right** on a footpath. You soon arrive at a smart white swing gate leading into a long green meadow, a stark and welcome contrast to the dark woods. Head diagonally across the grass on a faint path leading into the wood about 250m away. Your path goes through the wood passing a deep pit on your left. You cross a tarmac drive diagonally, leading on your right to Tottenham House which you can see in the distance.

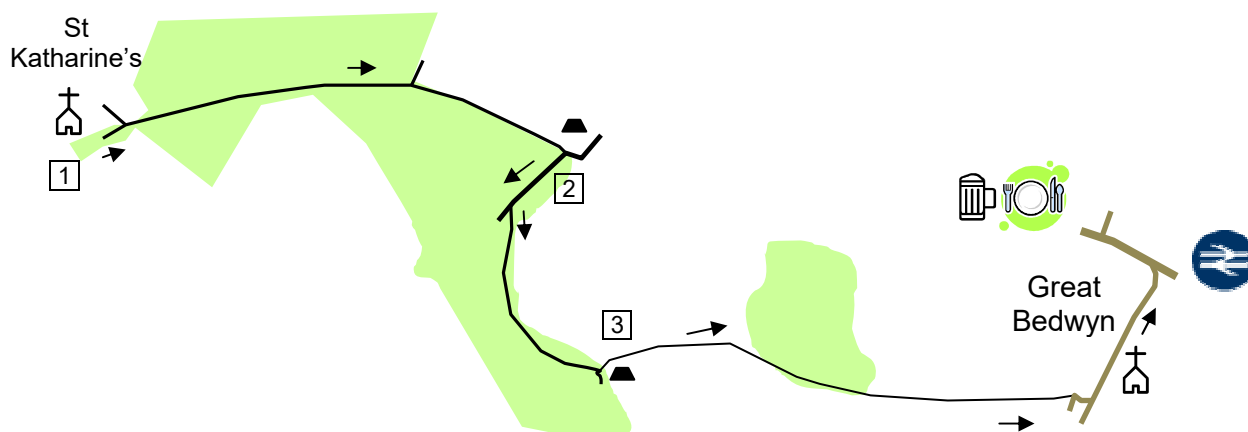
Tottenham is a vast estate which incidentally includes the whole of Savernake Forest! The house at the centre was built in the 1820s and has more than 100 rooms, all currently unoccupied. After a plan for a golf resort hit the buffers, there were (2018) plans to return the house to family ownership. But not for the current Warden of Savernake: because he (aka the Earl of Cardigan) is impoverished, drawing JSA, but ultimately sworn as lord protector of the Forest.

The path runs through scrubland and then across more grass, heading for another small wood. After emerging, follow the faint path, passing a large field maple and go straight on into woodland. You pass through another white swing-gate, next to a large white gate. This straight wide woodland path crosses under wires and, after 500m in total, suddenly ends at the great steeped church of St Katharine – a magnificent surprise. The interior of the church is exquisite and must not be missed on any account!



Leg 4: Back to Great Bedwyn 3½ km=2¼ miles

St Katharine's Church, the estate church of Savernake, was completed in 1861 as a "chapel of ease" (a kind of extension to the mother church) of Great Bedwyn. It was paid for by the Marchioness of Ailesbury and named in memory of her Russian mother who was descended from a courtier of Catherine the Great. Architect T.H. Wyatt made much use of marble and Minton tiles with warm Bath stone in the graceful vaulting and arches. The church was badly damaged in WW2 from an explosion in an ammunition store and, after six years of uncertainty, it rose again on Easter Day 1952.



- 1 With the church on your left, walk along the drive to a 3-way signposted junction. Avoid the drive sharp left and avoid a farm track on the right and go straight ahead, signed *Stokke, Chisbury*. This track runs through a great beechwood and passes close to a meadow on your right before diving back into woodland. After more than 500m on this track, at a 3-way signpost, keep straight ahead, passing under two high yellow barriers, with more woodland on your right. After 400m, you reach a major junction of tracks and tarmac: a house is on your left and ahead of you is a semi-tarmac drive at a Z-bend, with an untidy scattering of equipment.
- 2 Turn sharp **right**, as directed by a bridlesway sign, on the semi-tarmac drive, going through more woodland dominated by tall birch trees. In 200m, your track forks. (2019-22 there was a fake "bus stop" here but it has not always been here and is not a reliable landmark.) Take the **left** fork here, avoiding the track ahead. (The track ahead only leads to a pair of thatched houses in the hamlet of Stock Common.) You soon pass under a high red-and-white striped barrier. Stay on this rough driveway for another 500m until the drive suddenly bends right within sight of a house. **Leave** the drive here by keeping straight on towards the house. Immediately before the gate into the house, turn **left** to go through a wooden gate swing-gate into a pasture.

- 3 Keep **right** along the short edge of the pasture, passing the thatched house on your right, and go through a small metal gate next to a yellow arrow, and into the next meadow. Your route is along the right-hand side of the meadow to the far end. Go through a new metal kissing-gate and then straight on along the left-hand side of a large field with woodland on your left. Your path passes a marker-post with a yellow arrow and continues between fields, heading for the houses of Great Bedwyn. At the other side, continue between hedges to come out to a residential road. Keep **left** on the road to meet the main road and turn **left** on it towards the town centre. You pass on your right the big St Mary's Church which is definitely worth visiting.

St Mary's church was built around 1092, financed by Old Sarum Cathedral (the original Salisbury Cathedral). Its great size shows how important the town was in times past. The carved heads in the 11th-century nave are thought to be a visible tribute to the stonemasons who built it. The rare 14th-century wooden screen in the north transept was lost for 120 years before being rediscovered and finally returned to the church in 1974. The church is full of interesting brasses, effigies and memorials.

For a great deal more about the history of Great Bedwyn, see the adjoining walk "Little & Great Bedwyn, Shalbourne, Kennet&Avon Canal".

On your left, you pass the Post Office shop which used to house the monumental mason and repair shop for the churchyard and consequently displays a range of reproductions of interesting gravestones and plaques. Continue to the main crossroads and turn left, returning to the *Three Tuns* where the walk began.

St Katharine's Shortcut <1 km = >½ mile

[Follow this section if you are doing the shorter Great Bedwyn Circular.](#)

Turn **left** on the road. In only 100m, turn **left** at a bridleway sign through a nettly patch onto a woodland path. The path takes you through a large wooden gate (undo/redo the string) into a large meadow. [The spire of St Katharine's, your destination, is now visible.](#) Cross the large meadow, heading for the church, keeping just to the left of a line of large oaks. After the oaks, continue along the right-hand side of the pasture. Soon, on your right, you see a small wooden gate next to large metal gates. Go through the gate and forward to a tarmac drive. Turn **left** on the drive, passing a junior school. As the church comes into view, you will see a notice and a gate on your **right** leading into the churchyard. St Katharine's is magnificent. The interior of the church is exquisite and must not be missed on any account!

[Now resume the main walk at Leg 4.](#)

Getting there

By car: **Great Bedwyn** is easily reached from the M4 motorway and/or the A4. From the M4, come off at exit 14 (*Hungerford, Wantage*), go through Hungerford Newtown to Hungerford and turn onto the A4, signed *Froxfield*. Just before Froxfield, turn **left**, signed *Little Bedwyn*. Turn **right** after 300 yds signed *Little Bedwyn, Great Bedwyn*. Follow the canal-side road into Little Bedwyn and from there follow zigzagging signs to Great Bedwyn. Alternatively, stay on the A4 through Froxfield for another 2½ miles, where there is a **left** turn marked *Great Bedwyn*.

For **St Katharine's**, take the alternative route above (left 2½ miles after Froxfield) but, after 1½ miles, turn **right**, signed *Burbage*. In ⅔ mile, opposite a house and driveway with a clipped hedge, turn **left** at a sign for *St Katharine's Church*. There is parking space on the grass in front of the church, bordering the haha (grass ditch), but it may be more considerate to park on the dirt strip under the trees on the other side of the drive.

By train: begin at **Bedwyn Station** (regular service from Reading and Paddington); from the approach road, turn **right** on the road into the little town.

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