



Buriton and the South Downs

Distance: 21 km=12¾ miles or 18 km=11½ miles or 11½ km=7¼ miles
easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Hampshire, West Sussex

Date written: 2-apr-2014

Author: Hautboy

Last update: 2-aug-2024

Refreshments: Chalton, Finchdean, Buriton

Map: Explorer 120 (Chichester) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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High hills, views, woodland, villages, pubs

In Brief

This is a terrific walk over the South Downs in Hampshire on the West Sussex border with three possible return routes to suit every mood. The village at the start, Buriton, is a delight with its cottages, streams and two pubs. Two other pubs are available en route (one of them only on the long option). The pubs are excellent but not really the gastro variety so you probably don't need to book. The terrain is a mixture of open Downs with great views in all directions and dense forest. Typical of this series, some of the paths chosen are a little audacious and probably unique to this site.

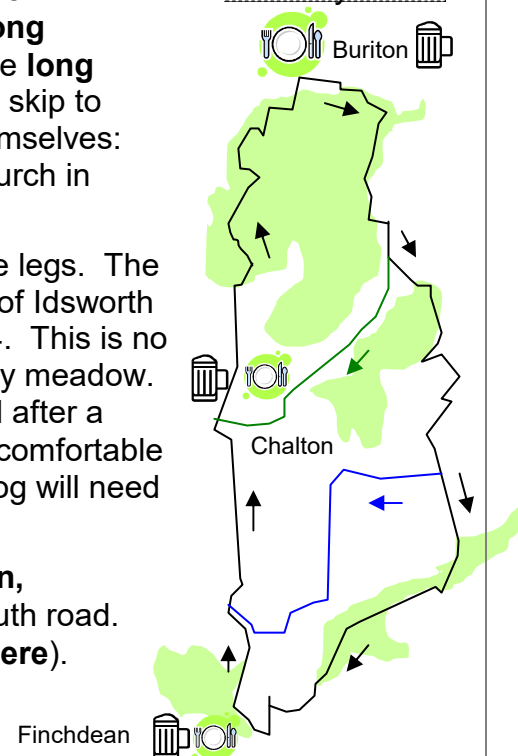
The start and finish to this walk are fixed but there are **three** return routes, giving you a **short** option, a **middle** option and a **long** option. If you follow the text in sequence, you are doing the **long** option. But at two places there are short cuts that you can skip to at the end of the text. The short cuts are interesting in themselves: for instance on the middle option you can visit the "little church in the field" (St Hubert's) at Idsworth with its wall paintings.

There are no nettles or brambles on this walk to worry bare legs. The terrain is generally chalky and firm. However, the villages of Idsworth and Finchdean suffered from flooding in the winter of 2014. This is no problem at Finchdean, apart from one narrow strip of soggy meadow. But the tunnel under the railway at Idsworth is waterlogged after a rainy season, making this choice (the **middle** option) only comfortable after dry weather. All the stiles are dog friendly but your dog will need to be on a short leash across the sheep meadows.

The walk begins at the free car park by the pond in **Buriton, Hampshire**, postcode GU31 5RT, just off the **A3** Portsmouth road. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



Bird's Eye View



The Walk

Leg 1: Buriton to Ditcham Park 3¼ km=2 miles

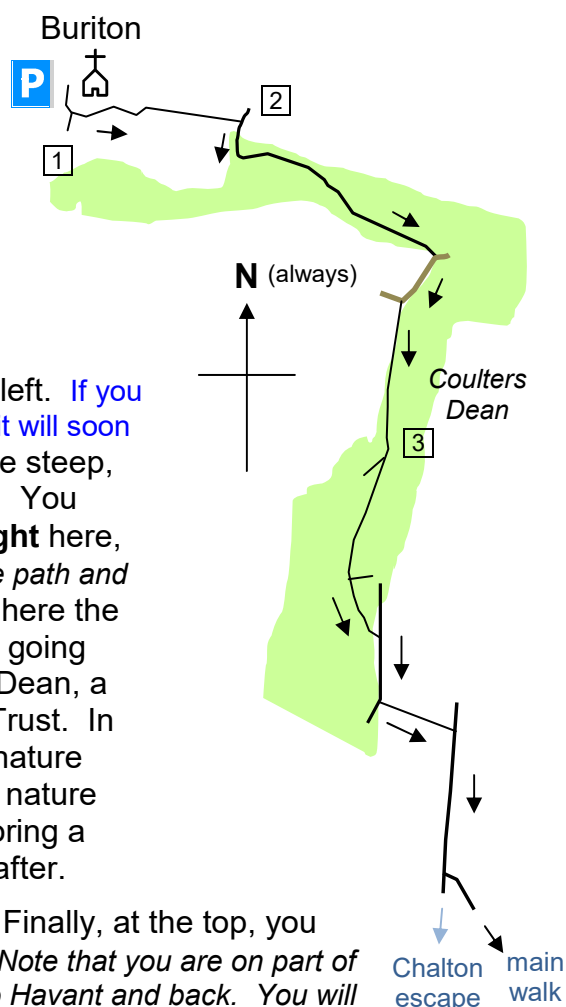
Before or after the walk, a quick look round this pretty village is essential: the big duck pond of course; the streams and the bridge leading to a little garden; the *two* pubs (of which more later); and St Mary's church which is well worth visiting. *Note the tree stump near the church used as the official "noticeboard".*

The Saxon name "Buriton" (pronounced "berriton") means settlement ("ton") by the fort ("burh" or "burgh"), probably referring to a nearby hillfort. Although its population was only 100 or so in the Middle Ages, Buriton was more important than neighbouring Petersfield (now a large town). This was because St Mary's Church was the "mother church" of the district. The church dates from the late 1100s but the tower was rebuilt in 1714 after the original burned down. The main Portsmouth Road ran through here until two centuries ago so the inns would have been busy. Buriton Manor is the most prominent building and the historian Edward Gibbon ("Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire") inherited it in 1770. Until 1968 Buriton rivalled some Kentish towns in growing and drying hops.

1 Walk between the church and the pond to the corner of the churchyard. Turn **left** and immediately **right** to go through a swing-gate by a fingerpost. Avoid a fenced footpath straight ahead and instead turn **left** on a path running parallel to a ditch on your left. Buriton Hanger, which you will meet on your return, is prominent on your right. The path zigzags a couple of times and eventually leads out through a swing-gate to meet a wide track.

2 Turn **right** on this chalky track which soon bends left. *If you encounter some mud here, you can be confident that it will soon ease.* The track gradually rises and becomes quite steep, eventually levelling out as it goes under grid lines. You meet a tarmac lane by a 3-way fingerpost: turn **right** here, thus joining the South Downs Way, a *long-distance path and bridleway running from Eastbourne to Winchester*. Where the lane bends right at a fingerpost, leave the lane by going straight ahead on a gravel path through Coulters Dean, a conservation area run by the Hants/loW Wildlife Trust. In 250m ignore a stile on your right leading into the nature reserve. In another 100m or so, at the end of the nature reserve, keep ahead through a wooden gate, ignoring a narrow downhill path that forks right immediately after.

3 Your track continues gently but inexorably uphill. Finally, at the top, you reach an altitude of over 200m on Oakham Hill. *Note that you are on part of the Staunton Way. This is a circular route that runs to Havant and back. You will meet it again on the return leg.* Your track goes over a crossing track resuming on a signed bridleway. It then joins a wider track coming from the left and runs beside a field on your left. After another 300m, you will see a notice directing you abruptly **left**. Your path runs beside a field on your right with great views ahead to the Harting Down and beyond. (See the



“Harting Down” walk in this series.) The path becomes narrower and stonier and comes down to a quiet tarmac lane. Turn **right** on the lane. Soon you arrive at a junction by the entrance to Ditcham Park School, a private mixed school in what must be the most enviable location in the South.

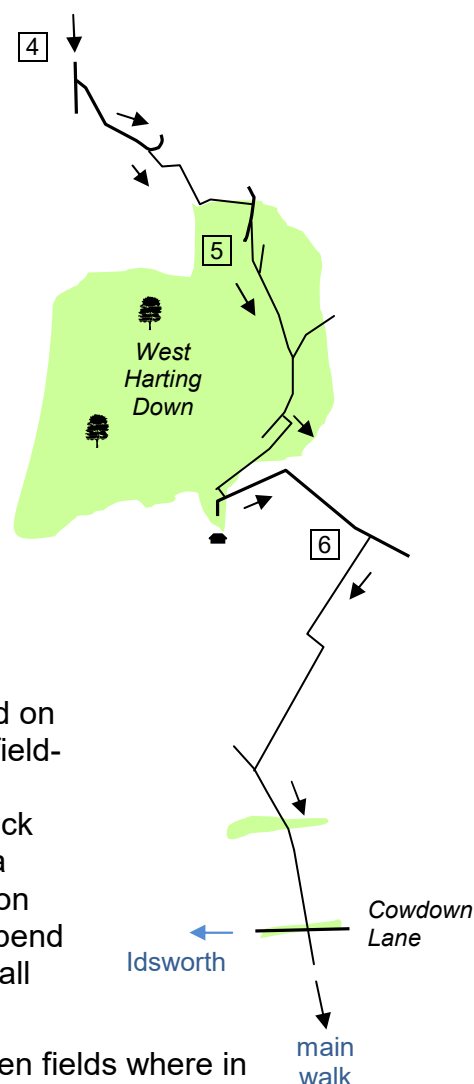
Decision point. You now have a choice between the **short** option which takes you direct to Chalton with the *Red Lion* pub and the remaining **middle** and **long** options. For the **short** option, skip to near the end of this text and do the **Chalton Escape**. For the other two options, continue with the next leg.

Leg 2: Ditcham Park to Cowdown Lane 3½ km=2¼ miles

4 Opposite the entrance to the school, turn **left** on a bridleway, indicated by a blue arrow, thus leaving (for now) the Staunton Way. Your wide stony path affords an excellent views of the Solent. In 300m, where the main track curves left, keep straight on on a grassy path beside a field on your right. The path bends right and runs along the top of a sloping meadow known as Downley Bottom. At the corner, the path turns **left** downhill. *The gradient is quite steep and you need to watch your footing.* At the bottom of the valley the path turn **right** through trees. A path joins you from the left and, only 10m later, you reach a fork in the path with a marker post on your left. Choose the **left** fork, the narrower path. You are now in West Sussex for a small section of the walk.

5 A wide forestry track quickly joins from the left. In 300m through part of West Harting Down, another forestry track joins from the left. In another 150m or so you come to a junction with a narrow chalky uphill track on your right, and on your left a fingerpost behind bushes to the left of a metal field-gate. Turn **left** here on a bridleway beside the gate into woods. Follow the path as it bends right parallel to the track you were on but gradually climbing. At the top you meet a track curving towards a house, *Ladyholt*. Turn sharp **left** on the track avoiding the house. Stay on the track at a right bend where it runs uphill between fields. At the top, with views all round, you come to a fingerpost.

6 Turn **right** at the fingerpost on a grassy track uphill between fields where in early summer a multitude of larks sing. Your path zigzags left-right round the edge of a field. You pass a group of pines on the right concealing an old stone tank. At the next corner, by a fingerpost, turn **left** on a narrow path that cuts across the field, passing the left-hand corner of a large thicket. At the other side follow a narrow path through a band of bushes and trees into a crop field. Take a faint path straight over the field. On the other side you meet a crossing bridleway running between two lines of trees and hedges. This is Cowdown Lane, an ancient trackway.



Decision point. You now have a choice between the **middle** option and the **long** option. The middle option takes you to the hamlet of Idsworth and the "little church in the field" (St Hubert's) from where you have a short journey to Chalton for refreshments. This middle option is perfect, provided that the recent weather has been dry, because of possible flooding in the tunnel under the railway. If you would like to choose the **middle** option, skip to the end of this text and do the **Idsworth Traverse**. For the **long** option through to the woods to Finchdean, continue with the next leg.

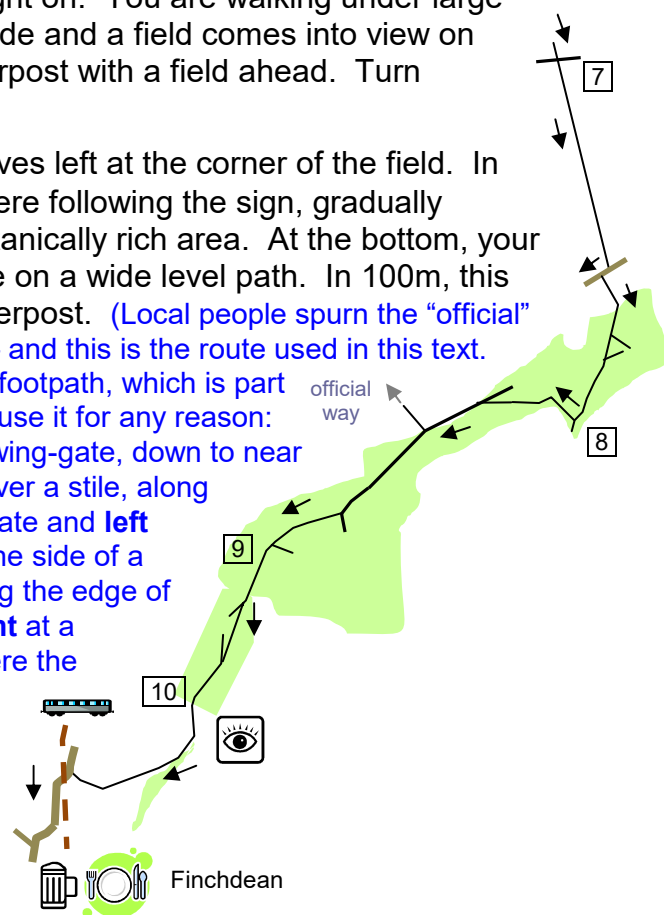
Leg 3: Cowdown Lane to Chalton via Finchdean 8¼ km=5¼ miles

7 Cross the trackway into a large field and go straight across the centre on a faint path. After a thick hedgerow, go straight across another large field, and through trees to a lane. Turn **right** on the lane and, in just 40m, go **left** through a small metal gate. Cross a narrow field to go into woods on the other side. Take a flinty path uphill between yews. As you pass under power lines in 250m, ignore a footpath on your left. At a marker post, where a track joins from the left, keep straight on. You are walking under large yew trees whilst your path becomes very wide and a field comes into view on your left. In another 50m you reach a fingerpost with a field ahead. Turn sharp **right** with the field on your left.

8 Your path goes downhill, levels out and curves left at the corner of the field. In 25m you reach a footpath sign. Go **right** here following the sign, gradually descending the slope through trees in a botanically rich area. At the bottom, your path goes down a few steps. Turn **left** here on a wide level path. In 100m, this wide path reaches its lowest point by a fingerpost. (Local people spurn the "official" path here and stay on the beautiful main path – and this is the route used in this text.

Rambling groups and visitors use the statutory footpath, which is part of the Staunton Way. Should you be forced to use it for any reason: go **right** down steps, through a barrier and a swing-gate, down to near the tarmac lane; keep **left** in the meadow, go over a stile, along the left-hand side of a field, through a kissing-gate and **left** here at a 3-way fingerpost; go over a stile, up the side of a meadow to a swing-gate into woods, **right** along the edge of the wood and up through the wood, forking **right** at a fingerpost to join a post with a green arrow where the "unofficial" path meets you. Otherwise ...)

Ignore the steps on your right and veer **left** staying on the unofficial permissive path, gently rising. After 450m, where the main track bends left uphill, leave it by going straight ahead on a wide level grassy path. *You are walking along the border of Hampshire and West Sussex.*



9 In 250m or so, a wide track joins from the left. 150m later, your path narrows and the silver birches give way to darker woods. At this point, avoid a narrow path that forks right downhill under yew trees and keep straight on along another narrow path in an area full of wild garlic and, in late spring, bluebells. After about 200m, the official footpath joins you from the right as you enter an area of tall beeches. The path finally leads you out onto open hillside with the village of Finchdean spread out below in the valley, back into Hampshire. *Atop the wooded hill on your right is the historic Old Idsworth House and Gardens.*



- 10 There are two clear tracks ahead of you. Take the **left** fork, to go over a stile in a fence (which you can avoid through a gap a little further to the left). Keep ahead on the level, ignoring the wooden swing-gate on your left, not far from the left-hand edge. As you near the jutting corner of a fence on your right, veer **right** at an old fingerpost to go past the corner. Now turn diagonally **right** aiming for the left-hand corner of a group of shrubs. At the left-hand corner of the fence turn **right** and head for a stile next to a wooden gate. Cross straight over the meadow heading for a railway bridge. Go over a stile to the road and turn **left** on the road. In 150m you reach the centre of the village opposite the *George* pub. *Welcome to Finchdean – not originally a village at all but the centre of the Finchdean “hundred” (a medieval administrative region) which included Buriton and Chalton. Note the old animal pound (now repurposed).*

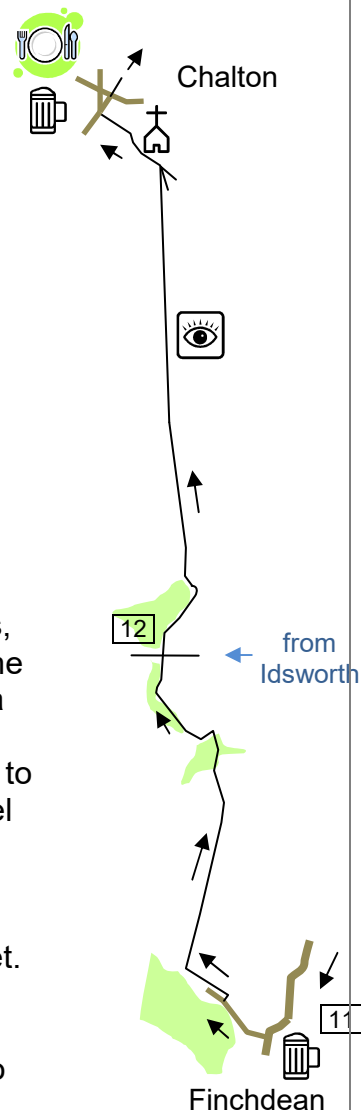


- 11 After possible refreshment, take the lane opposite the pub, passing a phone box on your right and some attractive cottages on your left. Opposite a fingerpost on your left, go **right** and take a path along the **left**-hand side of a field, parallel to the lane. At the corner, turn **right** up the left-hand side of the field, with ever-widening views to your right. Near the top, keep **right** to enter woods on a wide path. As you come out into another large field, turn **left**, as signed, along the edge of the field. In 50m, bear **right**, staying on the edge of the field, with another field on your left for a short distance. Continue with woodland on your left to the next corner and bear **right** again, still on the edge of the field. Finally you reach a wide gap on your left by a 4-way fingerpost with completely new views over to the west. Avoid the gap and keep straight ahead between fields.



The **Idsworth Traverse** short cut re-joins the main walk at this point.

- 12 In 30m, there is woodland on your left as your path curves right and left. It turns **right** at the top between fields. 80m before power lines, go **left** through a new wooden swing-gate and **right** to keep the same direction. When you reach the next large field, after going through a new wooden swing-gate, you are on the high point of Chalton Down where there is a mound and a fingerpost with great views all around to the Solent and the loW. Your route now takes a grassy straight level path between fields. At the far end you go through another new wooden swing gate, besides a hawthorn hedge, and continue on a chalky path through the next field. This path gradually meets the hedgerow on your left at a point where two other footpaths also meet. Turn **left** through a wooden swing-gate, cross straight over a gravel drive and continue on a wide grassy path ahead. The path curves right and leads through a wooden swing-gate and through a gap into the churchyard of Chalton Church with the charming thatched *Red Lion* pub and its attractive garden opposite.



Leg 4: Chalton to Buriton 5¼ km=3¼ miles

The venerable village of Chalton is so isolated between hills of the South Downs that its population has hardly changed since before 1066. In fact the Manor (i.e. the village and surrounding hamlets) was owned by none other than the last English¹ king Harold (arrow-in-the-eye) Godwinson. William the Conqueror then gave it to his redoubtable right-hand man William Fitz-Osbern who passed it to his son Hugh

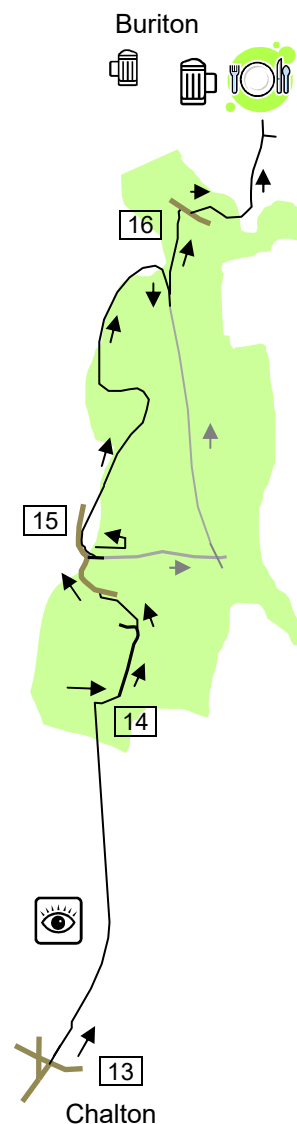
¹ * All subsequent monarchs have been foreigners: Normans, Plantagenets (French), Tudors (Welsh), Stuarts (Scottish), Orange (Dutch), Hanoverians (German).

Goch (Welsh for “red-head”). Hugh was (would you believe it) shot in the eye defending Anglesey from King Magnus “Barefoot” of Norway. Chalton then passed through the hands of various Plantagenet kings, including the Lancastrians during the Wars of the Roses. After the Civil War, it came into the possession of Oliver Cromwell. The church of St Michael and All Angels, built just after 1066, witnessed most of this history. The high chancel is the oldest part and here you will see an effigy of Richard Ball who was rector till 1632. The wonderful stained glass includes an image of St Hubert, patron of huntsmen, a link to Idsworth.

13 The “standard” route used by most guide books is a quick descent to the Newbarn Road and a slow trudge across a large field. The route chosen here avoids the heavy clumpy field by taking an unusual route through the Head Down Plantation. With your back to the *Red Lion*, turn **left** and fork **right** beside the little triangular green with its red post box. Cross straight over a road to a byway opposite. Go through a kissing gate (not needed owing to an adjoining gap) beside a large metal gate by a farm. The concrete drive leads up into a field and immediately dips to run along the right-hand side of another field. *Windmill Hill is in clear view behind to your left.* After 400m or so, the first field is followed by another. 600m further, where the hedge on your right ends, keep straight ahead between fields. You reach a line of trees at a wooden swing-gate by a 2-way fingerpost.

14 Go through the gate and turn **right** along the edge of the wood. After two benches, your path bends left into the wood. You are now on a high wide path with sloping beechwoods on your right. After 200m or so, the official path forks left at a waymarker, an unnecessary little diversion, best ignored by staying on the wide path. 50m later, at a marker post, turn **right** downhill, thus leaving the Staunton Way. Your path descends gradually through a beech wood to meet a tarmac lane at the bottom of the valley, Newbarn Road. Turn **left** on the lane, passing the small settlement of New Barn as the lane curves right and left. At the left curve, leave the lane by turning **right** past a metal barrier into Head Down, an area used for archery and off-road activities.

15 Many walkers take the “natural” route (the grey lines on the mini-map) by going straight up the wide track to the top of the rise and then **left** on the official footpath, looking out, after just over 1km, for a smaller path straight ahead, just as the path begins to curve to the left. BUT, this guide chooses an interesting unmarked riders’ track. Since this path is not a statutory footpath, the way could be barred because of archery or forestry work at any time and you would then need to use the “natural” route. Only 20m after the barrier, turn very sharp **left** on a path, almost doubling back. (Care! You may need to concentrate during this section as some walkers go astray.) The path runs parallel to the lane you were on and then veers right uphill through the Head Down Plantation. After about 600m, the path wheels left and right round a deep hollow on your left known as the Gorecombe Hole [May 2023: not seen by some walkers]. After another 500m or so, the path begins to wheel completely round right in a semi-circle. Just after the path straightens, look to your left for a marker post and a yellow arrow. Turn very sharp **left** here, doubling back and joining the official footpath.



- 16 Your path descends to reach, in about 350m, a V-shaped barrier and a lane with the village of Buriton visible below (summer foliage permitting). Turn **right** on the lane and, in only 40m, go **left** down a bank at a fingerpost. The path curves right over a fallen tree trunk and descends through trees, before levelling out and going downhill again. The path may be steep in parts and you need to take care in wet or icy conditions. At the bottom, go through a wooden swing-gate, down steps and along a path between fences. At the end, go through a swing-gate near the church and turn **left** on a track taking you immediately back to the car park where the walk began.

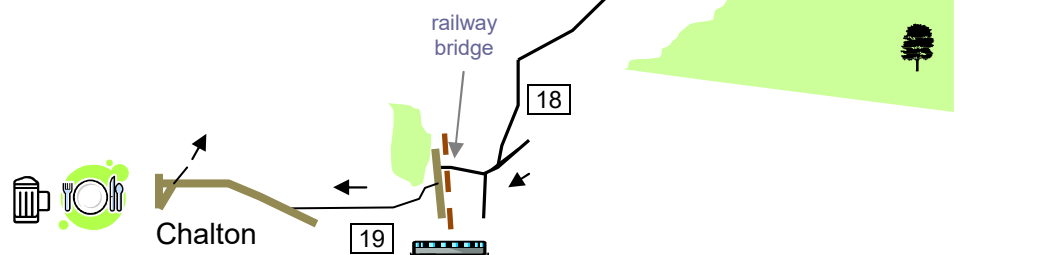


*For final refreshments, Buriton has **two** pubs. The “Five Bells” is a favourite among visitors and has a lovely garden in the back. The “Nest Hotel and Restaurant”, which is also a B&B, is excellent too.*

Chalton Escape 3¼ km=2 miles

Take this route if you want to do the **short** walk by taking a short cut from Ditcham Park direct to Chalton.

- 17 By the entrance to the school, keep straight ahead, avoiding the track on your left. You pass tennis courts, gym and playing fields belonging to the school. The path gradually descends giving you views ahead to the Solent and with the well-named Windmill Hill visible ahead. You pass *Park Barn*, a B&B that seems to offer space in a yurt if the conventional rooms are all taken. A narrower path takes you downhill through trees and beside a field on your left as you approach the hamlet of Long Row. Your path runs between two large pastures as you approach the hamlet.
- 18 Eventually your path comes out by some untidy smallholdings to a junction of tracks and paths. Cross straight over a tarmac drive and keep ahead as directed by a fingerpost onto concrete, soon followed by grass. A house and an ancient small black grain store should be on your right, some modern barns on your left. This path leads to a rather grimy concrete bridge taking you over the railway. After the bridge, your path leads up to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane and, in 25m, go **right** at a fingerpost on a narrow path steeply uphill.

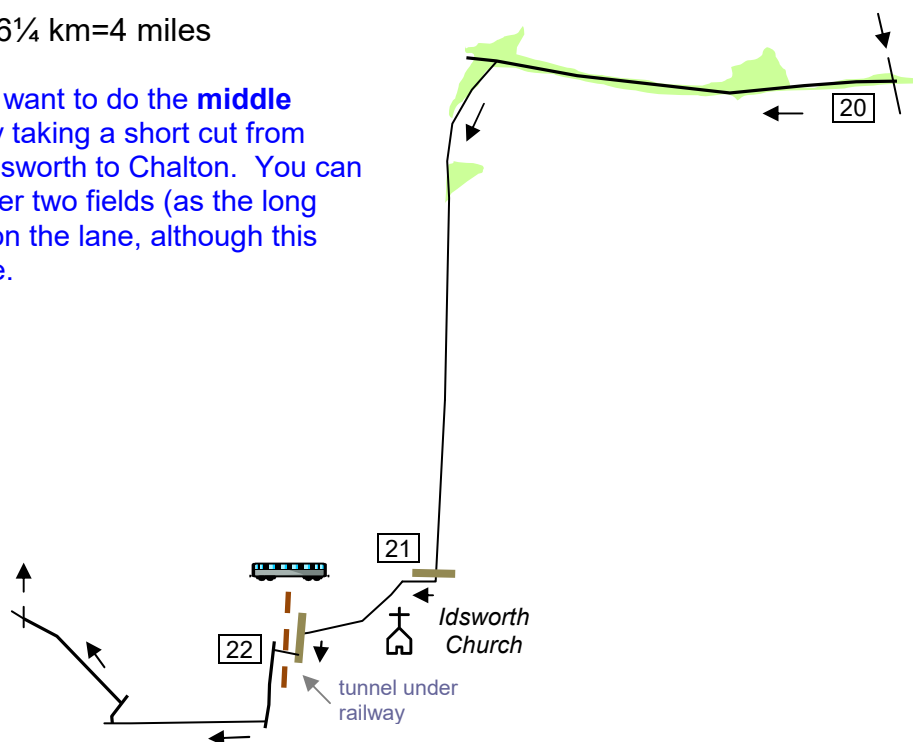


- 19 Although this is the easy option, you cannot escape lightly from the steep gradients of this area. Your path goes through a wooden swing-gate and very steeply up the chalky hillside. Go through another gate in the fence and continue straight ahead over the grass. Come out between two posts by a fingerpost to a road and turn **right**, shortly reaching the village of Chalton. The byway on your right just before the village centre will be your return route. The *Red Lion* pub and the church are reached by forking left just before a triangle of grass.

Now re-join the main walk at **Leg 4**, section 13.

Idsworth Traverse 6¼ km=4 miles

Take this route if you want to do the **middle** version of the walk by taking a short cut from Cowdown Lane via Idsworth to Chalton. You can also cross straight over two fields (as the long walk) and turn **right** on the lane, although this route is less attractive.



- 20** Turn **right** on the trackway. The yew trees are evidence of the great age of this shady ancient path presumably, from the name, an ox drovers' route. You pass metal gates and a large field on your left, followed by another. On your right shortly is a quarry as your path descends a little. Finally, after just over 1 km on this track, by two large metal gates, turn **left** through a metal kissing-gate. You are now on the Staunton Way. Turn **right**, as directed by a marker-post, and follow the field edge to the second corner where a new fingerpost directs you onto a wide grassy path with a wire fence and tree plantation on your left. Continue beside a hedgerow on your right and, half way along the field edge, ignore a footpath on your right. At the next field, continue along the right-hand side, going under grid lines. Finally the path takes you over a stile to a lane.
- 21** Cross the lane directly and go through the metal kissing-gate opposite. Turn **right** in the meadow and keep **left** round the corner. In only 20m turn **right** at a fingerpost and go through a metal kissing-gate. Cross the grass to reach the little church at Idsworth, dedicated to St Hubert, patron saint of huntsmen.

Idsworth church was, by tradition, built by Earl Godwin, father of King Harold, in 1053 and is practically unchanged from that time. It was originally St Peter's church but the dedication was changed by the Victorians after a remarkable wall painting was discovered, on view on the North wall. The upper part is a hunting scene and also (scholars now agree) shows the arrest of St John, plus the "hairy anchorite", a hermit penitent who took to walking on all fours. The lower part shows Salome with the head of John the Baptist, plus the imprisonment of St John.

Leave the church by a wooden swing-gate and go down the grass and across a stream by a long bridge. Another wooden swing-gate takes you out onto a lane in the scattered village of Idsworth. Turn **left** on the lane for 50m and, opposite a fingerpost, turn **right** on a track heading for a railway tunnel.

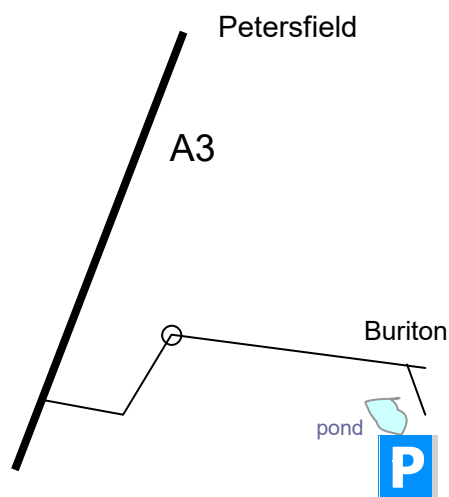
As already said, the tunnel here under the railway tends to *flood* after a rainy spell. You may still find some residual mud or an inch or two of water. If the tunnel is impassable, you will have to continue south along the lane to Finchdean and do the remainder of the **long** option – only a small diversion.

- 22 Go through a tunnel beneath the railway and at a T-junction turn **left** on a concrete path. After two horse pastures, at a fingerpost, turn **right** on a path uphill beside a hedgerow of tall trees on your left. At the top, just after the field on your right ends, turn **right** on a narrow path to a fingerpost. Turn **right** along the edge of the field and, in 30m, turn **left** at a fingerpost on a wide path across the centre of the field. At the far side you reach a signposted crossing path with completely new views ahead to the west. Turn **right** at the fingerpost between fields.

Now re-join the main walk at **Leg 3**, section 12.

Getting there

By car: Buriton is easily reached from the **A3** trunk road. The turn-off is marked and is 2 miles=3 km south of Petersfield.



By bus/train: for the railway it is a case of *so near yet so far* since the line cuts through the walk in several places. One option is to take the train to **Rowlands Castle**, about 2 km from Finchdean, and extend the walk using your map to a “super walk”. There are plentiful taxis at Petersfield station.

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