



Wisley Common

Distance: 10 km=6½ miles

easy walking

or 7½ km=5 miles or 3½ km=2¼ miles

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Date written: 26-dec-2009

Refreshments: entrance café in Wisley Gardens
Ockham Bites

Date revised: 10-jun-2014

Map: Explorer 145 (Guildford)

Last update: 5-sep-2023

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

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Heath, woodland, historic landmarks, gardens, river

In Brief

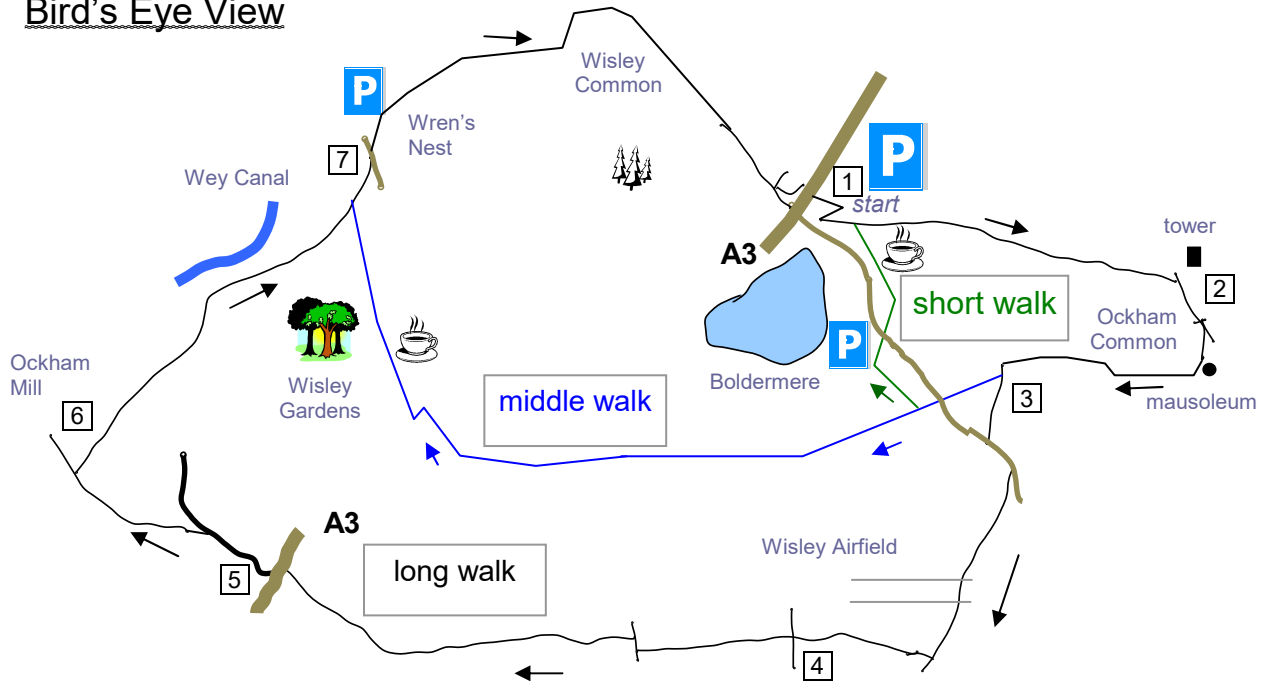
This is a circular walk through history exploring the wild pine and birch slopes of Wisley and Ockham Commons in an accessible part of Surrey. Three options are available. The **full walk** (10 km=6½ miles) visits Ockham Mill and goes past the River Wey with a generous view of Wisley Garden with a chance to visit the garden. The **middle walk** (7½ km=5 miles) goes to Wisley Garden by a more direct route, with an option to stop for coffee. The **short walk** (3½ km=2¼ miles) makes a shorter return, omitting Wisley Common. This walk has many varied and unique features. The great beauty of the heath is tempered a little, on the full walk, by nearness of the A3 trunk road, the undergrowth around Ockham and the fencing around Wisley Gardens. Nevertheless, this walk holds a strange fascination for regular walkers.

This is also a fine winter walk. In the height of a dry summer, walking through the barley on the full walk is a joy, but not if it has been raining. Also in summer, the undergrowth there can be very dense in parts. The full walk contains one short very muddy section, making boots necessary, even in dry weather. Otherwise, good shoes are adequate in the drier months. There are some patches of nettles and scratchy undergrowth on the full walk that may need all your legs and arms to be covered. The Commons are ideal for your dog but the full walk goes a little further afield, with some rough ground, so it may not be the best option for him.



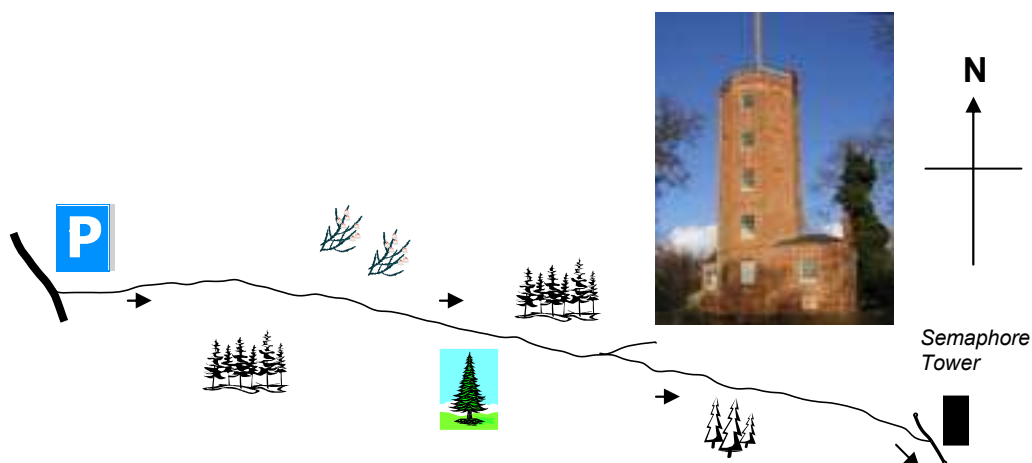
All three versions of this walk begin at the free **Ockham Common Boldermere** car park, nearest **postcode KT11 1ND**, just off the A3 road, near the M25 junction. The Boldermere car park is the first of two car parks in Old Lane. For the short walk, you can also start in the second, Pond car park, a little further along the lane. Both car parks are free, with optional donation to a worthy cause. For the two longer walks, there is the Wisley Common ("**Wren's Nest**") car park (approx postcode **GU23 6QD**). For the middle walk, you could park at Wisley Gardens (postcode **GU23 6QB**). There is a dirt strip in Mill Lane (**GU23 6QT**). For details, see at the end → **Getting there**.

Bird's Eye View



The Walk

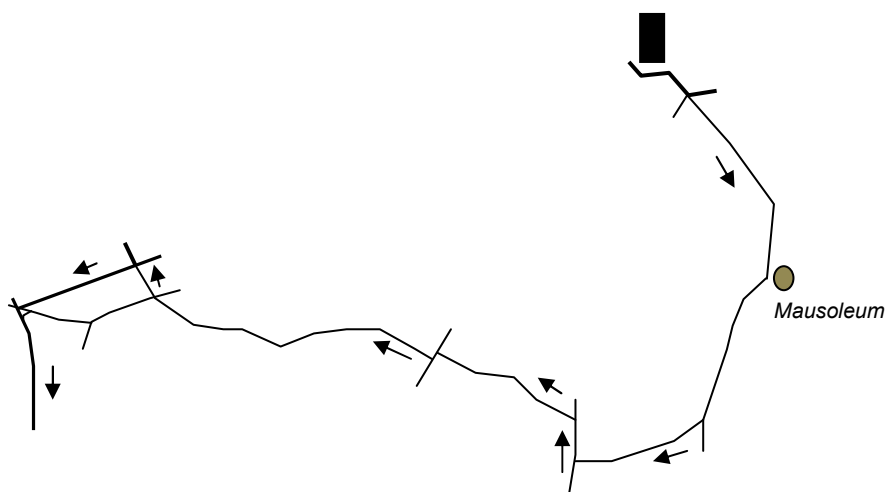
- 1 [See end of Section 7 for a note on the "Junction 10 Improvements".] The first stage takes you up to the Semaphore Tower. About 30m to the right of the café, go past a wooden 1-bar gate by a noticeboard onto a wide track, next to a small blue-and-white sign for the *Chatley Heath Semaphore Tower* (a naval captain with a telescope). Follow those signs, avoiding any minor paths leading off. In 150m, the path goes through a clearing of felled trees, over a horse track, along a narrower path through heather, over another track and then to the **right** of some railings. *If you pass this way during the Christmas season, you may see decorations in the trees for the special events held here.* After 1 km of agreeable walking, you reach the redbrick tower.



The Semaphore Tower formed part of the Admiralty Telegraph joining Portsmouth to Whitehall. Naval orders and news of victories came this way before the invention of the telegraph. The existing 70ft high semaphore tower was built in 1822. The mast still works and there is an information centre inside

but it is only open a handful of days a year. In 2021 it has been sympathetically restored and should be open to visitors on Heritage Open Days.

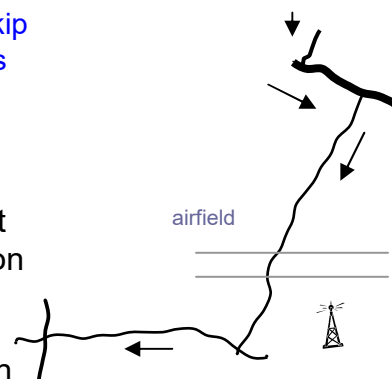
- 2 Keeping the tower on your left, follow the driveway round, turning **left** and **right** round the side of the tower. After 50m, **leave** the tarmac drive as it bends left. There are two obvious paths here on your right, one immediately *before* the bend and one immediately *after* it. Take the *second* right turn, immediately *after* the



bend, a wide woodland path. **Ignore** a lesser path that forks right in 15m towards a giant redwood and keep to the main path round the **left-hand** edge of the Common. In 250m you reach a domed mausoleum. *The occupier, Bernhard Samuelson 1820-1905, was owner of nearby Hatchford Park.* [The rest of this section requires some complex navigation and you need to concentrate for a while!](#) Wheel **right** with the path which takes you in 90m past the remnants of a wooden barrier. Immediately ignore two narrow paths on your left and stay on the main path which curves right and then left. In around 50m you arrive at an oblique T-junction by a post with a yellow arrow. Veer **right** here on a bridleway but, **after only 15m**, turn **left** on a path which promptly passes another wooden barrier. Follow this path for 40m to a T-junction. Turn **left** here on a wide straight path **but**, in less than **10m**, turn **right** on another narrow path. This pleasant twisty path through silver birches and bracken is clear and dry and has no major branch-offs. After 250m or so, you pass through the remains of a wooden railing. 15m after the railing, go **straight over** a crossing path onto a *very narrow* path through bracken. In only 20m, the path ends at a T-junction. Turn **left** here on a *very wide* brick-lined horse path. In 100m or so, you come to a major junction of several wide paths by the open heath. Avoid a path very sharp left, but take the *second* path on your **left**, a wide, fairly straight track under tall oaks, heading for a green meadow. In 50m you will notice on your right a sign "L5" (now *very faded*) painted on a tree, just before the meadow.

Decision point. If you are doing the **short** or the **middle** walk, skip to the section called the **Route by the Stream** near the end of this text. Otherwise, continue with the next section.

- 3 Stay on the track, regardless of the sign, and follow it, passing the meadow on your right and a pond on the left, past a large wooden gate immediately to the right of *Surrey Cottage* and out to a road. Turn **left** on the road. In just over 100m, turn **right** on a footpath over a stile next to a driveway for *The Gardens*. Cross two stiles under a plum tree and go along the left-hand side of a large field. At the field corner, keep the same direction



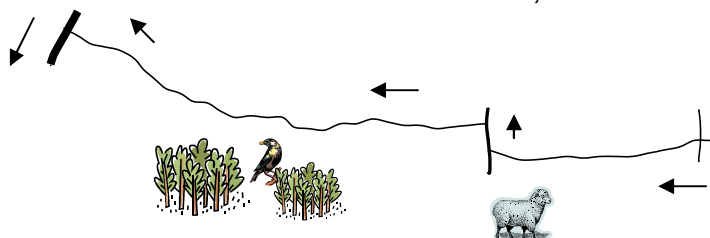
up the centre of the field, heading to the right of what looks like a huge branding iron. *This is in fact an air traffic beacon (a kind of radar lighthouse).* The path crosses the old Wisley Airfield.

Wisley Airfield was requisitioned from farmland and opened in 1944 for flight testing by the nearby Vickers factory. It closed in 1972 and its unusual control tower, converted from an old cottage, was demolished in 1980. It is now (2019) given over to cereal crops.

In high summer, due to undergrowth, walkers recommend you turn **right** and walk the length of the “airfield”, joining the route in [4c](#) below. Continue on the path across another field (with swaying barley or maize in summer) until you meet a (new) wire fence and a fingerpost. (As a diversion, by turning **left** after the fence and **left** again at a road, you reach in 10 minutes the *Black Swan pub* for a good lunch.) Cross the stile and turn immediately **right** following the fence. At the corner of the field, turn **left** with the fence towards farm buildings. Go over a stile and keep hugging the fence on a short but overgrown path, avoiding the farm, passing a lot of debris on your left, reaching a wide farm track.

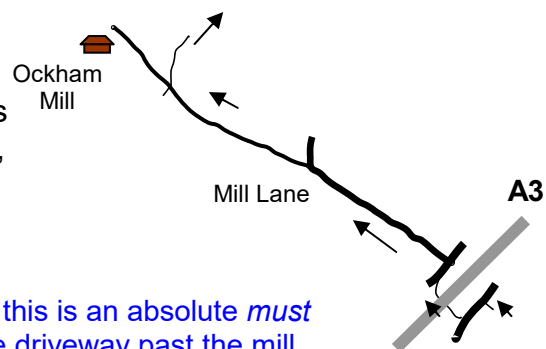


- [4](#) Go briefly **left**, then **right** through concrete blocks on the other side of the hedge. Keep straight ahead, avoiding a right fork across the centre of a cereal field, alongside the fence and a line of poplar trees. *The field on the left is notable for the huge puffball fungi that appear in some seasons.* In 300m or so you meet a metal kissing gate on your left. There are now, in theory, **three** options, although in high summer only the third option may be easily walkable.



- [4a](#) In summer, this option may be very overgrown at point (*) below. Go **left** through this gate. Cross straight over a pasture, over a (bypassable) stile, down a few steps, onto a sunken bridleway and turn **right**. (This bridleway is muddy even in a dry summer and circumvention is possible but difficult; it improves a little after 50m.) In 200m, you pass steps and a stile on your right. (*) Shortly, just after a large concrete block, turn **left** at a markerpost on a footpath, indicated by a yellow arrow. The path follows the left-hand edge of a long field. There are tall trees on the left, often with resident noisy crows. Continue on a sometimes vague path, always along the left edge. (The *Private Property* notice does not apply to the footpath!) After nearly 1 km in total, you pass a redundant concrete stile as you come to a major crossing track. Turn **left** and keep left following the path towards the noise of traffic, with the A3 over/underpass visible ahead, cutting through bushes and through a modern kissing gate, to reach the A3 slip road. Turn **left**.
- [4b](#) (Now quite impassable; retained in case Surrey C.C. clears the path in future.) Ignore the gate and keep straight ahead on a footpath, keeping the wire fence very close on your left, leading over a concrete stile and down steps. Resume as [4a](#) above from point (*). This route is better in winter as it avoids most mud on the track.
- [4c](#) Ignore the gate and turn **right** opposite it on a clear path through a cereal field. Where you meet the galvanised barriers of the “airfield”, turn **left** along the “runway”. In the distant right-hand corner, take a descending track [Sep 2023: closed by construction works: instead, take a footpath to the left of the field, not easily seen from a distance]. As you near the road, keep straight ahead on a narrower path and go through a modern kissing gate, to reach the A3 slip road. Turn **left**.

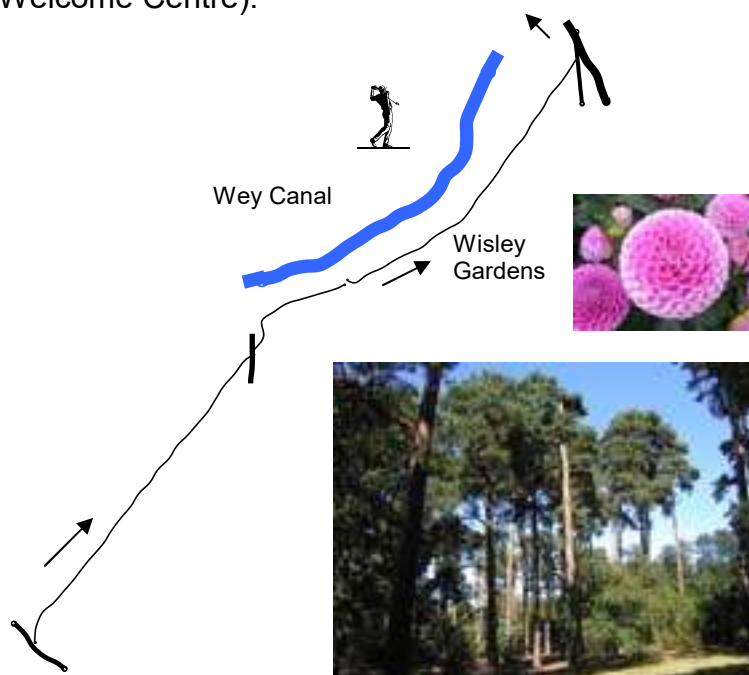
- 5 Turn **right** through the first A3 underpass, veer **right**, cross the sliproad carefully and turn **left** on Mill Lane opposite. *On the right is part of Wisley Gardens, of which more later.* Where the road bends right towards the golf club, keep straight ahead on narrow Mill Lane, passing a seed nursery on your right. Soon after the nursery, there are two fingerposts and here your route is **right** on a narrow enclosed path.



However, the lane you are on leads to *Ockham Mill* and this is an absolute *must* if not seen before, requiring only a small diversion. (The driveway past the mill to the lovely millpond is a right of way.)

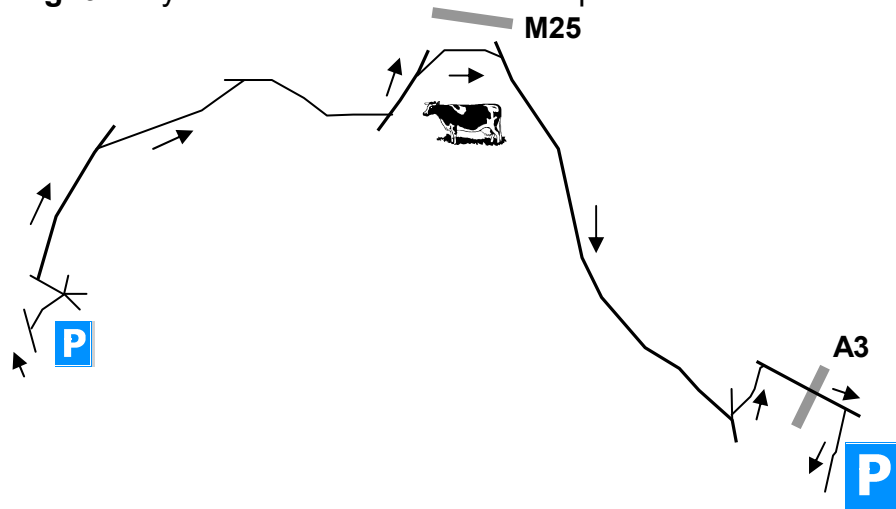
Ockham Mill is a fine brick structure in the beautiful setting of a pond on the River Wey Navigation. There has been a succession of mills at Ockham since probably 1296. The present structure was built by the first Earl of Lovelace (William King-Noel, 8th Baron King of Ockham), lover of gothic architecture, in 1862. The earl's coronets can be seen either side of the sack hoist sited near the top of the building.

- 6 The enclosed path leads between fields. Where it ends, continue between more fields to a drive and cross it to a narrow footpath opposite. The path veers left, goes through a tall kissing gate and runs close to the new glasshouse of Wisley Gardens. It then runs beside the Wey Canal and crosses a bridge over a path onto a fenced path running through the gardens. The path passes through two more metal gates and another tall kissing gate for keeping out deer and finally emerges on a concrete drive. The route is **left** here but the signposted tarmac footway on the right would take you quickly to the entrance to Wisley Gardens (2017: passing a big construction site for the new Welcome Centre).



Wisley RHS garden is one of the world's great gardens. It was given to The Royal Horticultural Society in 1903, and the garden grew from 60 acres (24 hectares) to the present-day 200 acres (80 hectares). It is a beautiful garden in itself with a fine collection of rare plants but it also serves as a centre for practical and innovative design and research. Wisley Garden is open all year. The dazzling glasshouse closes a little earlier than the rest of the garden.

- 7 Where the drive shortly meets a road, keep **left**. In 50m, turn **right** through the Wren's Nest car park (an alternative starting point). Go straight through the car park and exit through a wooden gate beside a larger one. Immediately turn **left** beside the fence. In 50m, opposite a small wooden gate, fork **right** away from the fence on the main path. After two marker posts, in

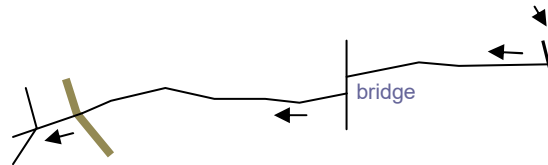


200m or so, you meet a marker post with blue and yellow arrows. Fork **right** here on a wide permissive horse path. In 300m, within sight of the M25 motorway, a footpath joins you from the left as you veer a little right. Follow this wide winding irregular path, keeping to the left-hand side. Finally, at a crosspaths in front of a farm gate, turn **left** on a wide track. In 120m, about 50m before the noisy M25, fork **right** on a wide path which skirts a field on your right, staying by the wire fence. 25m after the corner, turn **right** on a wide track. Follow the track, passing pastureland and sometimes belted Galloway cattle. You soon pass the Birchmere Scout Camp on your right. Later, a large expanse of water with seasonal ducks appears on your left, just after buildings of suitably named Pond Farm on your right. After 750m you reach a T-junction, visibly close to the A3 road by a large fingerpost that points to various landmarks. Ignore a dirt track on the right and abandon the tarmac track as it bends sharp left. Your course is almost straight ahead on a rather obscure grassy path between two silver birches. Follow this path ignoring any minor branches. The path winds through trees and reaches a gate. Turn **right** here over a footbridge across the A3*. On the other side, take the first track **right**, leading back to the car park where the walk began.

[* In 2022-23 there are large-scale forestry works in progress from here, affecting the bridge across the A3 as far as the Ockham Bites / Boldermere car park. The area is part of the "M25 junction 10 improvements" (see "nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/south-east/m25-junction-10" for details) - and the bridge will be replaced by a wider one allowing walkers, cyclists and wildlife to cross. It's a big project that started a few months ago. Fences keep people away from the works and sometimes make it look like paths are blocked. But everything has been perfectly accessible since work started in September or so.]

Route by the Stream ½ km= .3 miles

Take this route if you are doing the **short** or the **middle** walk, missing Ockham Mill and the path through the RHS garden.

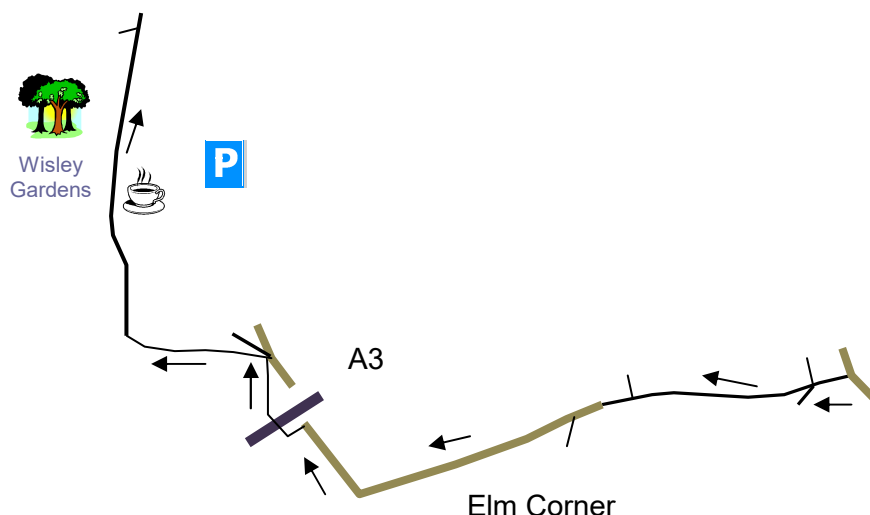


Turn **right** at the “L5” sign on a narrow path into a wood of beech, rowan and chestnut. The green meadow is visible on your left and the pine-clad heath on your right. Closer on your left is a sunken rather murky stream. After 200m you reach a 3-way junction with a path coming down from the open birch heath on your right. Turn sharp **left** here into the woods. *Don't miss this turn!* The path takes you quickly over a stream via a 4-plank bridge. *Immediately after* the bridge turn **right** on a peaty path into the deep woods. The path veers right a bit and on your right you will see a deep swampy area. The road Old Lane gets nearer on your left. Finally you reach the road at a bend. Cross straight over Old Lane to a wide cinder track opposite. In 70m you reach a junction of paths with a 1-bar barrier.

Decision point. If you are doing the **short** walk, skip to the section called the **Short Return** at the end of this text. Otherwise, continue with the next section, the Wisley Garden Quest, with an opportunity to visit the gardens or at least a pleasant coffee stop in prospect.

Wisley Garden Quest 2¼ km=1½ miles

Take this route if you are doing the **middle** walk.



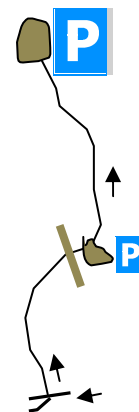
Ignore the track with the wooden barrier and take the **right** fork. Follow this wide, rather rutted track. After 350m on your left, although *not* part of this walk, is a pair of gates leading into Snakes Field, a conservation area. Continue on the track, passing a noticeboard in another 100m or so and reaching the start of the tarmac in the hamlet of Elm Corner. Continue ahead on the lane for another 300m and follow it as it turns **right** on a concrete surface heading for the A3 road. On reaching the A3, turn **left** and cross the road by a pedestrian bridge. At the other side, a wide path takes you down into woodland and you reach a tarmac lane by the entrance to Wisley RHS Gardens. Keep **left** here on a narrow path with the entrance drive about 15m on your right. Your path bends right into the car park. Go straight across, passing a main block on your left which used to be the welcome centre. Keep all buildings on your left till you pass the spanking new visitor's centre with its shop and coffee shop where you can take refreshment without necessarily buying an entrance ticket. [A visit to the gardens is an absolute **must-do**. For more details see section \[6\]\(#\) of the main walk.](#) Continue walking on pedestrian tarmac, with everything tight on your left, finally heading for "car parks 4 and 5". You come out eventually near the road as a tarmac footpath joins you from the left. Keep **right** to meet the road.

Now re-join the main walk at section [7](#).

Short Return $\frac{3}{4}$ km = $\frac{1}{2}$ mile

Take this route if you are finishing the **short** walk, returning directly to the car parks.

Ignore both main tracks ahead and turn sharp **right** on a path into the Common, signposted *Horse Ride*. After 100m, by a marker post, keep **right** on the main path. (The lakeside is unfortunately not easily accessible.) Soon the path goes along a boardwalk. Take any path up the slope ahead to reach Old Lane again. Cross the road into Ockham Common Pond car park. For the Boldermere car park, take the first path on the left with a sign for *café and toilets*. At the top of the slope, fork **left** as indicated. Keep following the numerous signs, soon reaching the car park where the walk began.



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Getting there

By car: park in the **Ockham Common Boldermere** car park. To get there from the London area, go to the A3 / M25 junction and take the sliproad towards Guildford. (If you come from the A3, you need to take the exit for the M25 and go straight on at the roundabout. If you come from the Guildford direction, you need to do an about-turn at the M25 roundabout.) In about 600 yds, leave the sliproad by turning **left** onto a narrow road (Old Lane) signposted *Effingham* that runs through the forest beside the lake (*Boldermere*). The car park is immediately on the **left**. The alternative **Pond** car park is further along Old Lane, but it is often closed in winter. An alternative starting point for the middle and long walks is the **Wren's Nest** car park on Wisley Common.

By bus: the special Wisley Gardens bus 715 runs hourly from Guildford or Kingston railway station, including Sundays. Check the timetables. (Join the walk in the *Wisley Garden Quest*.)

