



Ashampstead

Distance: 12 km=7½ miles easy walking
or two walks of 9 km=5½ miles and 7 km=4½ miles

Region: Berkshire Date written: 9-sep-2019

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Refreshments: Yattendon

Map: Explorer 159 (Reading) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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Villages, woodland paths, churches, easy field paths

In Brief

Here is a walk off the beaten track through rural West Berkshire visiting two villages of quite different character. Ashampstead is a rather isolated spread-out village of pleasant residences which can only be accessed along country lanes. It has a village green and a church famous for its wall paintings. Yattendon is a small charming village of visibly medieval origin, with an eventful history, clustered around a tiny square. Much of the walk is through woodland, with a breezy section across open fields on the return leg.

This walk is divided into two parts which can be done as separate walks on different days, or as a single walk.

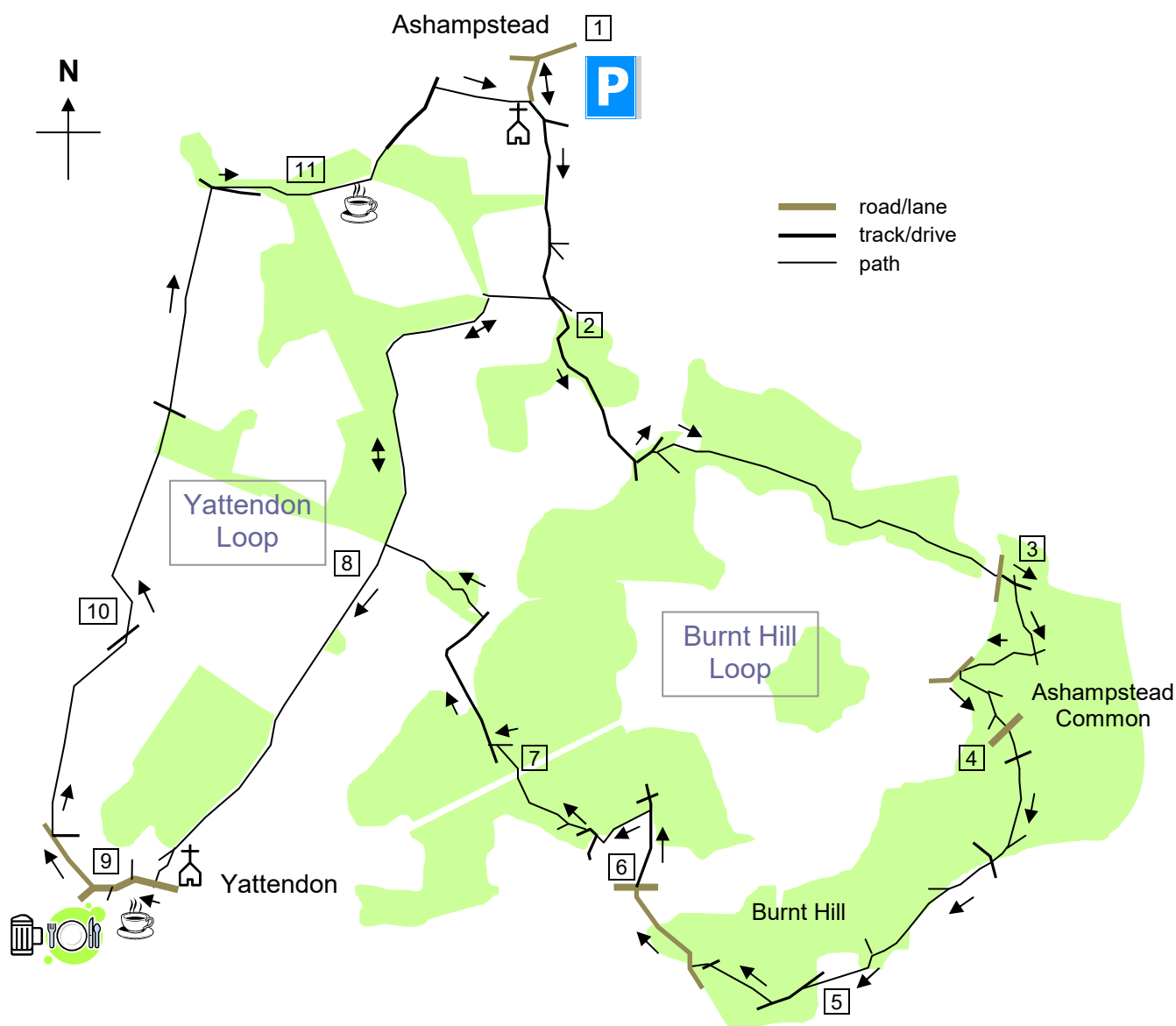
There is an excellent pub, either on the *Double Loop* or on the *Yattendon Loop* (to enquire at the *Royal Oak*, ring 01635-201325).



There are bound to be some nettles and other undergrowth on this walk, because of the long woodland paths, so shorts are probably inadvisable. Trainers or sensible outdoor shoes are adequate in summer but generally this is a walk best undertaken wearing boots. With only one main road to cross twice straight over, this is an excellent walk for your dog too.

The walk begins at the village green in Ashampstead, between Reading, Newbury and Streatley, Berkshire, www.w3w.co/alarmed.newest.barbarian, postcode **RG8 8RS**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1 Starting from the main road with the green on your left, continue ahead for 30m to turn **left** into Church Lane (Pinfold Lane). Pass the village hall (a part-time “pub”) and some effective topiary to reach the church of St Clement’s which is an absolute must-see.

Ashampstead (“Esshamstede” in the Middle Ages) is famous for its church which has some of the finest wall paintings in the country. They appear to have been painted in the 1200s by a Benedictine monk, perhaps from Reading Abbey, or even Normandy. The style is certainly of the Windsor School of this period and the technique used was similar to fresco painting. These colourful pictures were used by the priest to help instruct the congregation about the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity and the appearance of Gabriel to the Shepherds. The figure of Christ and the Apostles over the chancel arch is particularly powerful, with souls being dragged down to Hell on the right and admitted to Heaven on the left. The artist paid particular attention to detail, right down to the dogs barking at the archangel. The new wave of Protestantism in the 16th century did not agree with such “iconoclasm” and all the paintings were then plastered over. They were further covered in Biblical

texts during the 18th century. But, in 1886, some of the plaster fell off during a storm and the vicar discovered his church's hidden treasure. They have been treated to ensure their future preservation in the 20s, the 50s and, most recently, in 1990.

After the church, continue along the lane, passing an old village pump, ignoring a footpath on your right (the return route from Yattendon). At a signpost, ignore a bridleway on your left and continue on the tarmac as it curves right. After a row of cottages your route becomes a stony track. Ignore some paths on your left. In 600m after the church, you reach a junction.

Decision point. For the *Yattendon Loop*, with a pub stop, skip down this text to the section called **Fieldside West**. For the **Double Loop** (including the pub stop) or the **Burnt Hill Loop**, continue as below.

- 2 Ignore the footpath on your right and a farm track that forks left and continue on the track into trees. This wide track runs through a band of trees with fields visible each side, eventually winding its way downhill and out briefly into the open. It curves uphill again to meet a crossing track and signpost. Turn **left** here. In only 50m, at a junction, fork **right** on a track and immediately fork **left** at a marker post, choosing the blue-arrowed bridleway rather than the yellow-arrowed footpath. Your route runs along the right-hand side of an open grassy space and veers **left** by a marker post into trees. The next km consists almost entirely of a pleasant undulating stroll on a good path through dense woodland. You pass very briefly through an open area and pass a solid wooden post. You come out finally by a wooden shed belonging to a house and garden with a water feature, ending at a tarmac lane in the hamlet of Ashampstead Common.
- 3 Cross straight over the lane to a track opposite. In only 30m, opposite a wooden gate on your left, avoid the narrow path straight ahead and instead turn **right** at a marker post onto a narrow winding woodland path. In 200m or so, you reach a crossing bridleway with a marker post. Turn **right** here to reach the lane again in 200m. Turn **left**, quickly arriving at a small settlement where the lane bends right. Turn **left** here as directed by a fingerpost on a shingle drive beside the cottages. Just before the last cottage, your path veers **left** at a marker post into woods. Immediately keep **right** at a fork. Only 50m into the wood, look for a signpost with a symbol for "horse riders" and turn **right** here. In 15m you reach a marker post with two bridleway arrows. Choose the **left** fork. In 100m you reach the main Yattendon Road.
- 4 Cross over the main road towards a 2-way fingerpost and take, as directed, a grassy path through woodland. In 100m or so go straight over a wide crossing track, going under tall beeches, downhill past a marker post. You pass another marker post at the bottom of the slope where another path joins, quickly leading to a junction of lanes, with a signpost, and a telegraph pole opposite. Cross straight over to a wide track opposite. In 150m, you come to a signpost [Aug 2023: covered in leaves and brambles: don't miss!] at a fork by an electricity pole. Choose the **left** fork, the narrower path. You pass a christmas-tree farm on your left, occasional gardens, pines and one or two large houses. In 300m you enter a sheltered glade beneath a tall beech. Keep straight ahead, as indicated by the purple arrow.
- 5 Your path runs beside a wooden fence and joins a track from the left coming from *Linden House*. You meet another driveway from the right, as

you pass a large wooden gate on your left. Keep straight on, to be greeted by the distant sight of *Burnt Hill House* preceded by its large brick out-house. Before you reach these main buildings, opposite a cream-coloured cottage on your left called *Newfields*, look right for a multiple signpost. Turn **right** here and immediately **left** on a narrow footpath. Follow this bendy path through woodland. In 250m, your path crosses a major track to arrive immediately at a road junction in Burnt Hill village. *Opposite is the tiny Burnthill Methodist Chapel.* Turn **right** on the road, passing *Nut and Bolt House*, amongst others, and arriving at the main Yattendon Road.

6 Cross straight over the main road onto a wide byway. Follow the track to the start of some woodland. Continue on this track for around 250m until you reach a 4-way fingerpost. Turn **left** here onto a path that runs along the top edge of a horse pasture. (If you find yourself at a woodland junction where the track curves left, you have gone too far.) As you approach a large timbered house, turn **right** just before the house on a track marked as a footpath. Where the track bends left into the back yard, keep ahead over the grass and turn **left** on a cinder track. In only 10m, at a marker post with a yellow arrow, turn **right** on a woodland path. After a section under majestic tall pines and broadleaf, you come out to the end of a long mown-grass strip (or “ride”) which stretches to your left to Yattendon Court, barely visible in the distance.

7 Cross directly over the mown-grass strip to a narrow footpath on the other side. [Aug 2023: walker missed this footpath; if unclear, simply turn **left** in the grass strip and **right** in 50m on the concrete drive described below.] There is a short section of bracken, but the path has been well forged by other walkers. In 100m you come to a T-junction. Turn **left**, as per the yellow arrow, to arrive at a concrete drive. Turn **right** on the drive, soon passing a murky pond on your left. Stay on the drive as it bends right. Shortly before a gate into a piggery, turn **left** on a track, heading for an old barn and farm house. Follow the track round to the **right** of the buildings and keep straight on, on a track with a pinewood on your left. Ignore a junction on your right and press on, with a crop field now on your left, finally reaching a major T-junction and a 3-way signpost.

Decision point. If you are doing the shorter **Burnt Hill loop**, missing Yattendon, skip down this text to the section called **Fieldside East**. Otherwise, for the **Double Loop**, continue as below. Otherwise ...

Turn **left** at the major T-junction.

8 At first, you are on a wide grassy path between fields. You next follow an easy path for nearly 500m, with woodland on your right, with some of the impressive rolling estate of Yattendon Park on your left. As you near the village, go through a small wooden gate on your **left** into the cemetery, quickly leading to the lovely spired church of St Peter and Paul.

Yattendon church is full of memorials which tell its history, beginning in 1450 when the “new” church was built. Sir John Norreys (1400?-1466) was Master of the Wardrobe to the ill-fated King Henry VI and stumped up the considerable funds. Another Sir John Norreys (1547?-1597) was a sort of military counterpart to Sir Francis Drake, harassing the Spanish on land, only with Queen Elizabeth's very implicit approval, dying an eerie uncanny death in Ulster. Sir John Gallini was an Italian-born opera and dance impresario in Georgian London and friend of Haydn. Alfred Waterhouse, the late-Victorian architect (of the Natural History Museum etc.), also from Yattendon, added much to the

church, including the prominent spire. His son-in-law, the poet laureate Robert Bridges, published the *Yattendon Hymnal* which influenced later composers such as Vaughan Williams.




Continue to the road and turn **right** into the village centre. The *Pantry* on your left serves teas and snacks. There is a General Store (which closes midday on Sunday). The *Royal Oak* on your right, a celebrated pub which is both a typical village local and a hotel / restaurant with clients from far and wide, with a lovely garden and an impressive menu which includes “12 hour slow roast shoulder of lamb (30 mins)”.

*At the time of the Conquest, the village was called “Etingedene” which means “the valley of the people of Eata” but, after many transformations, the new name stuck. The Saxon village covered eight “hides” and included 13 serfs & villeins (tenant farmers) and 6 “bordars” (cottagers). Yattendon Castle, home of the Norreys, was levelled by Cromwell's troops in the Civil War. The Manor at Yattendon was home to the De La Beche family whose gigantic effigies can be seen in nearby Aldworth (see that walk). Later, it was here that Anne Boleyn famously dropped her handkerchief, for the lord's brother, Henry Norreys, to pick it up, leading to ill-founded rumours that cost both their heads. The last of the Norreys, the Earl of Berkshire, shot himself in prison in 1622. In 1878, builders were excavating the foundations of Yattendon Court (one of a succession of great houses with that name) when they struck treasure: a 59-piece Bronze Age collection including spearheads, sword parts, gouges, knives and axes. The “Yattendon Hoard” can be viewed in a Newbury museum (see also the “Cronall” walk on this site). Later famous sons of Yattendon include newspaper magnate Lord Iliffe and Egon Ronay, author of the famous restaurant guide (the *Royal Oak* really should be in it!).*

9 After your break, continue on the road, with the pub on your right, but immediately fork **right**, signposted *Hampstead Norries*. In 200m, just after a driveway, and 1m *after* a signpost, fork **right** on a footpath, going through a wooden swing-gate and a barrier. Take a path straight ahead along the right-hand side of a small meadow, to go through a similar gate into a crop field. Take a path straight ahead across the centre of the field, passing a small tree under an electric wire. After the tree, your path continues in exactly the same direction, heading for a gap in the hedge visible ahead. When you reach the gap, do not go through it, but veer **right** along the edge of the same field. [Nov 2024: if the crop field has been freshly tilled, the border may be narrow and wet; it is then much more practical to go through the gap to reach a clean farm track which leads on to the next section.] Ignore two wide gaps in the hedge and press on to the end of the grass verge where there is a marker post. Go diagonally **left** here, through a gap, over a track and across the corner of the adjoining field.

10 Go through a narrow gap in the hedge and a small wooden gate into a crop field. Turn **left** along the edge and **right** in the first corner. At the far side, continue on a grass path which runs between tall hedges. At the far end, cross a semi-tarmac drive to a narrow path which you can see leads to a small wooden gate. After the gate (which turns out to be avoidable), keep straight ahead along the right-hand side of the field. At the far side, go through a small wooden gate and a belt of shrubbery with tall pines into another field. Keep dead straight on, passing to the right of a small round pedunculate(?) oak. At the other side is a wide dusty track. Cross straight over it and veer **right** on a narrow path running in a band of trees parallel to the track.

- 11  Your path continues as a wide path through the centre of the wood, shortly passing on your right an enclosure and a farm complex which includes *Casey Fields Farm Shop* which also has a coffee shop (closing at 5pm or 4pm on Sundays). Veer **left** on a concrete drive. Avoid a track on your right into a field but, just after the drive curves left, at a signpost, go **right** through a small wooden gate and take a green path across the field towards Ashampstead church. A bypassable swing-gate and a small wooden gate lead you finally through the churchyard, with another opportunity to visit the church, where a **left** turn on the lane takes you back to the centre of the village and the green where the walk began.

Fieldside West 1 km= $\frac{2}{3}$ mile

At the junction, turn **right** on a signed footpath running along the valley between fields. 20m before a large metal gate, go **left** through a wooden barrier into a wood. On emerging, turn **right** along the edge of a large clover field and keep **left** round a bend in the corner. In 600m, you reach a 3-way junction with a signpost. Keep straight ahead at the junction.

Now join the walk to Yattendon, starting from section [8](#).

Fieldside East 1 km= $\frac{2}{3}$ mile

Turn **right** at the major T-junction. Your path goes along the right-hand edge of a large clover field and bends right in the far corner. About 25m before the end of the field, look left for a fingerpost and turn **left** here, as per the yellow arrow, into woods. On the other side, pass a wooden barrier and turn **right** on a farm track running along the valley. At the end, turn **left** on a stony track between fields. Soon you pass a row of cottages as the track becomes tarmac. Straight ahead, you pass the church on your left and quickly reach the centre of Ashampstead where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: You can reach Ashampstead by means of a pleasant scenic route from the M4 motorway. Come off at Junction 12 (Theale). Follow the A4 road to the second roundabout and turn **right** onto the A340 as for *Pangbourne*. In 500 yds, turn **left** as for *Bradfield*. Go straight through Bradfield on the Ashampstead Road and under the M4 motorway. Keep following the narrow lane following signs for *Ashampstead* until you reach the green. Park in one of the spaces around the green, being careful to stay out of range of cricket balls in summer.

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