



Hertfordshire Commons and Forests Northchurch and Berkhamsted Commons Little Gaddesden, Ashridge Park, Frithsden Beeches

Distance: 13 km=8½ miles

easy walking

Region: Hertfordshire

Date written: 31-jul-2016

Author: Phegophilos

Last update: 9-jan-2022

Refreshments: Little Gaddesden

Map: Explorer 181 (Chiltern Hills North) *hopefully not needed*

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

Public rights are restricted to printing, copying or distributing this document exactly as seen here, complete and without any cutting or editing. See *Principles* on main webpage.

Woodland trails, commonland, grasslands, parkland, nature reserves

In Brief

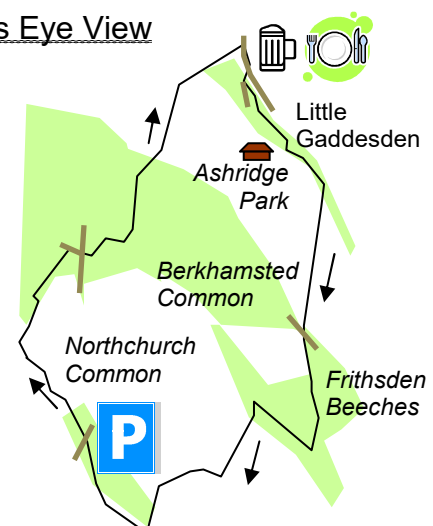
This is a mesmerising walk through forests and across green commonland in western Hertfordshire, easily reached from the London area via the M25. This walk takes some unexpected turns to find the most rewarding woodland paths. Much of the land along the way is owned by the National Trust, including areas of outstanding natural beauty and ancient woodland. They include Frithsden Beeches and the sweeping downland of Ashridge Park.



The nettles which you might find close to farmland are almost completely absent on this walk, so shorts can be worn. The ground underfoot is generally firm and easy, although the woodland paths will inevitably have patches of mud in the wetter months, making boots a wise option. This walk is perfect for a dog, except for one section with livestock which can be bypassed (see the text). There are **no stiles**.

The walk begins in the **Northchurch Common car park** off the B4506 New Road in **Northchurch**, just outside **Berkhamsted**, Hertfordshire, www.w3w.co/ahead.parkland.themes postcode **HP4 1LS**. The car park is on the left after a bend (if you are going north). For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Bird's Eye View



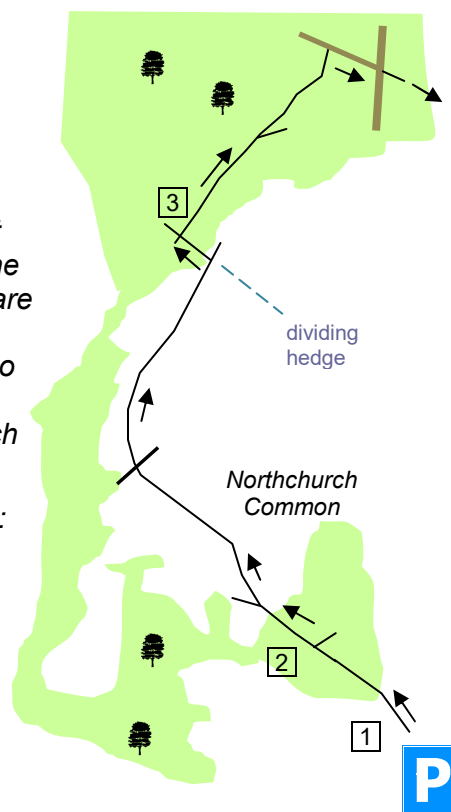
The Walk

Leg 1: Northchurch to Rail Copse 2¾ km=1¾ miles

- 1 Starting in the Northchurch Common car park, walk to the end of the car park, furthest from the road, and take a popular path through trees. In about 200m, you are out into the wide breezy heath of Northchurch Common.

Taken with adjacent Berkhamsted Common, Northchurch Common is the largest in the Chilterns at 427 ha. It forms part of the Ashridge Estate, run by the National Trust, like most of this walk. The commons are free to roam but only local vigilance has kept them so as, just before the Civil War in 1642, the Crown tried to fence off the Common. The year 1865 saw a momentous event in the history of the Commons which had repercussions for the whole country.

Remember, a “common” is not usually publicly owned: it merely gives rights of access, grazing, foraging etc. to the common people, enshrined in Common Law. The 24-year old Lord Brownlow whose family owned the Ashridge Estate thought otherwise. He erected a 5-ft high fence around the Common. In 1866, a local radical MP, Augustus Smith, hired 120 tough Irish navvies from the East End of London and brought them under cover of darkness to dismantle the fence. This act, known as the “Battle of Berkhamsted Common”, galvanised the local people and prevented any further attempts at enclosure, although the case dragged on for years, resulting in victory and a clarification of the law. The “Battle” is commemorated with a nature trail and an exhibition.

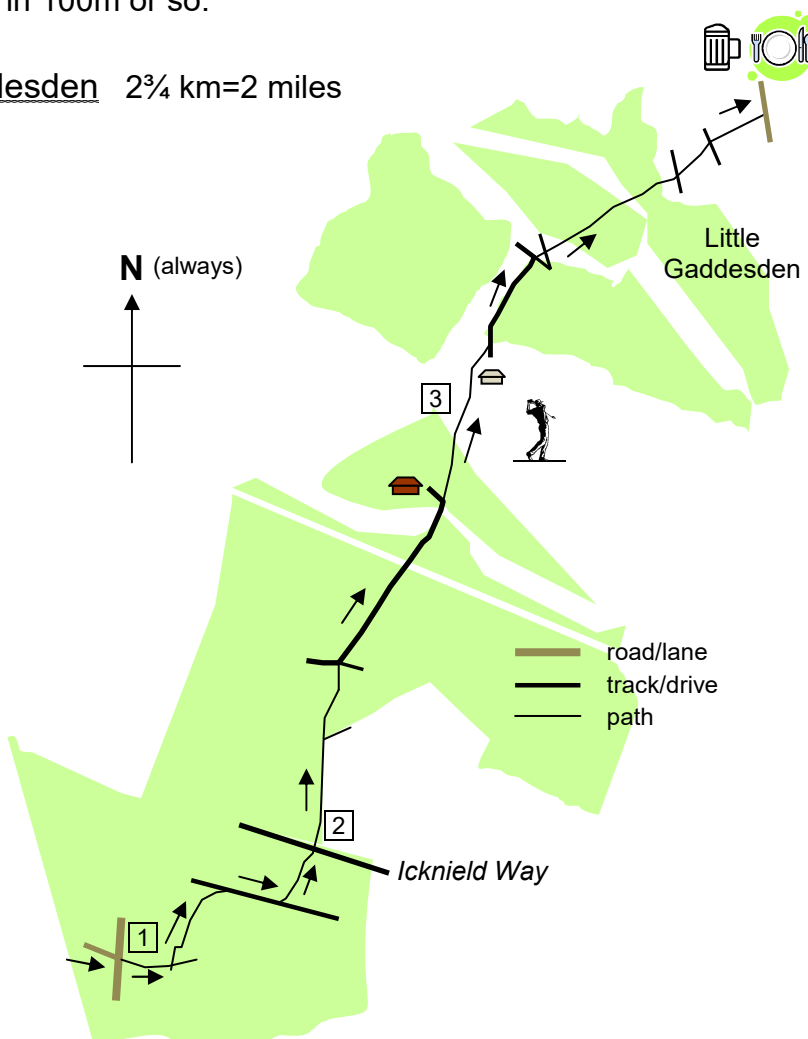


- 2 Turn **left** on a path along the edge of the Common. In 150m or so, your path forks. Avoid the left-hand path into bracken and choose the **right** fork across the open space. In 150m, on reaching a line of trees, veer **left**. Keep straight on along the main path across the Common, heading for the trees on the other side. When you approach the corner, wheel **right**, staying in the open space, crossing a bridleway that bisects it, near a marker post. Follow the long side of the Common for another 500m, probably meeting a number of dog strollers. In about 300m, you pass a large rotten tree trunk and reach a tall hedge, a long bank of bracken and hawthorn, which divides the Common in two. Turn abruptly **left** immediately opposite the hedge on a narrow but clear path through bracken and into woods.
- 3 Just 25m into the woods, you meet a crossing path, with a marker post visible about 10m on your left. Turn **right** here on a beautiful green woodland bridleway, parallel to the Common on your right. In 150m, you meet a marker post as you go over a crossing path, staying on the bridleway. *You are on part of the Hertfordshire Way (HW), a 267 km=166 mile circular trail.* In just over 150m, your path appears to fork. The right fork seems to be more established, but in fact it only leads to a car park. Instead take the **left** fork which is really straight ahead, staying on the HW. Your route is

straight on for nearly 250m to a road. The path is underused and rather unclear and you need to avoid several minor paths and cross a clearing trying to keep the same direction at all times. *The NT coniferous woodland on your left is called Rail Copse, the site of eight circular historic extraction pits.* When you eventually reach the road by a signpost, turn **right** on the road to reach a junction with a major road in 100m or so.

Leg 2: Rail Copse to Little Gaddesden 2¾ km=2 miles

- 1 **This section needs concentration.** Cross carefully straight over the road onto a bridleway, still on the HW, signposted *Coldharbour Farm* ¾. Very shortly, your path veers left across a more open area and, about 100m from the road, you will notice a yellow-topped post 15m on your right. Turn **left** here on a narrow path and immediately keep to the **right** of a large birch tree. Follow this winding path through more birch and oak till, after 200m, you reach a long wide straight clearing. Veer **right** and follow a path along the left-hand side of the clearing. In 150m, your path zigzags round a group of fir trees. Immediately turn **left** on a narrow path (*not* sharp left through the firs). This path leads down to a major surfaced path, part of the ancient Icknield Way, by the corner of a cow pasture.



- 2 Cross straight over and take a path along a line of beeches with the pasture on your right. In 230m, where the edge of the meadow veers off right, ignore a yellow arrow and keep straight ahead, thus leaving the meadowside. In 50m, you pass a yellow-topped post. Follow this twisty but clear path to pass a similar post after 120m. 50m after, you meet a crossing at a bend in a tarmac drive. Keep straight ahead on the tarmac. In 200m you pass a wide green "ride" with Ashridge House visible on your right. You pass some golf links, a bench and *Old Park Lodge*, a 17th-century verderer's house. (A *verderer* was a kind of official forest warden / gamekeeper.) Leave the wide track by keeping straight ahead to the right of a large barn.
- 3 As your path comes down onto the golf links, pass to the right of a yellow-topped post and head for a multiple signpost (which turns out to be for the sole use of golfers). Pass just to the left of the club house, after which your waymarked path forks **right** into trees, passing close to the club car park. Now join a tarmac drive straight ahead, marked as a public footpath *Little Gaddesden Church* ¾. At a T-junction where the drive bends left, veer **right** past a yellow-topped post and across the grass, cross a shingle drive to *The Hook* and take a path between fences, passing a stout wooden

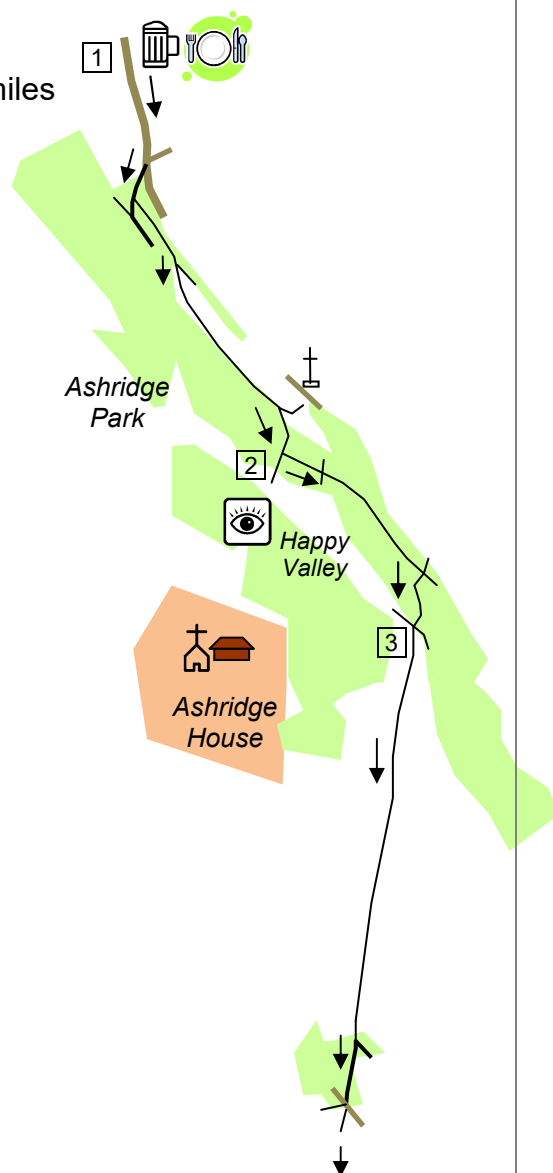
post. After another post, continue ahead through woodland to cross another fairway (eyes right!), down through trees and straight ahead, following a yellow arrow, on a path between hedges. You catch a glimpse of houses and gardens before you cross a tarmac drive and ascend some shallow steps. Follow the enclosed path to arrive at the car park of the *Bridgewater Arms* in Little Gaddesden, for a welcome rest up.

The Bridgewater Arms used to be the village school house as you might tell from the unusual square stone appearance. Meals are apparently available all day every day "from £5" but you need to book (01442-842408) if you are a group. They also provide "coffee and cake £3.29" (as 2016). Ales are Greene King and all can be scoffed or quaffed in the separate garden.

The parish of Little Gaddesden, apart from village, covers much of the Ashridge Estate explored in this walk. It has been home to a bevy of fascinating characters. In the late 1200s, John O'Gaddesden published the "Rosa Medicinæ" which soon became the first printed medical text book in English. Throughout the centuries, witches inhabited the parish, being drawn to a location called Witches Bottom. The "Witch of Little Gaddesden" was a certain Rosina Jane Massey (1832-1866). Her husband was a poet and a "Christian Socialist" committed to the "Labourer's cause". (What did they talk about at home?) Another resident Michael McCaul had an eventful career as a spy with the security services. For more information, Roger Bolton's book "The Witch, The Poet and The Spy" makes a fascinating read. Present-day residents include John Motson (commentator and walking encyclopedia of football), TV presenter Fiona Bruce, Rolling Stone Ronnie Wood (when he's at home) and several ex-footballers and actors.

Leg 3: Little Gaddesden to Frithsden Rise 3 km=2 miles

- 1 **See map overleaf.** After a probable break, with the pub on your left, walk along the road for 250m to a junction, passing several Tudor and neo-Tudor houses, some worthy of a scene from gothic horror. (On your left is a lane leading to Little Gaddesden Church and the Bridgewater Chapel, worth a visit.) Fork **right** here and pass between white posts down a driveway signposted for *Ashridge Hult*. In 40m, just before the tarmac curves left, go **left** through a black metal kissing-gate. Follow this narrow level path along a slope of brambles and beeches. In 200m, as you come out onto the open grass, take the **right** fork, the more level option. *This charming grassy slope lies on one side of Happy Valley which runs beside Ashridge House.* After 450m on the grass, your path forks again. (As a guide, looking to your left across the road, you will see a stone cross.) Take the **right** fork, going down and through a wooden swing-gate. (If you find the path curving left towards the road, you have overlooked the right fork and need to backtrack.)



Ashridge is a house, a park and an estate. After life as a priory, it was bought in 1604 by the Egerton family one of whom was made 1st Earl of Bridgewater (hence the pub name). The family vault where they are buried is not in the house but in Little Gaddesden Church. The present house was built during 1808-1814 after plans by architect James Wyatt and is regarded as a matchless example of early Gothic Revival. The Chapel was also designed by James Wyatt. Its prominent spire was demolished in 1922 to stop it collapsing on the house and the spire you see now is a fibreglass replica erected in 1969. Another strand of the family who took it over in 1848 were the Brownlows (see the unflattering account above). The house is now a management training college. It is occasionally open to guided tours.

2 Turn **right** down a wide grassy slope with Ashridge House and its adjoining chapel clearly visible. Go down the slope, but for only 50m, before the woodland ends, as far as a crossing path by a rustic bench. Turn **left** here on a path into Cromer Wood. In 100m, your path crosses a footpath marked by a yellow arrow and you go through gates in the black metal fence. Your path runs over a viaduct, taking you into some spectacular mature beech woods. Nearly 300m after the viaduct, you encounter another crossing footpath, opposite a large newish house on your left. The path on your right is unmistakable because it runs between low walls, looking rather like a water conduit. Turn **right** on this path. It comes out through the black metal fence into the grounds of Ashridge Park. The official footpath is diagonally **left**, as directed by a yellow arrow on a post. This slightly overgrown path goes downhill through trees and shrubs until it meets the path that runs along the valley. (If you reach the path any old how that's just as good.)

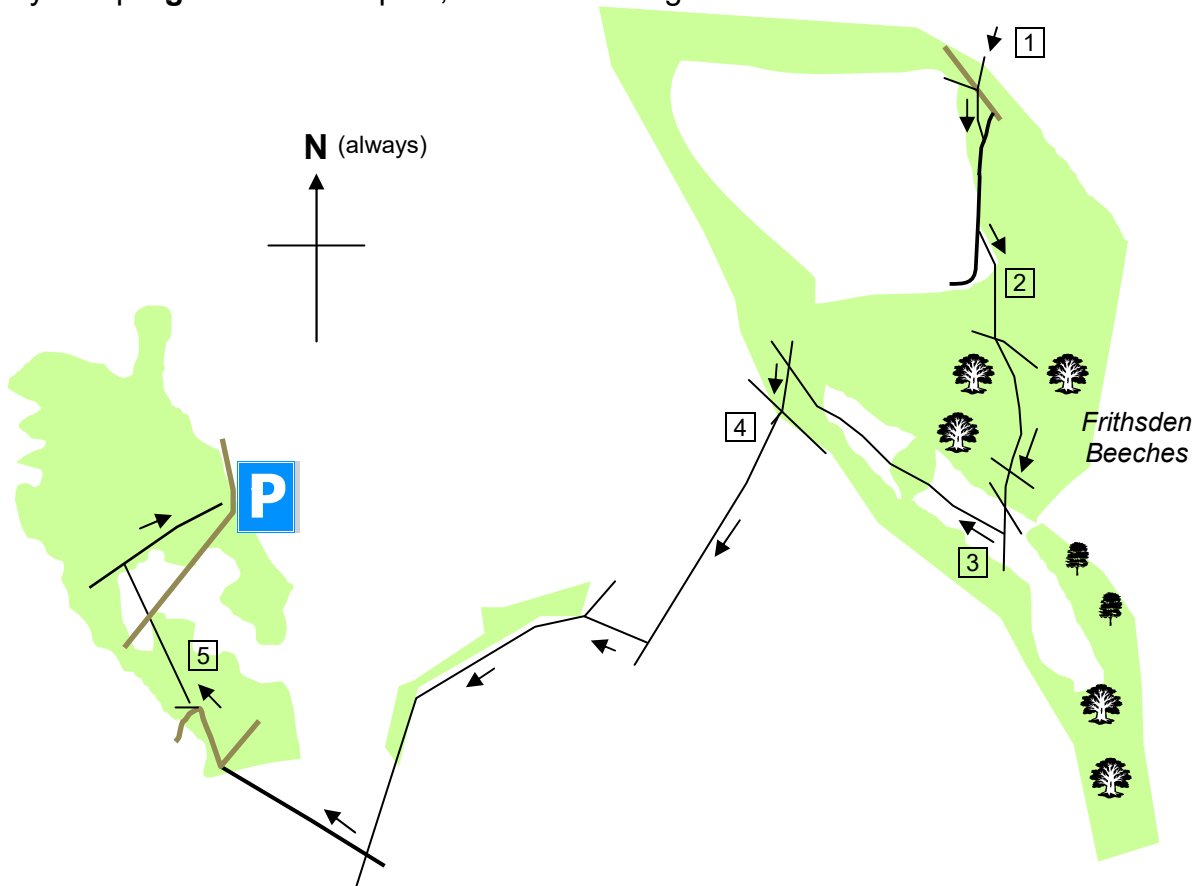
3 Your course now is straight on in the same direction up the centre of the vast grassy slope ahead. Aim to go through a wooden gate in the fence in 200m. *If you are worried about cattle in the field, it is perfectly ok to keep left (and go over a stile instead of through the gate) or to veer away right near the trees, as long as you reach the brow of the hill ahead. However, the cattle here are well used to people and were found to be very docile.* At the top, just after a rustic bench, go through a wooden swing-gate and follow a well-kept path between wire fences. Soon there is a laurel hedge on your right hiding houses and gardens. Your path becomes a tarmac drive which joins a lane coming from the left. This is Frithsden Rise. It comes down to a road opposite a small parking area.

Leg 4: Frithsden Rise to Northchurch 4½ m km=2¾ miles

1 **See mini-map overleaf.** Cross straight over the road and take the **left**-hand of two bridleways, keeping exactly the same direction as you came. Your path goes uphill through woods and into open grassland. Veer **left** along the edge and join (or walk parallel to) a tarmac or stony peripheral driveway. After around 250m, at the first corner, where the driveway wheels right, leave it by continuing straight ahead on a narrow path into the wild woodland of Frithsden Beeches (NT).

Your brief introduction to Frithsden Beeches only shows you the fringes. The wood is famous for its huge beeches which were originally pollarded, i.e. trimmed for firewood or material. Because of its brooding atmosphere, the wood is a favourite film and TV set, used in parts of Harry Potter, Sleepy Hollow and Jonathan Creek.

- 2 (There are a lot of **yellow-topped posts** marking your way. To save writing they will be referred to by the letters “**ytp**”. The loop followed in this walk gives you fair bite of this landscape and of course there are short cuts.) At a junction under a large beech, keep straight ahead, following a blue arrow. About ½ km into the wood, you reach a junction of footpaths by an unusual 4-way fingerpost: keep straight on. In 100m you reach a diagonal crossing path with a 4-way marker post: keep straight on again. (As a guide, you will see a **ytp** on your left and an open area of bracken on your right.) In another 80m, you meet a **ytp** with blue arrows just before a second **ytp**. Turn very sharp **right** at this first post, almost doubling back.



- 3 This section needs concentration. Your path runs through bracken for 70m, going past a **ytp** [May 2020: lying broken on the ground]. Ignore a minor path that forks left shortly after. A **ytp** 130m later is followed by some dense woodland. Another **ytp** follows after 130m and another **ytp** after 80m. After more dense woodland, you pass another **ytp** at a distance of 150m. In a further 130m, just before another **ytp**, turn **left** on an official path which is unmarked and rather overgrown. (If you come to a large wooden field gate at a junction with a track, you have missed the turning and need to backtrack 170m.) Once found, the path becomes perfectly clear. It comes down to a crossing path by a junction of green meadows.
- 4 Cross the path to go through a modern kissing-gate. Go steeply down a flowery meadow and up the side of the next meadow to go through a kissing-gate into a crop field. Keep ahead along the left-hand side of the crop field at the end of which is a seat offering a brief rest. Turn **right** here along the top of the same field on a permissive path. In the corner, veer **left** on a path which runs beside a wide band of trees on your right. *Berkhamsted with its water tower is visible ahead to your left.* Stay on this clear path, passing a small pond on your left and various properties on your right. After around 300m, at the corner, go through a wooden swing-gate to a

crosspaths. Turn **right** and follow this rough driveway past houses, using the grass verge where present. You reach a tarmac lane at a bend by a signpost. Keep straight on along the tarmac and, where the lane hairpins left, carry on straight across the grass to a small open area (which used to be an informal parking space).

- 5 Go to the **left**-hand side of the open space and take a very obvious wide sandy path uphill. (As a guide, there are five wooden posts at the beginning of the path.) In 100m, your path crosses a tarmac drive and continues on a narrow path, still uphill, through bushes, leading, in another 50m, to an open bracken-covered space. Bear **left** here, keeping most of the bracken on your right, on a wide path. Soon you are walking under a canopy of oaks. After 200m, you meet another path coming from your right, by a marker post. In 100m, cross a road and continue onwards in the same direction. Your path goes down into woods and steeply up again and, in only 100m, you reach a dirt drive. Turn **right** on the drive, quickly reaching the Northchurch Common car park where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: If coming from the London area, on the M25, take the **A41 north** (not the Watford direction!). After nearly 5 miles, **ignore** a turnoff for *Bourne End, Berkhamsted, Boxmoor*. Two turnoffs later, filter **left** for **Chesham**. Follow signs for *Berkhamsted* round the roundabout, back over the A41 and **left** at a roundabout for *Berkhamsted*. This is the A416, Kingshill Way, later renamed as Shootersway, running parallel to the A41. Exactly 1½ miles from the roundabout, look out for a simple signpost pointing **right** for *Northchurch*. Follow this lane, Darr's Lane, for ½ mile to the A4251 High Street in Berkhamsted. Turn **right** and quickly **left** on the B4506 going over the Regent Canal. In ½ mile, the road takes a tight left bend and, in another ½ mile, a gentler left curve. The Northchurch Common car park is on the **left**, immediately opposite the entrance to Hill Farm.

By bus/train: bus 30 or 31 from Hemel Hempstead station to Little Gaddesden (start at Leg 3) or to Northchurch near the start. Check the timetables.

fancy more free walks? www.fancyfreewalks.org