Fancy Free Walks *point your feet on a new path*

Fingest, Christmas Common, Pishill, Turville
Red Kites and Red Deer

Distance: 23 km=14 miles — moderate-to-easy walking

Region: Chilterns — Date written: 25-oct-2009

Author: Phegophilos — Date revised: 13-oct-2014

Refreshments: every village! — Last update: 13-jun-2020

Map: Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West)

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

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Woodland, hills, views

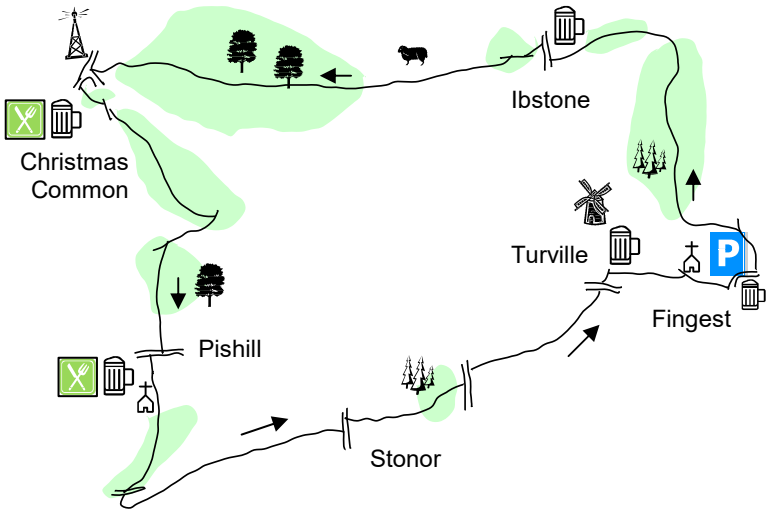
In Brief

This is an unforgettable walk through hilly beechwoods and villages of Buckinghamshire and South Oxfordshire, easily accessible from London. It is perfect at any time because the beech trees change at every season sometimes with spectacular colours. The walk is easy to follow thanks to the white arrows painted on the trees. There are *five* good pubs en route (to enquire at the *Crown Inn*, ring 01491 638364 or for the *top Fox* 01491 612599).

There are just a few nettles on the margins of the paths which might worry bare legs, unless you can swish them away. Dogs have a free run in the woods with only a few sheep and cattle fields.

The walk begins in the village of Fingest, Bucks, postcode **RG9 6QD**, w3w:areas.speeded.piston, not far from Henley-on-Thames. There is a favourite "cultural" route via the M4 and Marlow but it can easily be reached from Henley or via Stokenchurch (exit 5) on the M40, due south through Ibstone. For full details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Bird's Eye View



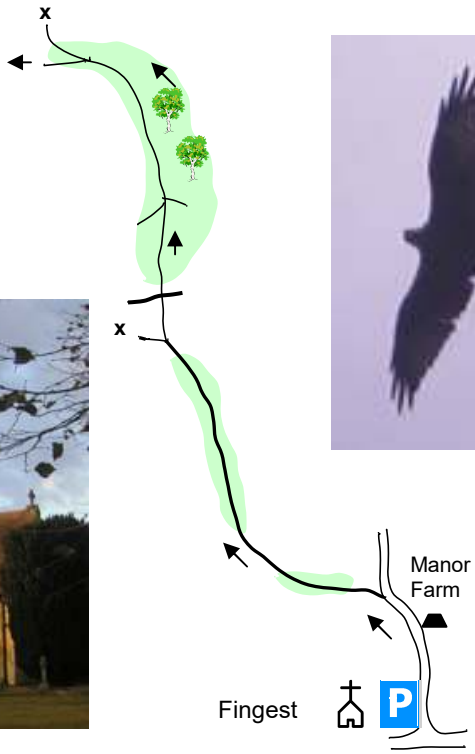
The Walk

Looking at the unique church of St Bartholomew you feel transported to the South, maybe Italy, rather than England. The massive western Norman tower with twin gables is from the early 1100s. Inside is some fine stained glass. Outside are the brick and flint walls, lined with ancient lime trees and of course the wonderful setting.

The name "Fingest" derives by gradual change from "Tinghurst" which tells us it is on a wooded hill, as we know, and that it was the seat of a Medieval council.

Leg 1: Fingest to Christmas Common 9 km=6 miles

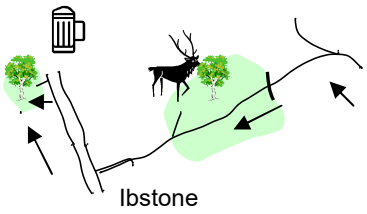
1 Opposite *The Chequers*, take the narrow side lane with the church on your left. On your left soon are the entrance to Fingest Manor and the Parish Pound. On your right you pass the picturesque Manor Farm, often with white doves fluttering on its roofs. Just after the lane bends left, ignore a footpath right and 100m later take a signposted footpath **left**. In 50m, before a gate into a field, fork **right** on the narrow footpath and continue on this forest path as it runs between fields and again among trees.



From this point, and for most of the walk, you will see red kites, the birds that were re-introduced so successfully and now majestically glide over the Chiltern Hills. After around 350m you pass a white arrow on a tree and then a junction marked with more white arrows ⬆. Keep straight ahead on path I14C, ignoring a path right and shortly after avoiding a bridleway left. *These white arrows are another charming feature of these Chiltern paths and will help to guide you during the entire day.* Soon you pass through a large wooden gate or over a stile. In 350m, the bridleway curves away left. Ignore it and keep straight ahead on the footpath, marked with a yellow arrow. 50m later, the path goes past another stile to a track near a farm. Cross straight over the track to an avoidable stile opposite and a narrow path. The path enters dense woodland and after

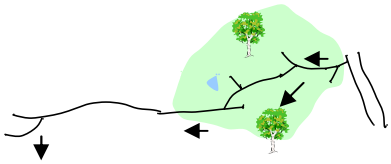
about 250m goes over a path in a small clearing with gates on each side. In another 250m, the woods become clearer with tall firs and soon open out completely. Here a crossing path comes in from the left and turns right into the woods. Ignore this junction by keeping straight ahead in the clearing on path **I14A**. About 70m further, you meet another white arrow indicating a path **S35** forking right. Again, ignore this by keeping straight ahead. In another 100m, you pass the corner of a field on the left. 200m further, the path runs under electricity wires. In less than 200m, you pass a double arrow on a tree indicating a fork in 15m. Fork **left** at this junction. *Take care not miss it!*

2 The path runs along the left hand side of a large field and at the end crosses a track into a large ancient coppice where the path gradually ascends for some distance. Sometimes deer are seen or heard here. At the top, continue on the left hand side of a field and go ahead on a farm track. Exit via a gate to the road at Ibstone and turn **right**. The road passes a few houses, such as *Yew Cottage*, and in 50m reaches the corner of a wood on the left. *A little further on is the Fox Country Inn which, despite its upmarket exterior, welcomes walkers. However, this would be early in the walk.*



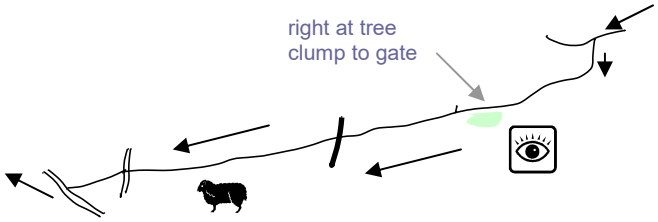
In his brilliant book of Adventurous Walks which inspired this walk, Raymond Hugh points out that this prosperity that you see everywhere in the Chilterns is recent. Historically, the hills were always mired in poverty. Wealth was found down by the River Thames where goods and water were easy to obtain.

3 Turn **left** into the wood just after the corner onto a narrow signposted footpath. In 30m, veer **right** as indicated by an arrow on a tree. In 20m ignore paths right and keep to the left curve in the direction of the white arrow. The path passes a footpath on the right and a pond and in 30m curves left. At a T-junction, turn **right** through a new metal gate, soon passing a sign for the Wormsley Estate on your left (partly hidden by summer foliage). The path comes out of the trees and descends. After nearly 200m on this narrow flinty sunken path, look out for white signs on a tree [Jun 2020: all the following signs now gone(?) - take care, do not stray!]. Leave path **S7a** by turning **left** here following **S21** (also marked as **CW** for the Chiltern Way) on a narrow path downhill. *Take care not to miss this turning!*

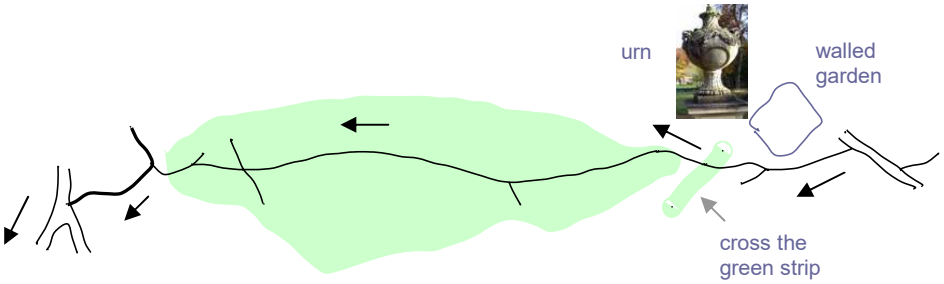


The Chiltern Way is a vast circular route covering the Chilterns from north to south, 192 miles=309 km in total if you do all the extensions.

4 The path leads steeply down and takes you over a stile where you have the first terrific views of this walk. Veer **right** downhill along the edge of a large meadow with thorn bushes on your right. At a clump of trees, stay close to the fence to go past a small wooden gate. Leave the meadow via another wooden gate, cross a track and enter a large sheep meadow via a swing gate and continue straight ahead. On reaching the far end, go over a tarmac drive via two swing gates. Continue half **left** across the meadow, then through a metal gate, or over stile, to a tarmac drive and turn **right** on it.



5 In 20m, fork **left** on a path marked as **SH4** and **CW**. *The private drive on the right leads to the great walled garden whose existence is a tantalising mystery.* After passing the walled garden on the right, ignore a marked footpath left, indicated by a sign on the tree, and continue to a large ornamental urn which once obviously formed part of the vista in a line with the garden. There is also a haha to the right, apparently to keep deer from entering the estate. Keep straight on past the urn, in the same direction, going across a grassy strip and joining a narrow path on the other side. (If there is no sign immediately on a tree, you can see one from here several metres further on.) This is the path that will take you gently and pleasantly up to Christmas Common. The path curves immediately left. After around 1 km, another path (**SH6**) joins from the left. Ignore this path and continue ahead on (**SH4**). The long lovely clear path now rises up into beechwood. At the top it reaches a bank on the left where another path (**SH5**) joins. Here the path curves slightly right (see the white arrow on the tree), goes past a pit on the left (possibly an old sawpit) and comes to a junction. Keep straight ahead on **PY3**, avoiding **SH4** that branches off right. Follow the path heading towards hollies and a field where the path curves right with the field on the left. Finally it comes out between posts to a track. Turn **left** here towards a house and keep to the right past the house on a grassy path. The path curves right and then left and reaches a road at Christmas Common by a Y-junction. Turn **left** on the road and take the **right** fork, signposted *Nettlebed, Henley*.



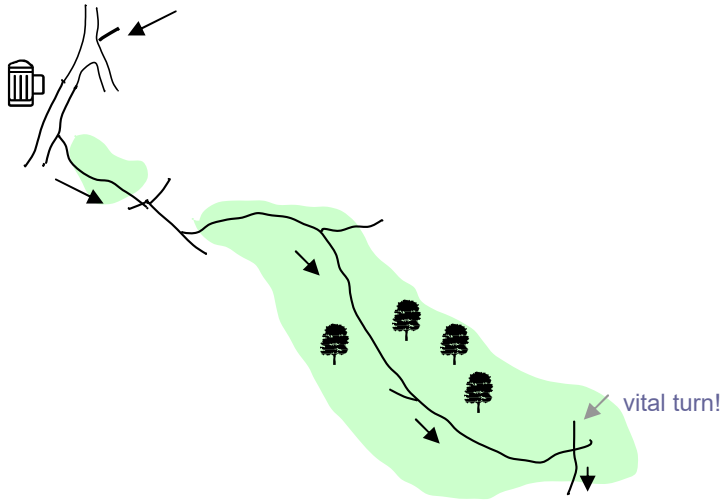
Christmas Common is a hamlet in the parish of Watlington Oxfordshire, 240m above sea level on an escarpment of the Chilterns. The two radio masts are local landmarks. The origin of the hamlet's name is uncertain. It is often ascribed to an episode of the Civil War when Royalists who held the heights and Cromwell's men who pitched down below in Watlington met on Christmas Day and called a truce on the site of the Fox and Hounds pub. But the local holly tree coppices, and the Christmas family, which lived nearby, also provide a convincing explanation.

Leg 2: Christmas Common to Stonor 8 km=4½ miles

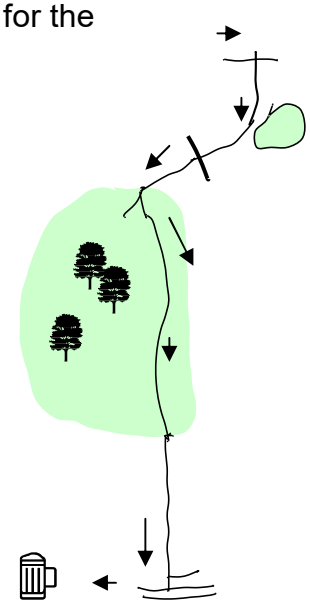
6 The road passes a pub on the right.

The Fox and Hounds (Brakspear) or 'the top fox' as it is known locally was once a rustic ale house, with a pond in front of the house, but now this Brakspear pub is has an enviable position with a cosy atmosphere, food and live music nights. It offers seasonal dishes such as 'Game On' made from game sourced from the neighbouring Turville Valley, roasted and cooked in its own juices and served on toast.

100m after the pub, take a footpath **left** marked as part of the Oxfordshire Way (OW). *The Oxfordshire Way is a 110km (68 mile) walk from Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire to Henley-on-Thames. It also passes through the Cotswold Hills.* This walk will follow the OW for the next few km. Your path passes a cemetery on your right and continues diagonally through a wood of tall young birches, always following the white arrows. At the end of the wood, turn **left** on a track and immediately **right** on a tarmac lane past houses, ignoring the marked footpath straight ahead. At the end of the lane, opposite Queen Wood Farm, turn **left** on a path marked with PS3 and OW. The path goes down through lovely beechwood. Soon, the path reaches a major fork near a field on your left. Keep to the **right** fork (W18 OW), the wider one, slightly downhill. In roughly 600m, the path meets a forestry track coming from the right and passes, on the left, an area presumably used for turning forestry vehicles. In roughly another 500m, after a left curve, you reach a crossing path indicated by arrows on a tree and a post with various coloured arrows. Turn **right** here on PS4 (OW), a path that goes past a white arrow and steeply up the bank out of the woods. *Take care not to miss this turning!*



7 When your path comes up into a field, go straight across, slightly right, heading for the centre of a broad line of woodland. On the other side turn **right** at a post, soon passing a sunken pond on your left. At the edge of the field, go over a track and through a new green metal gate. Continue along the left-hand side of a meadow. At the end of the meadow go through another new green metal gate into woods. In 20m you reach a fork, indicated by arrows on a tree. Take the **left** fork (**OW PS5** not **CW PS8**). This high path takes you through magnificent beech woods with views right into the wooded valley. Keep looking out for the white arrows that mark the route. Eventually the path descends to pass between posts into a large meadow with a sign for the Stonor Estate. There is still some way to go before you reach Stonor village however. Continue straight ahead following the long path between fields. Just before you reach the first house of Pishill, ignore a footpath left, continue to the road and turn **right** on it.



Pishill (pronounced to rhyme with "official") is named after the many pea farms that once existed in the area. The parish includes nearby Stonor, Russell's Water and Maidensgrove. The history of Pishill, especially of its various manors, is described in a fascinating account in the British History Online website (www.british-history.ac.uk).

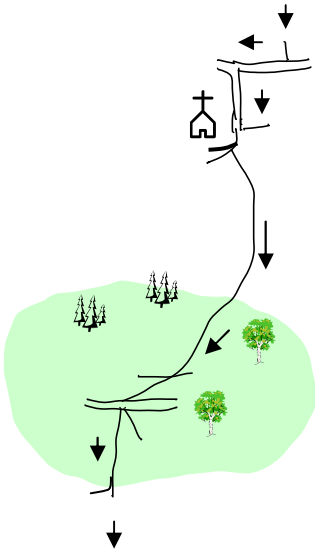
8 In 30m there is a lane on the left. If you suspend this left turn and continue a little further, you will shortly reach, on the right, the *Crown Inn*.

The Crown Inn is a 15th-century brick-and-flint coaching inn with origins that may go back to the 11th century. It was winner of the South Oxfordshire CAMRA Summer Pub of the Year in 2008. Walkers using this guide often lunch there and declare great approval. Accommodation is available in the 200-year-old stable block which was recently converted to a pretty self-contained cottage overlooking the valley, with a four-poster bed.

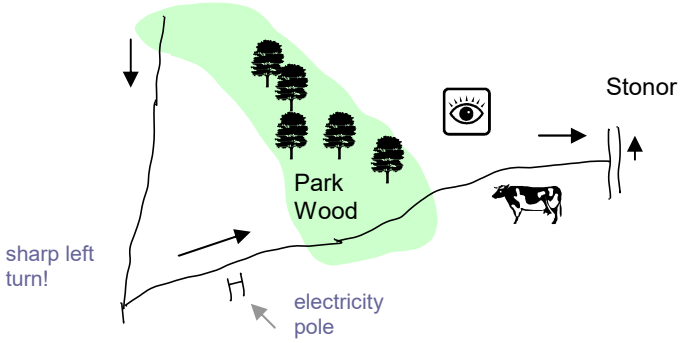
Turn **left** on the lane, past *Pishilbury Cottage*, and onwards to the church.

Pishill Church was built around 1100. The rectory was passed from Dorchester Abbey to more secular manor seats after the Reformation and then to the Stonor family, an anomaly since they were catholic.

Continue along the lane to the *Old Vicarage* which has some fine topiary in its garden. Stonor Park, your next destination, is visible to the left. Just past the lawn of the vicarage, by an entry drive for *Chapel Wells*, avoid the right turn (PS22) and instead fork **left** on a wide path (PS17) through a large wooden gate. The path goes down the left-hand side of a large meadow, through another wooden gate and up the other side. On reaching the trees, go over a track and up, following a blue arrow. After a taxing ascent, the path runs near a meadow on the right. Soon a footpath (PS9) joins from the left. Soon after, ignore a right turn (PS19) and stay on OW PS17. The path goes down to a lane close to the hamlet of Maidensgrove. Cross the lane and take the **right** hand of two paths opposite, the higher path with a white arrow. The path takes you uphill. Just before a field ahead, ignore a path right (PS18) and enter a large field.



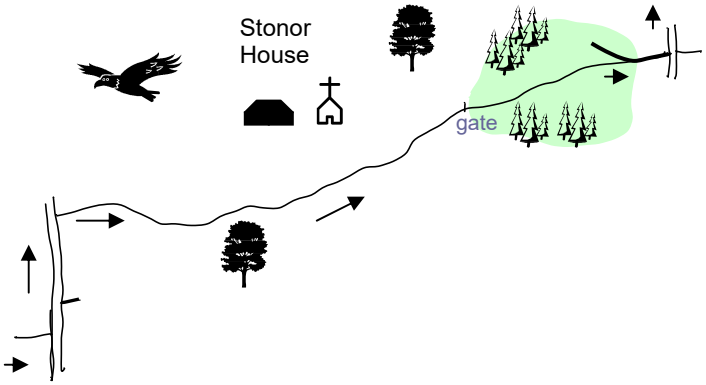
9 The route from here is along the **right**-hand section of the field, cutting the corner, all the way to the far right-hand corner. This rather awkward official route has one advantage: a great view ahead over the Thames valley in the distance. When you reach the far corner, do *not* follow the path as it continues between houses, but turn **sharp left** back across the field to a stile into the woods. In case the path is not clear at first, aim roughly 20m to the left of a double electricity pole. *(Some other day, if you continued ahead without turning sharp left, you would reach the magical Warburg Nature Reserve – see the other walk "Ewelme, Nettlebed, Warburg Nature Reserve".)* On reaching the trees, go down a lovely wide path through more fine beechwoods. The path goes through a gate into a fine high meadow with the ground sloping away on both sides. From here there is one of the best views in the walk: the village of Stonor in a delicate line along the valley with the parkland beyond, often enhanced by the late afternoon sun. Continue straight ahead, eventually going through a swing-gate into another meadow and down through a swing-gate and an enclosed path to the road at Stonor. Turn **left** on the road.



Leg 3: Stonor to Fingest 6 km=3½ miles

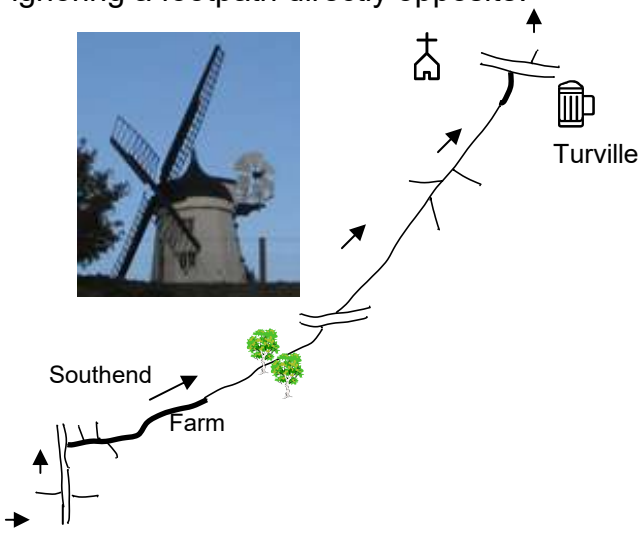
10 Ignore a bridleway on the right shortly. In just under 200m you reach a metal fence of the deerpark on the right. Turn **right** through a kissing gate into the park. Keep to the main path that climbs up the slope with Stonor House spread below on the left.

Stonor is one of England's oldest manor houses, owned by the same Catholic family for 850 years. The house contains some beautiful stained glass, paintings and drawings, bronzes and ceramics. The house, garden, tea room and gift shop are open from April until the end of September on Sunday afternoons and, during July and August, also on Wednesday afternoons.



Soon there is a fence on the right. Keep straight on at all times on the main path, occasionally following white arrows. Eventually, after a long walk through the park, you reach another kissing gate. Go through the gate and continue on a path through interesting woodland of tall conifers. At the end, join a track, go past a metal gate and continue to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane, ignoring a footpath directly opposite.

11 In 100m, just before a sign for Southend, turn **right** on a concrete drive. Continue on a lane to Southend Farm, ignoring paths off. At the end of the lane, go over a stile on a wide grassy path between fences. The path later goes over another stile, or through a large metal gate, and down a wide path with woods on either side. Soon, at a concrete block encased in a red metal container, you have fine views of the Hamble valley. Fingest, the starting point, is visible on the right. Ahead, above the village of Turville, is Cobstone Windmill.

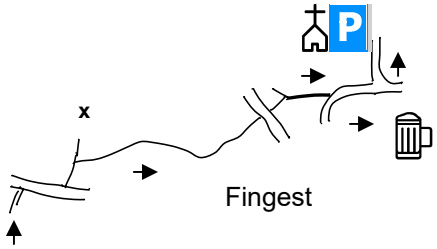


Cobstone Windmill was built in 1816 but an older mill stood there before. It milled cereals until 1873. In 1967 it was saved and renovated for the filming of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. It was then bought by Hayley Mills and her husband Roy Boulting and has been privately owned ever since, appearing in numerous films and TV shows.*

At the bottom, cross a lane and continue through a small wooden gate on the left-hand side of a field. *This is part of the organically managed Bosmore Park Estate.* At the end of the field, go straight ahead through a small wooden gate, along a path between bushes, a short residential road and a narrow lane into Turville. The last property is called *Sleepy Cottage* which seems so appropriate. *Some cottages here can be hired for a few days (try www.chilterncountrycottages.com).* Your route is straight over the road but you will want to look around first. The church and the Old Vicarage are on the left and the pub on the right.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 796 identifies Turville as Thyrefeld ("dry field"). With its lovely brick and flint cottages, it is inevitably a perfect site for film and TV. The Vicar of Dibley *was filmed there. The parish church of St. Mary the Virgin dates from the 12th century. Again, the website www.british-history.ac.uk has a full account. The* Bull and Butcher *pub has excellent home-cooked food served in the garden alongside and, it being a Brakspear establishment, good beer. It is open late on Sunday and serves food at mealtimes, extending to 4pm on Sundays.*

12 Cross the road, a fraction to your right, onto a signed footpath heading towards the windmill. Go through a wooden gate but **immediately** turn **right** across a meadow, thus **leaving** the path that leads up to the windmill. On the other side, go through a wooden gate and then follow an easy path. Eventually the path comes to a road. Cross the road and go through a small wooden gate. At a 3-way junction, keep **right** on an enclosed path down to a road. Turn **left** on the road, back to St Bartholomew's church and the point where the walk began.



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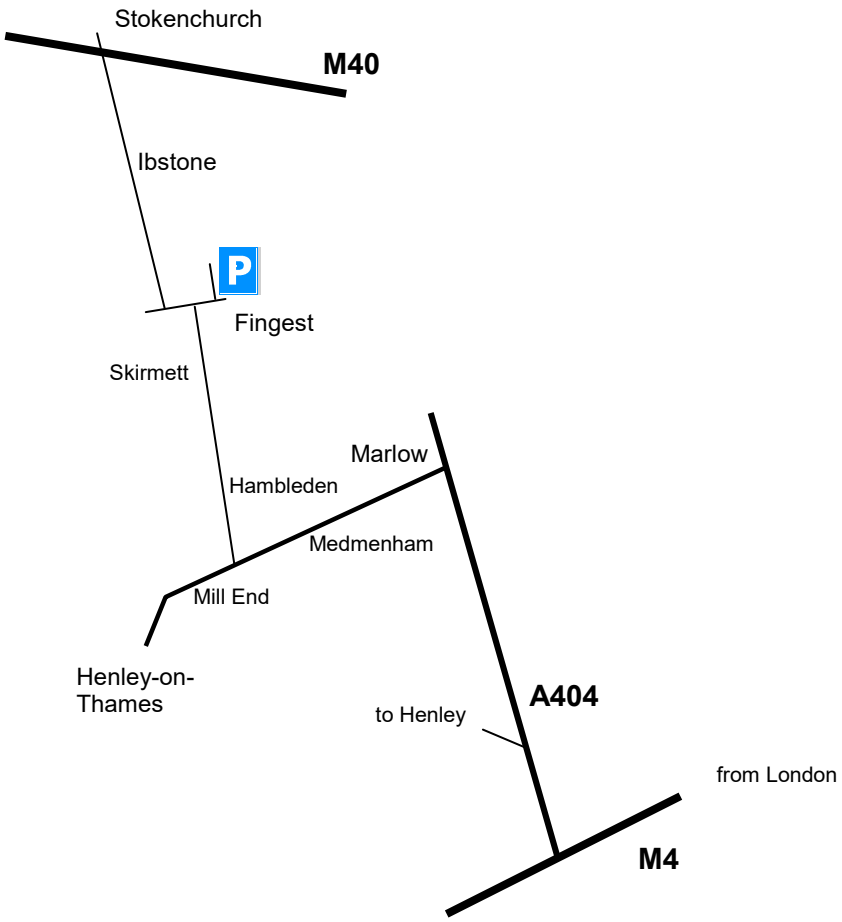
Getting there

By car: If coming from the London area, one way is as follows: Take the 8/9 exit from the M4 signposted **Henley** and then take the A404 motorway but do not turn off for Henley (although this is a good alternative route): stay on the A404, straight on all the way, until you eventually turn **left** for **Marlow**. If you have time, a short visit to Marlow is a perfect start to the day: turn left down to the riverside near the suspension bridge, the church and the fine georgian buildings. However, the route is straight on, signposted to Henley. A few miles later, you pass close to **Medmenham** where you keep straight on. Again, if you have some time to spare, a short walk down to the river past the church and the charming cottages is a delight. Soon after, you pass the sign for Mill End. (This is at one end of **Hambleden Weir**, one of the most interesting ways of crossing the Thames, from where there is a walk to Henley-on-Thames.) Turn **right** just after the sign on a road signposted *Hambleden, Skirmett, Fingest*. Soon you pass close to **Hambleden** and it is definitely worth stopping by to look at the brick and flint cottages and the 14th-century church. The road now takes you through Skirmett and on to Fingest. Park in the small road (Chequers Lane) alongside the church.

A simpler way is via the **M40**. Come off at **junction 5** (Stokenchurch) and follow signs for **Ibstone**. Go through Ibstone and keep straight on following signs for **Fingest**. At a T-junction, turn left into the village.