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

Great Gaddesden

Distance: 13½ km=8½ miles — easy walking

Region: Hertfordshire — Date written: 30-jul-2017

Author: Mustarastas — Last update: 4-mar-2023

Refreshments: Briden's Camp, Water End

Map: Explorer 182 (St Albans) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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.

Village, good field paths, long woodland trail, green meadows, pubs

In Brief

This walk shows the best of the gentle Hertfordshire countryside with some history and quite a few surprises, beginning with the historic village itself which you see from the best angle at the end of this walk. The easy field paths alternate with delightful patches of woodland. You may see sheep, horses and alpacas. At the centre of the walk, you traverse a little-known forest byway with 2 km of unbroken woodland – a local secret.

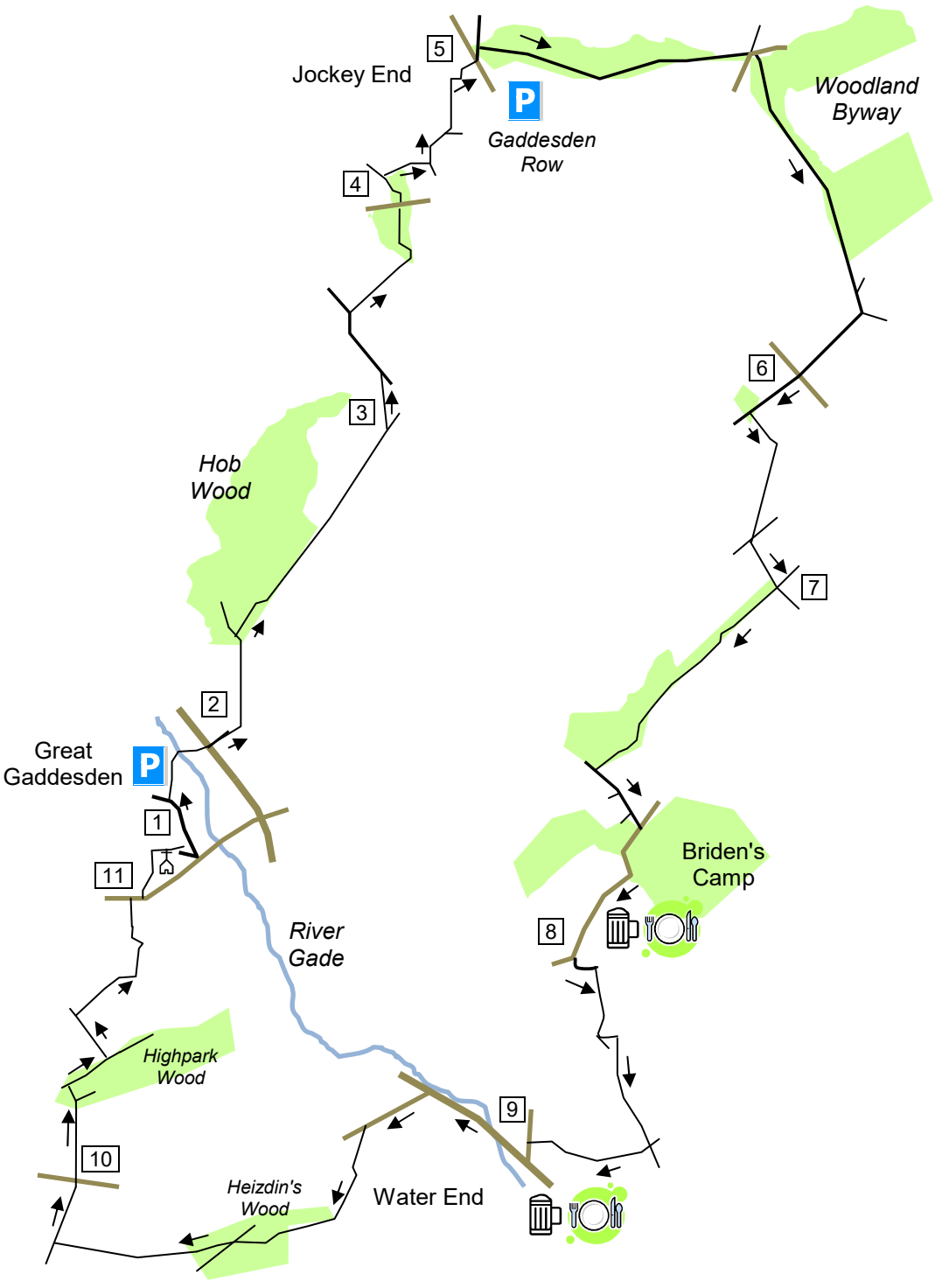
There are two highly contrasted places for refreshment on your route. One is a typical much-loved local in a small village with traditional fare and some interesting local brews. The other is a large roadhouse with an intriguing menu which would not look out of place on the Riviera, but with virtually no real ales at all.

This paths along this walk are all well-made and clear, so it is possible to do it with legs uncovered. In just a few patches in the woods there were some brambles and scratchy undergrowth and the author was glad to be able to stride through in long trousers without having to weave about. In summer this walk can be done in strong shoes or trainers although boots are always more comfortable for many people. Your dog can come on this walk but you need a short lead because of a short stretch along the main road.

The walk begins at the village of **Great Gaddesden**, near Hemel Hempstead, Herts, postcode **HP1 3BY**, w3w:voter.vies.digital. There are just a few spots in the village where you can park considerately, without blocking the pavement, or an entrace, or spoiling the grass verge; however, we believe the *Hemel Hempstead Garden Centre* (150m to the right of the entrance to the village) still offers their overspill (NB) car park for use by walkers (note closing times!). Out of school hours, some visitors park in front of the school. If your mid-walk break is at the *Red Lion*, you could begin in the hamlet of Jockey End, w3w:farm.lake.pats, postcode **HP2 6AG**, up to 250m from the route. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Great Gaddesden, like Little Gaddesden (visited on another walk in this series "Hertfordshire Commons and Forests"), goes far back into Anglosaxon history. The church (best seen before you start) was founded on Roman brickwork and Hertfordshire "puddingstones" which indicate pre-Christian origins. Some of the medieval and Tudor houses of the village will be seen at the end of this walk as you come over the meadows to the church. The village has always been associated with the Halsey family who built Gaddesden Place, the great house on the hill. Several memorials of the family will be found in the Halsey Chapel on the northeast side. In the floor of the church is a very fine memorial brass of William Croke and his wife Alice. On the left of the altar is a monument to Thomas Plumer Halsey who drowned, along with his wife and a son, in 1854 in the Ercolano disaster in the Mediterranean (the greatest sinking before the Titanic).



1 Beginning in the village of Great Gaddesden, walk along the road called *Church Meadow*, towards the church and school. Where the road bends left, go ahead over grass to a metal swing-gate. *You are on part of the Hertfordshire Way, a long-distance circular trail.* Follow a path across a meadow, veering right by a bank, and cross a board walk with railings, taking you dry-shod over this wide marshy section of the River Gade. A further section on grass takes you through a wooden swing-gate to the main road.

2 Cross the road to a concrete track opposite, leading to a grassy path uphill. The path curves left and crosses a crop field on a narrow, but clearly defined path. There is a bench at the top from where you can admire the view back to Great Gaddesden. Go through a metal kissing-gate into Hob Wood and immediately take the **right** fork. In 150m the path comes out of the wood through another metal kissing-gate into a crop field. Continue ahead along the left-hand side, next to the wood. At the end go through yet another metal kissing gate into a pleasingly green pasture, dotted with sessile oaks. (The author found no cattle in the field: they were on the other side of the fence and looked quite sweet.) Keep to the right-hand side till you reach the first corner of the lawn of an imposing house, *The Hoo*. Go diagonally **left** across the meadow towards the far opposite corner.

3 This path may be a little unclear at first: as a guide, you should pass just to the right of a small cone-shaped linden tree in a protective fence. In the far corner, go through a wooden swing-gate and **left** on a wide sunken path. This path shows signs of a made-up surface under the leaves, indicating its importance in past centuries. In 200m the path zigzags right-left. Here, go **right** between posts into a green crop field. Continue straight ahead across the centre of the field on a clear path. At the far side, turn left into the woods on a narrow path between wire fences which comes out to a shingle driveway belonging to *Bunkers House*. Keep **right** and follow the drive out to a road near the hamlet of Gaddesden Row. Cross straight over the road to a footpath opposite. If you are here in August, you will find a mass of blackberries in the hedgerow; this is the first of a host of spots throughout this walk, making it the clear winner anywhere on this site for the ripe fruit.

4 Your path takes you into Hedgeswood Common. You pass through a dark grove of young oaks and come out into a meadow. Turn immediately **right** along the right-hand edge. Go as far as you can to the far right-hand corner of the meadow, ignoring several paths on your right. Instead of exiting here, turn **left** for 50m round the short end of the meadow so that you are now at the far **left**-hand corner. Now find a narrow path leading away, going over a stile. (Note, the top beam is liftable, a very useful feature also present on the next few stiles.) Just before a wooden fieldgate (which may be open and invisible) into *Southings Farm*, go **left** through a new swing-gate and **right** along the edge of a sheep pasture. In the far corner, go **right** over a stile. Go **right** into a small meadow and **left**, passing a redbrick cottage on your left and immediately go **left** over a stile. (That was the *last* stile on this walk!) Turn **right** on a drive, out to a road by an attractive lawn adorned with silver birches.

5 Go **left** on the road and immediately **right** on a track opposite Old Ballingdon Farm. In only 10m, turn **right** on a woodland track. This is the beginning of the Woodland Byway, little known outside the area, giving you an unbroken 2km of woodland glades and majestic trees, on a near-perfect surface,

all the way to the road by Gaddesden Row School. The forest that envelops your path soon opens out and in late spring there is a fine show of bluebells. The woodland narrows into a long strip, still keeping the feeling of thick forest. After 1 km of walking, you come out to a tarmac lane where there is a signpost. Cross straight over the lane onto a byway opposite for another long woodland trek. This wide path rises and runs under tall oak, ash and beech. In ½ km you cross a farm track. In another 300m, the byway comes out into the open where it is met by a footpath from the left. Shortly, at another junction, the byway veers to the right, entering more trees. Finally you pass a school on your right and meet the road, Gaddesden Row.

6 Cross straight over the road onto the elegant tree-lined tarmac drive of *The Lane House*, marked as a footpath. At the end of the drive, avoid a small gate straight ahead and instead turn **left** just before the gates on a grassy path, across a rather rough field. At the other side, go through a brief band of trees and brambles, through a wooden swing-gate. Suddenly you have a wonderful vista across parkland with the view of the *Golden Parsonage* in the distance.

The Golden Parsonage was the original residence of the Halsey family, whose tombs you saw in Great Gaddesden church, from 1520. The present house was built for the Halseys in the late 1600s and they lived in this lovely well-proportioned redbrick mansion till 1774 when the swanky and pseudo-classical Gaddesden Place was ready. The present-day Halseys still live at the Golden Parsonage.

Go diagonally **right**, passing a huge chestnut tree on your left, to reach another wooden swing-gate. Keep the same direction across the next lovely green meadow, to meet a rider's track coming from the house on your left. This route is part of the Gaddesden Estate Ride which puts on riding events every year, for charity; you will probably pass several riders from this point. Keep ahead through a gap by some disused wooden gates and immediately turn **left** on a track along the left-hand side of a crop field.

7 In 200m, at the end of the crop field, turn **right** on a wide grass avenue between lines of trees. This path has a line of horse jumps, so don't sit on them because they are part of the Gaddesden Estate Ride! At the end of the avenue, avoid a narrow path straight ahead and go **left** at a yellow arrow into a field, then **right** along the right-hand edge of the field. In 700m you reach the far end of the field. Turn **left** here on a semi-tarmac drive. Avoiding all side paths, continue to the main road. Turn **right** on the road, passing a welcome sign for Briden's Camp. In 100m, avoid a track on the right (for the stables and cricket green) and continue another 200m to reach the *Crown and Sceptre* pub.

The "Crown and Sceptre" is a traditional country pub, serving the rural horse-riding community. It is often filled with country folk chomping on the reasonably-priced hearty country fare. Ales typically are nearly all local: Millwhites, Aylesbury, Chiltern Gold and Haresfoot, but they may vary totally. The pub is one end of a line of cottages, with a garden at the back. Don't be put off by the faux shabby appearance.

8 After possible refreshment, ignore a footpath immediately after the pub and continue on the road for another 200m, till just past the last house where the road curves right. Go **left** here on a track signed as a footpath for *Noake Mill* and, in 50m, veer **right** on a wide grassy path between crop fields, soon with woodland on your left. Your path veers left down through

the trees of Hogstrough Dell and immediately forks. Avoid the vehicle track and take the **left** fork, the narrower option. It brings you down to the edge of a crop field. Turn **right** along the edge. In 400m or so, you reach a junction of four fields by a marker post. Turn **right** here on a path along the right-hand side of a field. In about ½ km, your path goes down under sycamores and reaches a minor road. Turn **left**, immediately reaching the main road in the hamlet of Water End, opposite the *Red Lion* inn.

The Red Lion is a hugely popular clean roadhouse pub which draws in visitors from the neighbouring towns who might otherwise see little of the surrounding countryside. Brunch and lunch specials come with a Mediterranean flavour and pizzas feature prominently on the menu. Beers are unremarkable.

9 Turn **right** on the road, using the footway on the left side, going over a bridge across the River Gade. Ignore a side road and continue along the main road for another 200m. (Because there is no footway at this point, you may need to cross temporarily to the other side.) Turn **left** on Nettleden Road. Ignore a bridleway on your right and continue along the road for 250m. Fork **left** here on a signed footpath marked *Heizdin's (or Heizden's) Wood*. The path runs uphill between fences, then bends left-right to take you to a junction of crop fields. Keep straight ahead uphill along the left-hand side of a field with the hedgerow (full of blackberries in late summer) on your right. In 150m or so the path bends **right** to enter the wood. Stay on the main rather winding path, coming close to the field again before diving back into the trees at a marker post with a yellow arrow. Take the first path **left**. Soon the path runs through bracken beneath a stand of larches, making the ground pleasantly springy. After 300m in the wood, you meet an oblique crossing of paths. Go straight over, slightly downhill. You come out of the wood into a crop field. On your right, behind on the hill, you can see Gaddesden Place.

Gaddesden Place was designed in 1768 by architect James Wyatt for the Halsey family. This house on a hill overlooks the Gade valley, one of the best views in the Home Counties. Gaddesden Place was gutted by fire in 1905 and restored. The building is now the property of a software company and features in numerous film and TV scenes.

Follow this good path across the field. In 250m, at the fence boundary, turn **right** downhill alongside the fence on your left until you reach an (open) gate leading out to the road.

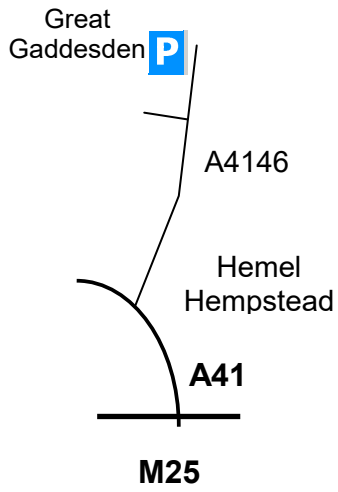
10 Cross directly over, between posts, uphill on a path between crop fields. At the top there is a seat where you can pause to admire the landscape you traversed earlier. Go straight on, into Highpark Wood and, in 15m, at a 3-way junction, keep **left**. Your path winds uphill for 50m to reach a T-junction with a field visible on your left. Turn **right** on this path. In 150m you come to a deep pit beside a marker post. Turn **left** here, out into a crop field and keep ahead along the right-hand side, with the dividing hedge on your right. In 150m or so, at a marker post, turn **right** along the left-hand side of a field. As this field ends, you will find another tempting scenic bench seat at the corner. Turn **left** here and, in the far corner, go through a metal swing-gate and up a grassy bank. Keep right to come through a metal kissing gate beside a large metal gate. A short track takes you to a road in Great Gaddesden.

11 The walk ends with a quick loop around the top of the village to the church. First, immediately on your left are the historic *Piper's Cottage* and

especially the venerable oak-beamed *Glebe House*, grade-2 listed and still showing its medieval roots. Turn **right** on the lane and, in only 30m, go **left** on a footpath, up steps. The path turn right down a small meadow. *Ahead of you is Church Farm with its late medieval cruck (= curved timber) barn.* Go **left** through a wooden swing-gate and straight ahead through another swing-gate into an orchard cemetery. Half way along, go through a small wooden gate on your right, into the main cemetery. Follow the shingle path past the church (which absolutely must be seen) and exit through the lichgate, beside the school, to the start of the village where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: Great Gaddesden is easily reached via the **A41** and **Hemel Hempstead**. From Hemel Hempstead, follow signs for the *A4146 Leighton Buzzard*. Great Gaddesden is signposted on your left in about 3 miles, ½ mile after the narrow bridge.



By bus/train: bus 30 from Hemel Hempstead, not Sat or Sun. Bus 29 from Berkhamsted station to Jockey End (Gaddesden Row), not Sat or Sun. Check the timetables.

*fancy **more** free walks?* www.fancyfreewalks.org