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

Henley-on-Thames, Stoke Row, Shiplake
The Maharajah at the Regatta

Distance: 27½ km=17 miles — easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Chilterns — Date written: 22-apr-2011

Author: Phegophilos — Last update: 5-jun-2022

Refreshments: Henley, Stoke Row, Lower Shiplake

Maps: Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West) & a small part of 159 (Reading)
but the maps in this guide should be sufficient

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

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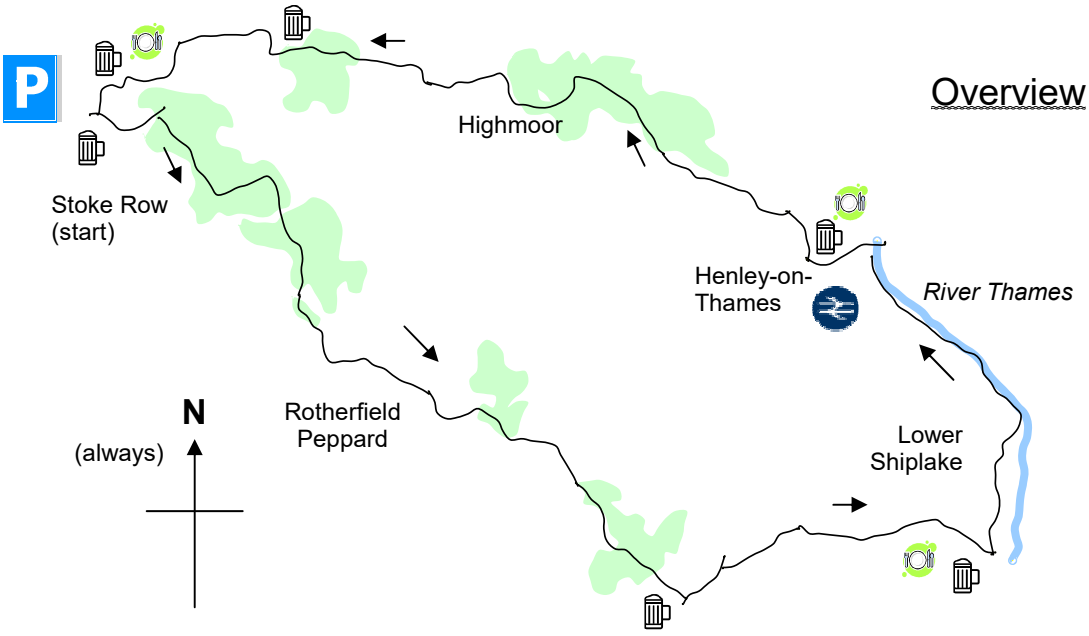
Lake, village, woodland, water, river, hills, heath

In Brief

This is one of the great walks in the Chilterns, unforgettable, an adventure in a day's walk. Please don't be put off by the length: there are few gradients and the going is quite easy. There are no nettles and any good strong comfortable footwear should be fine. There is no reason not to take your dog on this adventure. The stile count is low-to-moderate.

Possibly the best seasons for this walk are late April, when the bluebells are so spectacular, and late autumn for the colours of the beechwoods. The first week in July is also excellent because of the Regatta.

The Baskerville gastropub is included in the walk. If you want to reserve a table for lunch, ring 01189-403332. For the end of the walk, if you want to reserve dinner at the *Crooked Billet*, ring 01491-681048.



The walk begins at **Stoke Row**, near Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. Park on the roadside near the crossroads, postcode **RG9 5PY**, grid ref SU683840, w3w:ground.book.positions. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**). You can also start at **Henley-on-Thames**, possibly arriving by **rail**. For two shorter excursions, it is worth taking a bus from Henley to Stoke Row for the first part of the walk and, on another day, a bus from Stoke Row to Henley after the second part of the walk. Buses also start in Reading. Check the timetables.

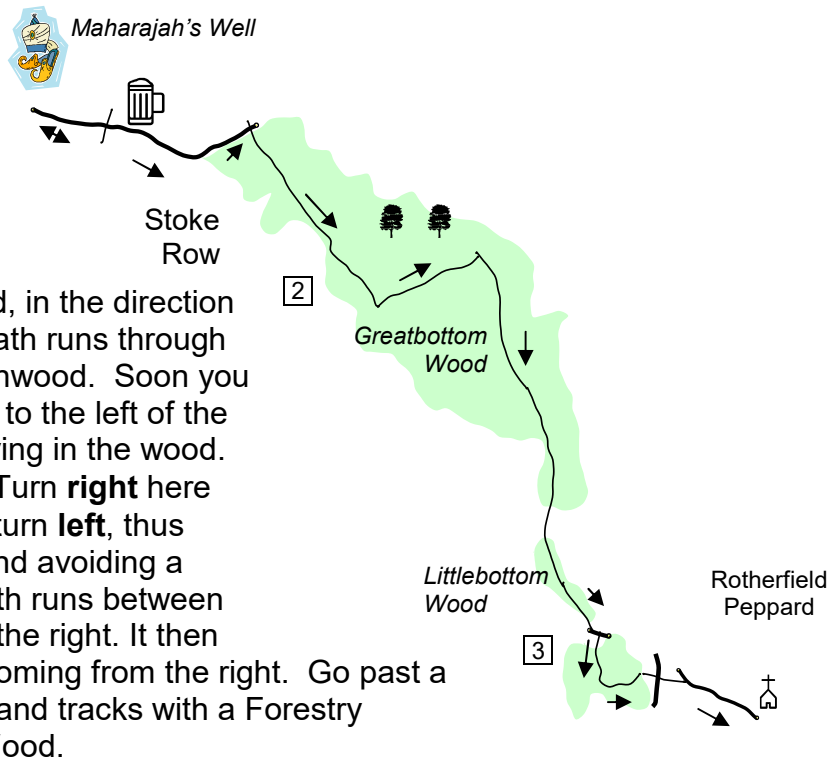
The Walk

Leg 1: Stoke Row to Rotherfield Peppard 5 km=3 miles

1 Before you begin the walk, since you will not have so much energy on your return, a quick visit to the Maharajah's Well is imperative. This is situated only 300m west down the road, on the right, just past the village stores and filling station.

> *The wealthy Maharajah of Benares, that holy city on the Ganges (now Varanasi), was a friend of Edward Anderdon Reade who came from near here and had sunk a well in India as one of his civic projects. Reade told the Maharajah that there were poor people in his home district in England as well as in India. He related how a boy had been beaten by his mother after drinking the last of the water during a drought. The Maharajah was so moved that he decided to fund a project in 1864 to dig a well for the local people. It is 370 feet=113m deep with a highly ornate wellhead cover, including a golden elephant under a domed canopy. It fell into disuse but was renovated in the 1950s and can still draw water.*

As you return the same way, it is worth going though a gate on the left into the Cherry Orchard or *Ishree Bagh*. This was also financed by the Maharajah. You can exit the other side on Cox's lane.



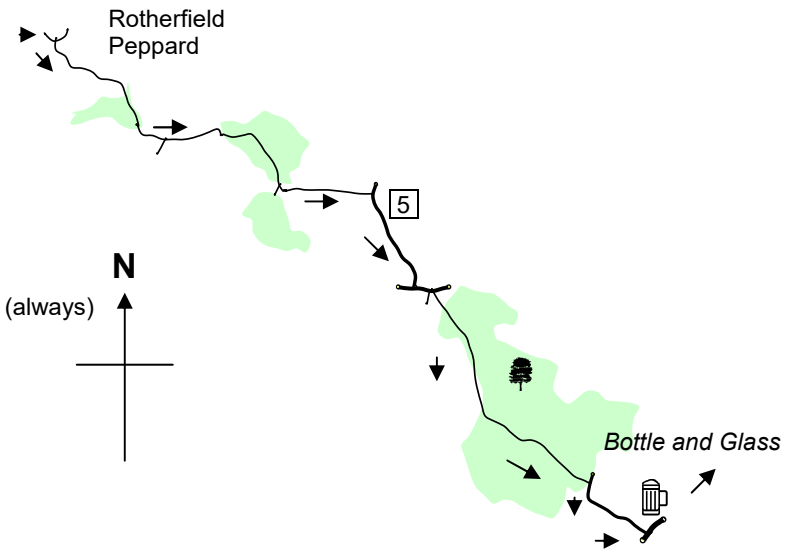
The walk begins south down the main road. Go over the crossroads by the *Cherry Tree Inn* and beside the village green, passing attractive cottages such as *The Oak*. In about 700m, after *Clare Cottage* on the left, turn **right** on a marked bridleway which is at right angles to the road, in the direction of a white arrow on a tree. The path runs through mixed wood and then a fine beechwood. Soon you meet a fence on your right. Keep to the left of the fence on the official footpath, staying in the wood. The path comes to a T-junction. Turn **right** here between fence posts and in 15m turn **left**, thus regaining your original direction and avoiding a bridleway straight ahead. The path runs between beeches on the left and pines on the right. It then descends to meet a forest track coming from the right. Go past a metal gate to a junction of a lane and tracks with a Forestry Commission sign for Greyhone Wood.

2 Go straight over past a large wooden gate on a signposted bridleway, a good easy open track through woodland. Eventually you reach a junction where main track curves sharply left. Turn **right** here, as directed by a blue arrow, onto a narrower path. The path leads downhill to a T-junction near the bottom of a valley. Turn **right** on a bridleway with a tall green meal fence on you left. On your right are conifers while on your left is the beautiful valley floor of which in spring is carpeted in bluebells. Soon your is joined (from under the fence!) by the path that runs along the valley floor. The path reaches a crossing path marked by a tyre thoughtfully placed in the centre like a kind of gyro hub. Keep ahead on a pleasant smooth and level path through Greatbottom Wood. Finally the path leaves the wood and runs between meadows. The path now enters another wood, Little-bottom Wood and, at the end, reaches a road. Turn **left** on the road.

3 In just 10m, turn **right** on an unmarked path. Care: do not stray! Ignore a small path forking right and stay on the wider path until you reach a wide grassy open area. Veer **left**, avoiding the wide path that goes right uphill. Follow the path through shrubs and uphill through holly and hawthorn, eventually reaching a lane. Turn **right** on the lane. Soon you reach a main road at a T-junction. Cross over the main road, across the grass, heading for a school in the far corner. Continue ahead on a residential road marked as a dead end which takes you to the Church of All Saints, Rotherfield Peppard.

Rotherfield Peppard is named in the Domesday Book of 1086. The word "Rotherfield" indicates a "field for cattle" whilst "Peppard" comes from the family of Pipard or Pypard, who once held the manor at Wallingford. The village has extensive areas of common land including, as you saw, rare heathland. The Church of All Saints is Norman. Blounts Court (not on the route) is a mainly 17th- century mansion with a history going back to the 1300s and famous for a tulip tree that King Charles I planted there.

Leg 2: Rotherfield Peppard to Binfield Heath 4½ km=2½ miles



4 Take the track on the **right** of the church. Soon you reach a junction in front of a cottage. Turn **right** through a large wooden gate and shortly **left** along the left-hand side of a large field. In the far corner, keep ahead on a short track into another field but this time go along the right-hand side of the

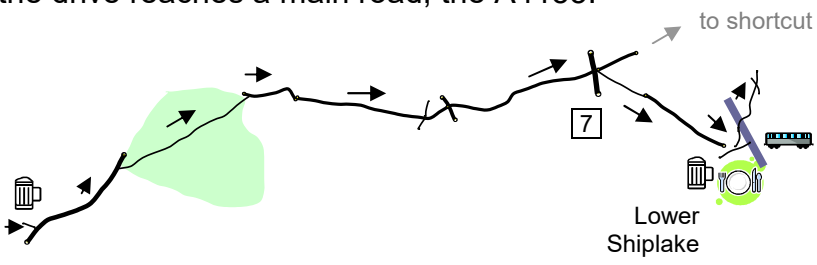
field as directed by a yellow arrow. The edge of the field curves left. About 100m later, ignore a farm track on the right and stay by the field. At a fence, go through a metal swing-gate and turn **right** through another similar into a wood. There is a cheerful sign here *You are welcome to walk in these woods*. You are now on a wide clear path through a delightful stretch of woodland. Just before the end of the wood, you come to a fork. Take the **left** fork on a path running by a fence on the right which soon rises steeply. At the top, go through two swing-gates between pastures on an enclosed path. Finally you reach a lane. Turn **right** on the lane. *Note that you are walking part of the Chiltern Way Extension.*

5 Continue along the lane, passing a field with radar dishes on your right. Soon you pass the gates of *Old Place* on your left and reach a T-junction with a major road. Turn **left** on the road, gaining further sight of this immaculate half-timbered house. In 60m, ignore a footpath right signed *Crowsley* and immediately after take a bridleway on the right marked *Binfield Heath 1½.*. The path goes through woodland, over a drive by *North Lodge*, on a long forest trail between fences and then through open woodland. Finally the path ascends through beeches and, with some relief, you reach an open field. Keep to the **right** round the field and then follow a sunken path, known locally as Bones Lane, which leads to the village of Binfield Heath and the *Bottle and Glass* pub.

The Bottle and Glass is a wonderful find if you don't already know it: the perfect timbered thatched cottage, restored in 2016 by local peer Lord Phillimore. It serves many good local beers (Brakspear etc.) and excellent food and snacks with tables and chairs outside and inside (where you benefit from a large cosy fire pit). It attracts walkers, bikers and out-of-towners from Reading. It has a good garden with water features. There is now a large converted barn to the side of the pub. But a word of caution: if you began the walk in Stoke Row, you are barely a third of the way round.

Leg 3: Binfield Heath to Lower Shiplake 4½ km=2½ miles

6 Turn left on the road (Harpsden Road). In 450m, at the corner of a wood, take a bridleway on the **right** into the woods. Keep ahead at all times on the main path through this beautiful wood which in late spring is a showcase for bluebells. Later, the woods open out and the path winds somewhat amidst birch trees. Soon it joins a path coming from the right. Keep ahead as the path turns to tarmac. In 50m, avoid a stile and footpath on the right. The path passes a house, zigzags right-left round the barn of *Upper Bolney House* and changes to a concrete drive. You now have pasture on the left and smart houses along the right, and the sound of lawnmowers and the scent of freshly-mown lawns may well fill your senses. The drive curves left. Avoid a (very narrow) path left here and a path on the right. Cross over a road beside the gate of *Cray House* on a rough drive called Harpsden Woods. Follow the track past various gardens and small pastures and a large garden centre. Finally, the drive reaches a main road, the A4155.



Decision point. The route described below takes you to **Lower Shiplake** where there is an excellent gastropub, where you can take a rest with refreshment and good food. However, if you prefer to reach Henley-on-Thames sooner, cutting out about 750m, do as follows:

Go straight over the main road to a rough lane on the other side, Bolney Lane. Follow this tree-lined lane, crossing the single-track railway via a long bridge. The lane meets Bolney Road at a T-junction. Turn **left**. Skip the next section and resume from Leg 4 below.

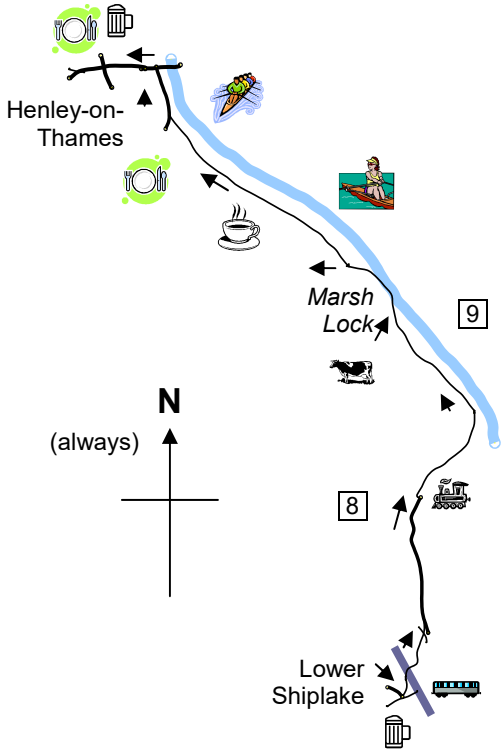
7 Cross the main road and take a footpath half-**right** through a metal swing-gate, avoiding the lane to its left. The path runs between fences and goes through another swing-gate. Continue along a quiet residential road, Northfield Avenue, arriving at a junction in Lower Shiplake village with *The Baskerville* ahead.

The Baskerville is both a good pub and a first-class restaurant at (currently at least) reasonable prices. It offers 2 lunch courses at £16 and 3 at £20 and has several guide listings (though not Michelin). It has a large garden and offers summer barbecues. The Baskerville is also a hotel.

If you have been visiting the pub, go back across the road again (or if you have not been to the pub, stay on the same side of the road) and go along Northfield Road on the **left** of Northfield Avenue where you entered the village. At the end, by a garage, continue on a footpath, over a stile and across the railway. Go over another stile and turn **left** on a path, through a metal swing-gate and between high fences. Cross over a driveway and join a residential road coming from the right, Bolney Road. As you go, names like *The Boat House* tell you you are near the river. Soon, at a slight bend, you pass the point where Bolney Lane meets your road (the short cut). Continue straight ahead.

Leg 4: Lower Shiplake to Henley 3½ km=2 miles

8 After another 200m or so, you come to *Thameside Court*. Here the route continues on a side path on the left of the drive. *The grounds of the house have their own half-scale railway, complete with junctions, sidings and even a station building where you would not be surprised to find a half-scale waiting room, newsagent and tickets for sale. The grounds also have a sunken garden, pinetum, summer house temple and tennis court.* After the house, follow enclosed paths, forking **left** to avoid a private drive, and go over a little bridge into a meadow. Cross the meadow to the bank of the River Thames.



9 Suddenly you are probably in the company of families out for a stroll along this pleasant stretch of the river. After about 600m along the riverside meadow [May 2022: you find that your path is currently blocked and a diversion set up: a sign explains it all], the path leads across the wooden walkway over the weir at Marsh Lock and you have an exhilarating double crossing of the river, almost to the Berkshire side, with a chance to watch the yachts and canal boats making their way through the lock.

There has been a lock here at least since the 1400s but the current Marsh Lock dates from 1773. Much of the planning was done by the Revd Humphrey Gainsborough, inventor and friend of James Watt, and brother of the artist. Like the broom that had its head and handle replaced, almost every part has been renovated at some time or other. The walkways are not there just for your pleasure but to carry the towpath, i.e. the barge-pulling horses, since the lock was on the far side of the river. The island and river bank here on the Oxfordshire side was the site of several mills. In 1881 "A disagreeable smoky chimney spoils the look of the Mill …, but the other, though lately rebuilt, is by no means ugly; some little outbuildings in red brick above the weir are not out of harmony with their surroundings, and the long walls of the Mill garden are suggestive of peaches, nectarines, and all manner of wall fruit, which the situation and aspect favour in the highest degree."

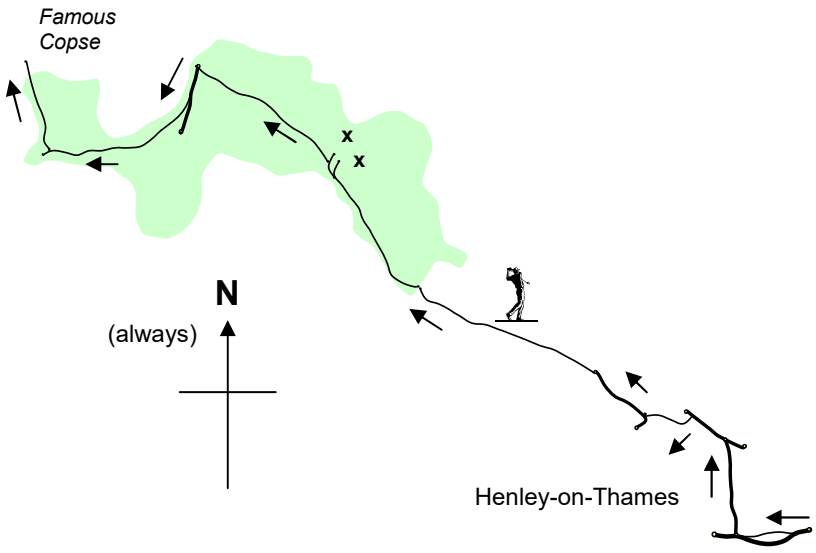
The second walkway takes you back across the river. The white house on your side is *Pool House*. Continue along the river path, quickly reaching Marsh Meadows where the crowds are even more evident and you can join them in the Terrace Café or pick up an ice cream, whilst inspecting the houseboats and converted canal barges. Finally you pass a well-spoken-of Spanish eatery, *La Barca*, and join a road for the last stretch up to the *Angel on the Bridge* pub, a legendary Brakspear outlet. Turn **left** on the main road, away from the bridge and into the town, passing the Red Lion Inn and St Mary's church, then several chances for refreshment, until you reach the pedestrianised area in front of the old Town Hall.

Henley is a small town with a big heart, famed throughout the world for the Royal Regatta which takes place during the first week of July. Along with Wimbledon tennis and Royal Ascot, the Regatta is one of the places one must be seen in each summer season. The course is about a mile and a half (2100m) up-river from Temple Island rowed by two boats side-by-side, normally sculls (single and double), coxless pairs and fours, coxed pairs, fours and eights. Other well-known names are London mayor Boris Johnson who was MP for Henley and the Brakspear Brewery, founded in 1779 by Robert Brakspear, still located here although the main site is now at Witney.

Leg 5: Henley to Famous Copse 5 km=3 miles

10 Go ahead to the **right** of the Town Hall on West Street, going past the *Row Barge* pub. At the end, by one of the ornate walls of Friar Park, turn **right** on a lane, Hop Gardens, with its Edwardian houses. At the end, turn **left** at a T-junction into Crisp Road. In 170m, between nos. 17 and 71B, turn **left** on a signed footpath. The path bends right by a fence of Friar Park.

Friar Park is an eccentric Victorian mansion built by the equally eccentric Sir Frank Crisp, lawyer and expert on microscopes. He turned the gardens into a spectacular showcase which included a 6m replica of the Matterhorn. Friar Park was bought by Beatle George Harrison who called it "Crackerpot Palace" and wrote a song of the same name after it.



At the top, turn **right** on a lane and follow this verdant tarmac drive past *Lambridge House* and through a big iron gate (or over a stile), going past *Badgemore End* and more iron gates. Go over a stile (avoidable due to a gate on its left) and ahead along the right-hand side of Henley Golf Course. Your route is more-or-less straight across the links for almost 1km. In 30m, you join a sandy golfers' path, but the path soon leaves it, at a yellow arrow on a post, to maintain its direction past various greens. Keep within a line of trees which, after a gap, becomes a line of pines. After this, aim for a low stile in a fence at the wood ahead, a fraction **right** from your original line.

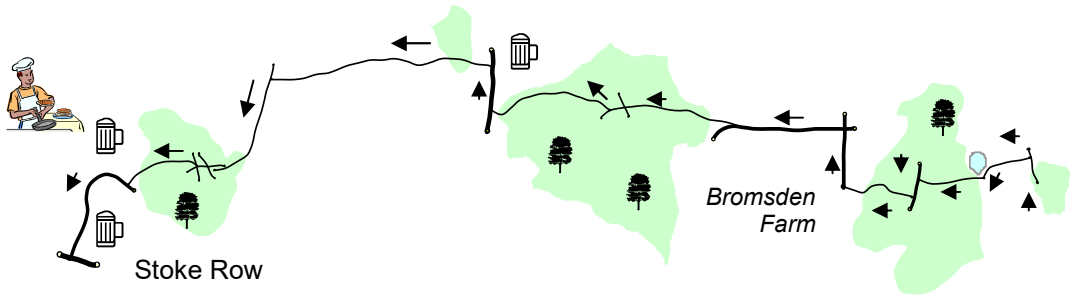
11 Go over the stile and along a narrow path through bramble and birch, then tall beeches. The path goes down into a valley, then up again. Keep to the main path at all times, avoiding side paths right and left. About 700m after entering the wood, you pass near a field on the left. Soon the main path seems to curve right towards a large curved white arrow on a tree. Ignore this and keep straight ahead. In just 15m, veer **right** on a path, as indicated by a red-topped pole. [2019-20: Careful! the poles are missing.] In a few metres veer **left** again, avoiding a path on your right with red-topped poles. You are now following white arrows on trees and then green-topped poles. Soon the path crosses a bridleway, as indicated by 3-way white arrows on a tree. Keep straight on. You need to keep your eyes open for those white arrows and the occasional green-topped pole on this narrow

winding path to avoid straying. The path is joined by a path from the right and finally reaches the end of the wood at a junction of lanes and tracks.

12 Turn sharp **left** on a lane that runs between the wood on the left and a field on the right. As soon as the lane veers away from the field, fork **right** on a narrow path in the trees to stay beside the field. Go through a (bypassable) wooden gate and continue on the path through the wood. The path crosses another path at an angle. At a 4-way yellow arrow on a tree, keep straight ahead. You soon pass a hollow on your right. (You may see a white arrow on the left here to mark the official footpath, but this is disregarded by everyone.) You reach the corner of a field on your left where a path joins from the left by a post with arrows. A sign informs you that you are on part of the Greys Court Estate Walk. *Greys Court is a fine Tudor house belonging to the National Trust and only a stone's throw from here if you would like to visit or have tea. It is closed Mondays and Tuesdays and during the winter.* At another post just 20m further, turn **right** on a footpath, as directed by a yellow arrow. Soon you have a large meadow on your left. You are now in Famous Copse. The route zigzags left-right around the corner of the meadow. It finally passes an irrelevant stile on your right and goes through a new wooden gate ahead onto a path between meadows,

Leg 6: Famous Copse to Stoke Row 5½ km=3½ miles

13 Proceed 40m, turn **left** through a new wooden gate and go along the left-hand side of a flowery meadow. *Here you may see red kites, now a familiar site in the Chilterns.* At the other side, veer **left** to go through a new wooden gate and down a few steps. The footpath skirts a small lake set in an attractive natural enclave. In 50m the path goes **right** and then runs the length a fine grassy meadow which narrows to a track towards the end and reaches a T-junction with a wide path in a valley. Turn **left**. In 70m, at a post, turn **right** on a narrow grassy path uphill. Don't miss this turn. At the top, go through a gate by a tennis court, turn **left** through another gate and bear **right** across an orchard, alongside the farm buildings, and go through a large wooden gate. Turn right **again** between the black stables and farm buildings of Bromsden Farm Stud, first on a track then on tarmac. *On the left is a statue of Bellerephon riding the winged horse Pegasus, sword in hand, wings sadly broken, probably a prop from a film set.*



14 At the end of the tarmac you reach a crossing track with a black fingerpost. Turn **left** on a drive marked as a bridleway. At the end of the drive, go through either of two gates by a cattle grid and immediately leave the drive, as it curves off to the left, to go straight ahead across the grass to a metal gate visible ahead. Go through the gate into woodland. You are on a narrow path and need to be alert here, although the route is quite clear. Later the path runs between laurels on the left and pines on the right. You

come to a straight stony crossing path with arrows on a post. Go over the crossing. In 40m, where the rhododendrons on the right end, fork **right** (really a half-right turn) on a narrow path with a white arrow (repainted from yellow) on a tree. *Do not miss this vital turning!* (Do not make the mistake of keeping straight ahead on another narrow path which goes to Highmoor Cross.) There are more white arrows on the trees and the path approaches a field on the right. At the corner, turn **right** on a track to a road. Turn **right** on the road. The large house under construction is on the site of the *Dog and Duck* pub.

15 Continue for another 50m after the house and turn **left** at a sign on a footpath by *Greenman* and *Appletree Cottage*, veering **right** on a narrow path by a fence. Your route leads to a crosspaths with a markerpost. Cross straight over, soon finding yourself on another dark path, enclosed between a fence on your left and trees on your right. After around 100m you emerge back into the light with a garden on your left. Continue straight ahead to go over a stile and down the right-hand side of a large crop field. Go through a green gate, down the right-hand side of a pasture, through another green gate and down, a fraction left, to a gate in visible in the valley below. This is an absolutely marvellous grassy valley, in a long perfect V-shape with steep sides.

16 Go through the gate and up the other side, slightly left. At the top, go through two gates and across the next meadow, again slightly left. On the other side, go through a gate and turn **left** on a tarmac drive. The drive bends right. Just after a fingerpost, at a fork, keep ahead on the tarmac, avoiding the left fork. Go straight over a tarmac drive onto a track, then over another tarmac drive. You now have an immediate choice of two widely diverging signposted paths. Take the **right**-hand option. Keep ahead, avoiding a crossing path, then uphill by a fence of *Bushwood House* on the right where alpacas sometimes graze. At the end of the path, turn **left** on a drive and, at a lane, turn **right**. In 20m, you reach the *Crooked Billet*.

> *The Crooked Billet is a gastropub with no bar. Shout your order and the drinks are brought to you. It revels in its rustic roughness. Beer is Brakspear and a little more pricey than usual, but it's worth it for the service and the sheer quiet pleasure of the location. Paul Clerehugh, the proprietor, is a self-taught chef who succeeded in getting his place nominated as Waitrose food magazine's favourite foodie pub as well as gaining entries in the Good Food Guide and Time Out's Eating & Drinking Guide. The inn was built in 1642 and was once the hideout of highwayman Dick Turpin, who was romantically attached to the landlord's daughter Bess. Kate Winslet (of Titanic fame) held a wedding reception there.*

Continue along the lane which bends left and takes you to a crossroads in Stoke Row, with the *Cherry Tree Inn* is on the left, where the walk began.

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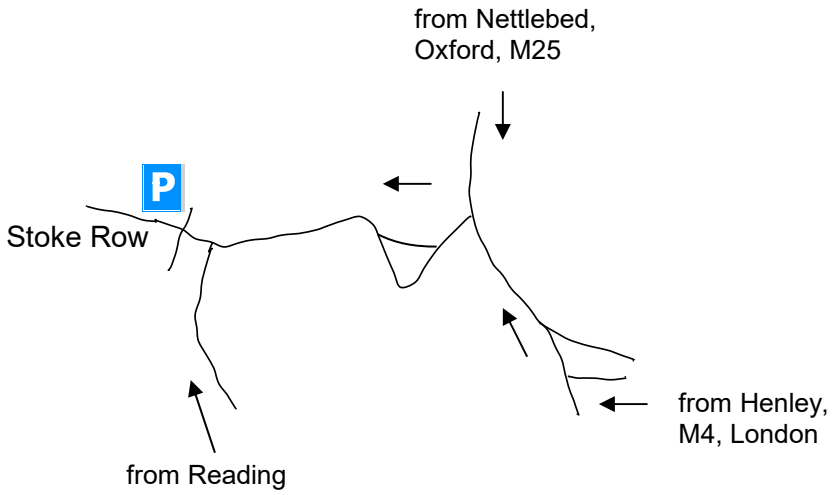
Getting there

By car: if coming via the **M4** east, e.g. from **London**, come out at exit 8/9 and follow signs to *Henley*; cross the bridge at Henley-on-Thames and keep straight on through the town; stay on the main road, avoiding all turnings off till, after 4 miles (7 km), you reach a T-junction; turn **right** on the B481 signposted *Nettlebed, Stoke Row* and in about 1½ miles=2½ km turn **left** at a sign for Stoke Row. From **Reading**, take the B481, Peppard Road, through Sonning Common and turn left at a sign for Stoke Row. From **Oxford**, take the A4074 and A4130 to Nettlebed, the B481 and look for signs for Stoke Row.



By bus/train: train to **Henley-on-Thames**, frequent service.
For a shorter walk, take bus 145 or 146 to **Stoke Row**. Check the timetables.