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

Nuffield, Grim's Dyke, Checkendon, Highmoor

Distance: 21 km=13 miles — easy to moderate walking

Region: Chilterns — Date written: 27-jun-2015

Author: Phegophilos — Last update: 30-nov-2024

Refreshments: Ipsden, Checkendon, Stoke Row, Nettlebed

Map: Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West) *hopefully not needed*

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

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Parkland forest, ancient earthwork, woodland, pubs, views, bluebells

In Brief

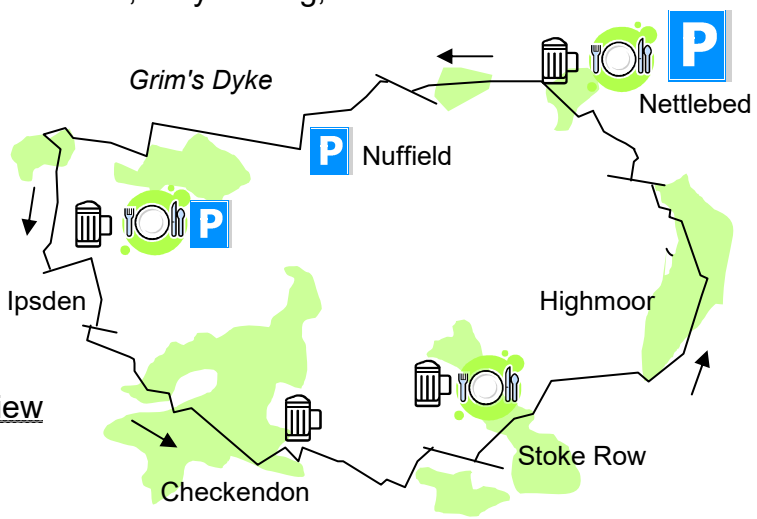
Here is another unforgettable, varied walk full of hidden Chiltern delights in South Oxfordshire, not far from London. At every turn there is something new and unexpected, separated by a sequence of delightful woods and other surprises. Along the way, you walk a generous and beautiful section of Grim's Dyke, accompanied by those famous red kites. As is typical of this site, you will be using some secret paths which are not marked on the map and known only to locals. Please don't worry if you are not used to walks of over 10 miles: this walk is so varied and interesting you will not notice the length – and there are very few steep parts.

There are several excellent opportunities for nourishment along the way. To enquire at the *King William*, ring 01491-681845; for the *Cherry Tree*, ring 01491-680430.

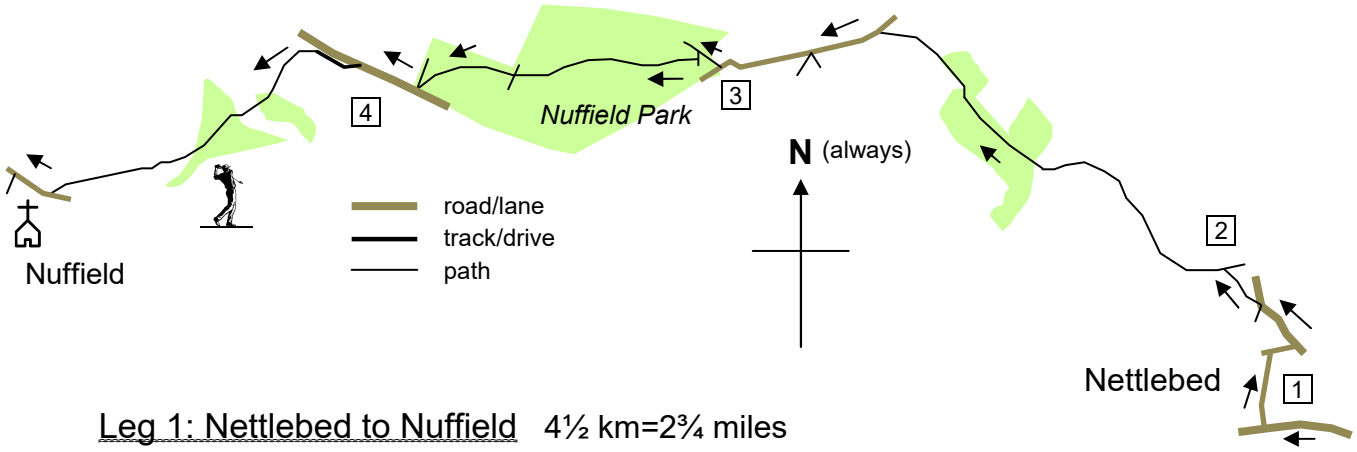
There are some nettles on this walk so shorts (and possibly short sleeves) are *not* advisable. It was completely dry when walked in June, making trainers ok as footwear, although in wetter times, boots are necessary. Most of the stiles have a gap, or liftable hatch, for your dog, but three are a tight squeeze.

The walk begins at **Nettlebed**, near Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, w3w:winded.moss.satin, postcode **RG9 5BA** where there is roadside parking. For more details, and alternative starting points, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Bird's Eye View



The Walk



Leg 1: Nettlebed to Nuffield 4½ km=2¾ miles

1 Starting at the green, walk through the strangely bleak main street of Nettlebed, passing the *White Hart* on your right. Just before a small deli on the left, turn **right** on a footpath, passing the village club. At the top, opposite *Popindoo*, turn **right**, then **left** on the main Watlington Street, using the side path. As the road begins to curve right, turn **left** at a fingerpost *(concealed by greenery: don't miss this turning!)*, taking the **right**-hand option, the byway, a narrow sunken path. In 100m or so, at a T-junction, turn **left** on another path, soon passing some houses on your right.

2 Follow this attractive path between hedges, soon ignoring a footpath on your left. The good surface suggests this may be an ancient trackway. After 500m, you come out to a junction of tracks. Keep straight ahead on a wide track through woodland. The track comes out of the woodland and continues to Huntercombe End Farm. Go straight through the farm on a concrete track and turn **left** on a tarmac lane. Follow the lane, ignoring a pair of footpaths on the left, until you reach, on your right, the flint walls of Nuffield Park Wood.

3 Turn **right** through the pillared entrance into the wood and immediately fork **left** through a small metal gate beside a large one. You are in a magical woodland with a deep atmosphere. In late spring the whole wood is carpeted with a bluebells. Only 70m into the wood, you come to a rather indistinct junction of paths. Ignore the white arrow pointing straight ahead for the main path and instead turn **left** and (*important)* after 5m continue straight ahead on a narrow path, following another set of white arrows on trees running almost parallel to the main path. (Don't worry if you miss this turn and end up staying on the main path. At the end, by a fence, simply turn **left** and join the walk at the grounds of the large house.) Follow the path through the centre of the wood, always following the white arrows. In 450m, near the end of the wood, go straight over a junction of paths. The path now runs between a tall wire fence and the grounds of a large house on your left. After the fence, keep straight ahead through holly. You come out to the main A4130 road beside a drive leading to Nuffield Place.

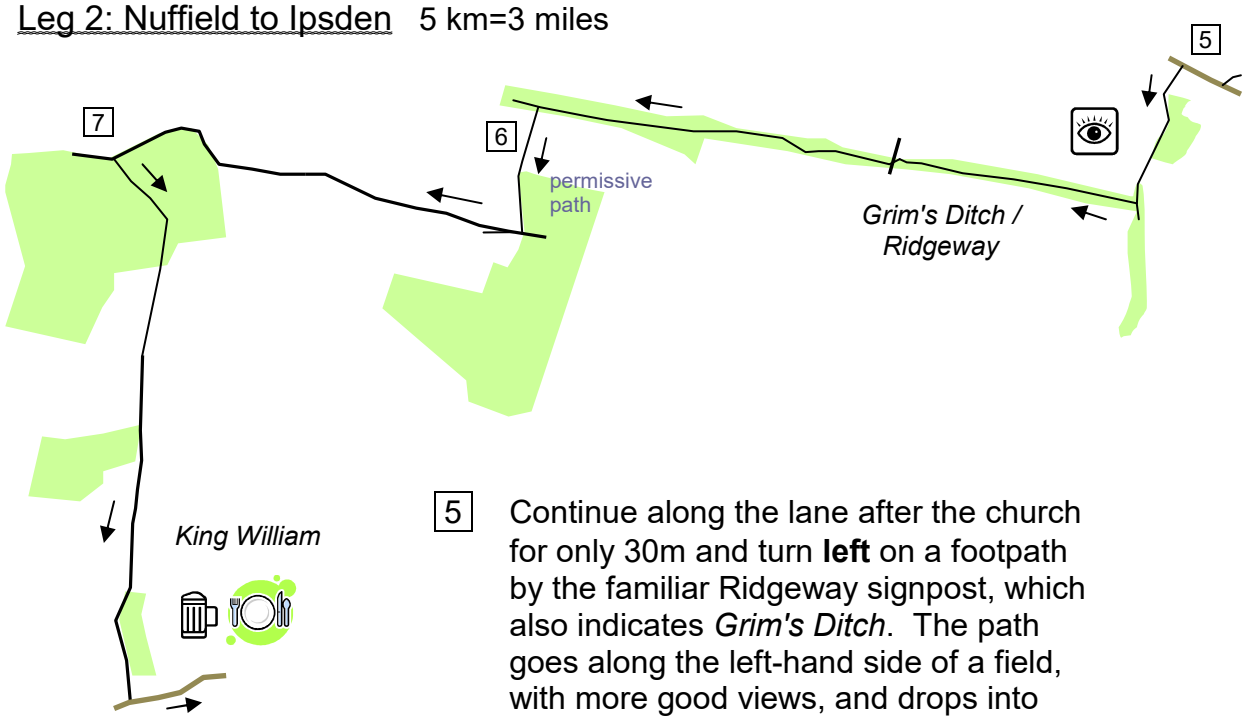
Nuffield Place (not seen unless you walk up the drive) was the home of W.M. Morris, aka Lord Nuffield, founder of Morris Motors (and an Oxford college). The house is a handsome mansion in an equally fine garden. But, for the home of Britain's one-time richest men, it's not exactly palatial, although it is full of gadgets and mod-cons from the 1930s, 40s and 50s. For Lord Nuffield was obsessed with mechanics. A cupboard in his bedroom, looking like a wardrobe,

was in fact a workbench with every kind of tool imaginable and here he would tinker in the small hours. Always a modest man, he once entertained the emperor Haile Selassie who was surprised and amused when Lady Nuffield herself brought the food to the table. Nuffield Place belongs to the National Trust and is open nearly every day, except during the winter.

4 Keep **right** along the main road, using the footway. In 150m, cross the road to a building which is now a café. Facing the café, turn **right** on a wide dusty track. You pass one of those colourful Ridgeway signposts. Keep straight on along the track, passing two new houses on your left and a golf tee on your right. Go straight over a golf fairway to the familiar acorn symbol on the other side, then go across another similarly. Continue on a path through a wood. After 150m the path comes out of the wood and goes diagonally across a third fairway. The path now runs to the right of the clubhouse and golf-buggy store, then diagonally across grass. You have great views right across Oxfordshire. After a kissing-gate and another diagonal path, a short path leads you to a tarmac lane in Nuffield Village opposite the church. Turn **right** on the lane.

A church stood here at least from the 1200s when it belonged to the nuns of Goring priory. Notable features inside include the round Norman font and some medieval brasses. As a "Ridgeway church", it offers succour to pilgrims in the form of do-it-yourself tea/coffee and cakes (in the fridge).

Leg 2: Nuffield to Ipsden 5 km=3 miles



5 Continue along the lane after the church for only 30m and turn **left** on a footpath by the familiar Ridgeway signpost, which also indicates *Grim's Ditch*. The path goes along the left-hand side of a field, with more good views, and drops into woodland to reach another Ridgeway signpost. Turn **right** along a beautiful beechwood path along Grim's Ditch which you will be following for 1½ km, possibly accompanied by the *whoopee!* sounds of the red kites.

Grim's Ditch or Dyke is the name given to several similar earthworks in England, dating probably from around 300 BC. There is no single dyke: they appear in different places ranging from Berkshire, North Oxfordshire, as far as Essex. This one extends westwards to Mongewell. Why were they built? No one knows: possibly as markers of territory, not for defence as they are too low.

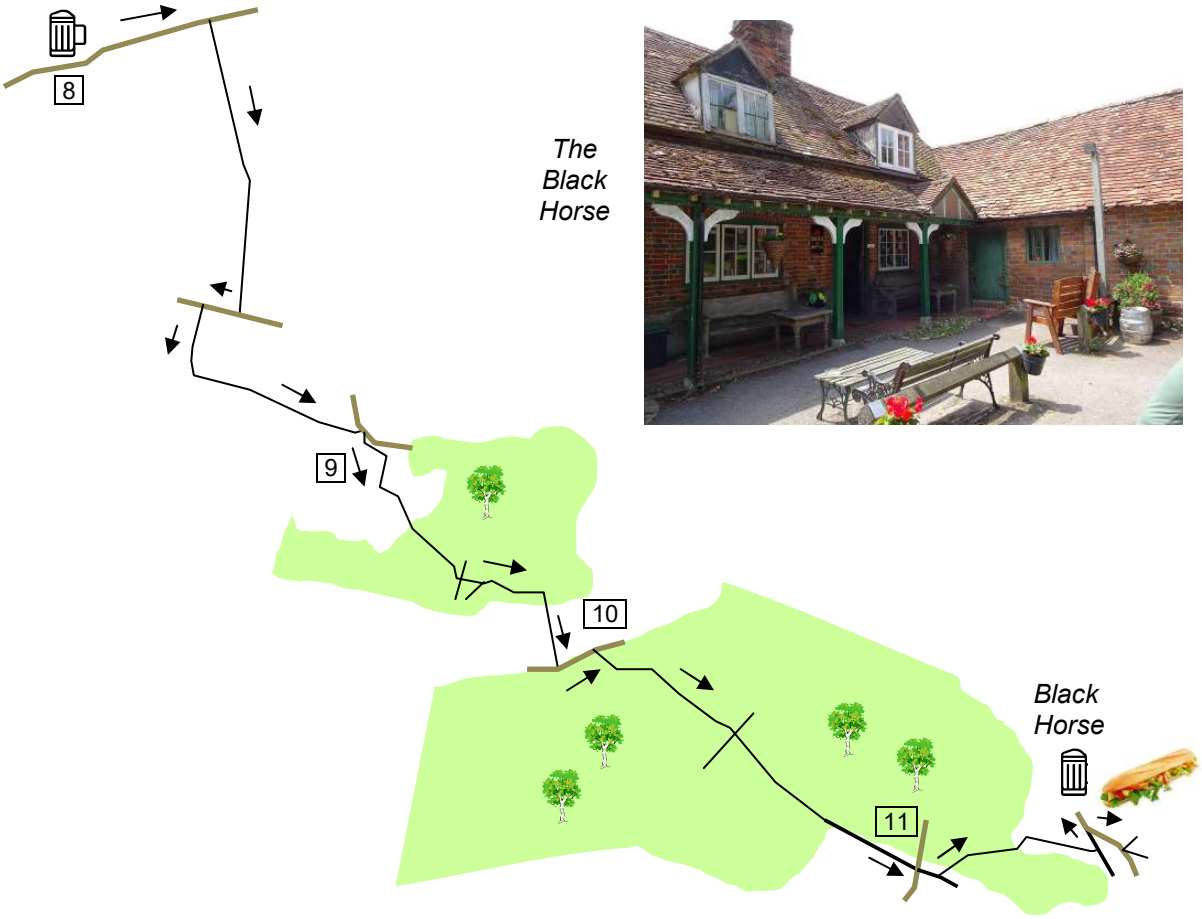
At first you are on a low path with the dyke on your right. After around 150m you switch sides. In 500m, you have a grassy meadow on your right and your path directs you **left** on a drive for a house named *Woodlands* with a water tap which the Ridgeway provides for its thirsty pilgrims. Go immediately **right** again on a sunken path which is in fact in the ditch itself. The path goes through a modified kissing-gate and climbs out of the ditch. It zigzags left-right over a stile or (much easier) through another of those kissing-gates. The ditch is now very distinct on your right and you have another 400m to go in its company. The path goes down and up over tree roots and on your left you can see a wheat field. At the beginning of a second wheatfield you meet a marker post with a green kissing-gate on your left. *You are unlikely to miss this junction but this turn is crucial!*

6 Turn **left** through the kissing-gate on a permissive path, by courtesy of Woodhouse Farm. The path goes up the left-hand side of a field along a generous grass verge. At the end of the field, at a marker post, turn **right** and immediately take a path on the **right** of a hedge. The path gradually descends into the valley towards a hotchpotch of forestry shacks. It finally curves right by the edge of a wood, passing the white farmhouse on your right. Immediately opposite the house, turn **left** uphill into the woods by a yellow arrow, marking the Chiltern Way (CW).

7 Follow this nice wide path up through Wicks Wood. At a double junction, keep straight on, still following the yellow arrow. At the bottom, as you emerge from the wood, keep straight ahead on a wide path across a barley field. Now continue ahead past fields and plantations and between the buildings of Poors Farm in a valley. You pass a sheep field and a house and your wide dusty track finally takes you out to a tarmac lane beside Stone Farm House. Turn **left** on the lane, quickly reaching the *King William*.

The King William is a Brakspear pub in an ideal location with outdoor seating that offers views over the Oxfordshire countryside. It has recently (2024) been smartly renovated outside. Food is freshly cooked from a limited menu which is always a good sign. Service was slow in 2020, so allow extra time. Beer, including one guest ale, is served direct from the cask. The pub is open daily from 12, closing in the afternoon on weekdays and at 3pm Sundays. They generously allow customers who are walkers use of the overflow car park, no matter for how long, making this site an alternative starting point. There are now many outside tables, including some on the other side of the lane: so keep your own food pouch tightly closed! There is an outside serving area attached to the pub, open (and popular) in summer. Teas and coffees are also served in the mornings.

Leg 3: Ipsden to Checkendon 4¼ km=2¾ miles



8 Continue past the pub along the lane for 300m and turn **right** at a fingerpost onto a path downhill between fields, still on the CW. *In summer, red poppies here are rife.* At the bottom, turn **right** on a tarmac lane and, in 90m, turn **left**, still on the CW, on a grassy path uphill. At the top of the field, at a marker post, keep straight on, ignoring a footpath on the right. Your path veers left between hedges and goes out between posts. Continue straight ahead in the meadow, with a new wire fence on your left and a hedge to your right. (If this path is overgrown, you can use an easier path on the other side of the hedge.) You exit, between posts, down to a tarmac lane. Turn **right** on the lane.

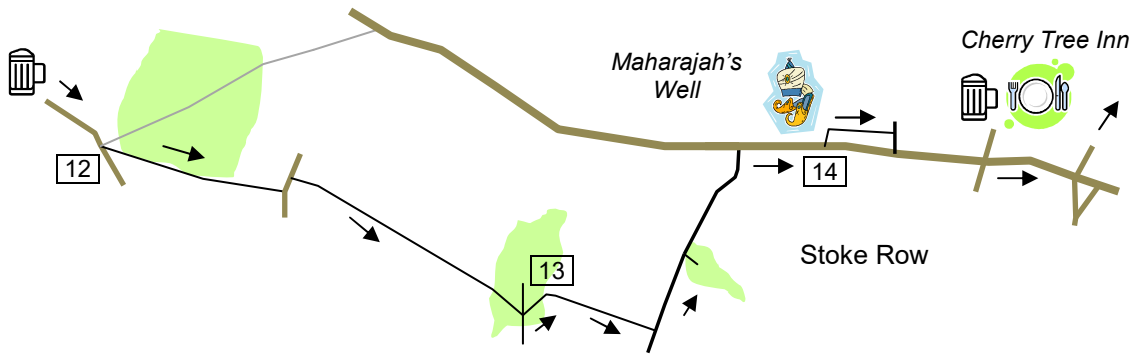
9 Immediately turn **right again** up a bank and into a crop field. Turn **left** along the edge and **right** in the corner (although, strictly, the path crosses the field) and go **left** through a wooden swing-gate in the corner. Veer a bit left and quickly right uphill in the meadow and, at the top, go through a wooden swing-gate into the woods of Berins Hill. You need to follow the white arrows on trees as you ascend the woodland. Where you meet a wide path coming from the left, go straight across on an even narrower path opposite, choosing the path a fraction **left**. Shortly after, you come to a marker post. Ignore the right turn here, thus **leaving** the CW, and keep straight ahead following a white arrow. Eventually, your path curves round right to go through a swing-gate. Cross a track and go through a new wooden swing-gate onto a narrow path. Go through a second wooden gate and past a rather untidy collection of farm machinery. Finally pass between new wooden barriers onto a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane.

10 In just short of 100m, just past the entrance to the picturesque Garsons Farm, turn **right** at a fingerpost on a path into woods of Wheeler's Copse. Soon your path runs through a clear section and forks **right** downhill, quite steeply, in the direction of a white arrow. *Care! The white arrow may be hidden by a fallen tree trunk.* You come down to the valley bottom where there is a crossing path and a post with yellow arrows. Go straight over the crossing path and continue uphill. After roughly 200m, you will notice a marker post with yellow arrows. Ignore the right fork here and keep straight on. Your path comes out beside some wooden gates by horse paddocks and continues on a dirt drive past houses to a tarmac lane by a small pond.

11 Cross straight over the lane onto a track by an old barn with a damaged roof, which is next to a newer barn. Look to the far left, away from the newer barn, to find a narrow path through the bracken, which may be obscured in high summer. Fork **left** onto this path. The undergrowth quickly clears, revealing a nice wide woodland path. In 250m you emerge from the wood beside some houses on your left, in the little hamlet of Scots Common near Checkendon, and reach a T-junction with a wider track. Turn **left** on the track to reach, in under 100m, one of the most unusual and unspoilt inns in South Oxfordshire. Welcome to the *Black Horse*!

*The Black Horse is an old woodcutter's pub hidden in what is still partly thick forest, a jaded survivor from past centuries (and please continue to **use** it so that it lasts into future centuries!). The unpretentious low-beamed interior is like a time capsule. There's a generous selection of beers. But this is not a great gastronomic experience: they can rustle up a roll or baguette to eat on one of those wide wooden tables in the yard. Boots and dogs are welcome – outside! The pub closes at 2.30 weekdays. An interesting historical nugget: this site was a camp for Polish families after WW2 (see also the Amersham walk in this series).*

Leg 4: Checkendon to Stoke Row 2¼ km=1½ miles

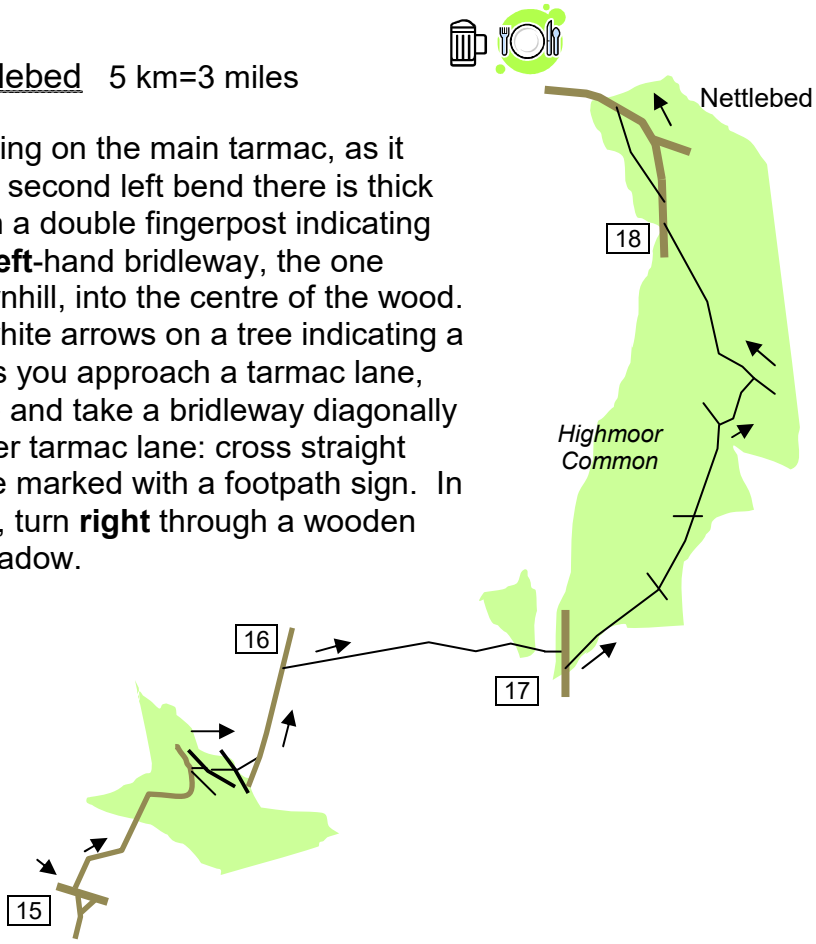


12 After a rest break, go back in the direction you came but this time keep **left** on the tarmac lane. In 100m, on your left are two signed footpaths. Take the path diagonally **left** through a new swing-gate, avoiding a path to its left by a large metal gate. (The author walked happily through two fields of cattle. However, if they are grazing and they worry you, simply take the footpath **left** beside the metal gate, follow a path through the woods and turn **right** - but not sharp right - on a road into Stoke Row.) Go along the left-hand side of the pasture and continue in a straight line to go over a stile on the far side just to the left of some farm buildings. Cross straight over the road through a new wooden swing-gate on a footpath. Cross a tarmac drive and go over another stile into a second pasture. Keep to the right-hand side and, at the far end, go through a swing-gate into woodland.

13 At a T-junction in the woods, turn **left** but immediately take the **right** fork, following white arrows, towards a corrugated barn where your path veers left and turns right between fences and meadows. In 40m, ignore a stile on your left and avoid another just before the end. (Everyone uses the straight path now and use of the short cuts has lapsed.) At a T-junction turn **left** on a track and, at a junction, continue ahead on a residential lane to reach a road in Stoke Row. Turn **right** towards the village. In 100m or so, on your left is the *Maharaja's Well*. *This is a celebrated historical landmark, an ornate but working deep well, with a story attached. For full details see the other walk in this series "The Maharaja at the Regatta".*

14 Continue on the road, passing the neighbouring quite lovable *Well Cottage*. Ignore a footpath on the left and, immediately after it, go **left** through a wooden swing-gate into the Cherry Orchard which was also paid for by the Maharaja. Turn **right**, walk parallel to the road and, at the end, go through a little wooden gate to re-join the road. Go straight over a crossroads to find, on your left, the *Cherry Tree Inn*, a cosy Brakspear pub / hotel with a full and enterprising menu, Michelin listed. After a possible break, continue to the next proper signposted junction at the start of the green and turn **left** on Newlands Lane.

Leg 5: Stoke Row to Nettlebed 5 km=3 miles



15 Follow this twisty lane, staying on the main tarmac, as it bends right and left. At the second left bend there is thick woodland on your right with a double fingerpost indicating two bridleways. Take the **left**-hand bridleway, the one straight ahead, slightly downhill, into the centre of the wood. Within 100m you will see white arrows on a tree indicating a fork: take the **right** fork. As you approach a tarmac lane, veer **right** to cross the lane and take a bridleway diagonally opposite. It leads to another tarmac lane: cross straight over to another tarmac lane marked with a footpath sign. In 300m, just after Little Farm, turn **right** through a wooden swing-gate into a grass meadow.

16 Take the faint footpath slightly left across the meadow. At the other side, go through two green metal kissing-gates and take a faint path, a fraction left, down a meadow of tall grass. At the bottom, go through a small metal gate and continue, slightly left, up a hay field. *At the top, to regain your breath, it is worth glancing back at the marvellous grassy valley, in a long perfect V-shape with steep sides, that you have just passed.* Go through a new green kissing-gate. Your path runs along the left-hand side of a barley field and over a stile into a tree garden under a quite magnificent (turkey?) oak.

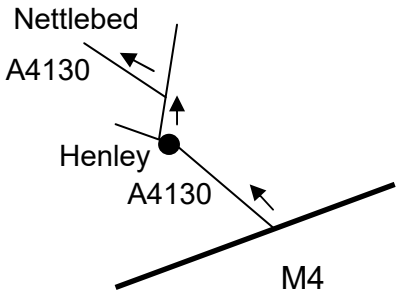
Keep to the left-hand side to the left of a wire fence (to oblige the owners: the official path runs next to their house). The path goes between fences, then right and left to meet a marker post. Go straight over a junction of paths, beside a garden fence and out on a shingle drive to meet the main road in Highmoor.

17 Turn **right** on the road for just 40m and sharp **left** on a signposted byway marked *Bix 2*. Follow this semi-tarmac path deep into the beeches and tall oaks of Highmoor Common. At a 4-way junction with a fingerpost, go over the crossing bridleway and continue as before on the byway. You pass on your right entrances to some houses of Lower Highmoor and reach a gravel driveway. Go straight over, following a yellow arrow, on what is now a more typical woodland path. After a majestic 300m or so, you will see on your left some white arrows on a tree trunk. Turn **right** here on a narrow path through undergrowth and, in high summer, plenteous nettles. *Don't mis this turn!* Your path runs through a luminous area of forest and, after 200m, comes down to a very wide forestry track. Turn **left** on the track. Soon the track narrows and runs through attractive woodland. Finally it comes out onto the main B481 road again.

18 Cross the road, turn **right** on the road for just 10m, and take a footpath into trees on the left. (The next short section is very overgrown in summer with brambles and nettles encroaching ; if you have bare legs or arms it may be better to stay on the road.) The path bends right and runs next to the railings of what used to be the Sue Ryder Hospice – now under development for *Beechcroft Homes* in 2024. It crosses its driveway and finally comes out at the gates of the new development opposite the green in the village. Welcome back to Nettlebed where the walk began!

Getting there

By car: the walk starts at Nettlebed, Oxon. The easiest approach is via Henley-on-Thames: turn **right** in the main street following the **A4130**, signposted to *Nettlebed* or *Oxford*. The road runs along the lovely Fairmile and reaches Nettlebed after 8 miles. Park at *this* side of the village (the east side), near the Kiln, on the road behind the little bus shelter on the green (watch out for cars unloading mountain bikes!). **Or** in the parking area on the left, by the gates to the Nettlebed ex-Hospice.



Nettlebed can also be reached from Reading / Caversham along the B481, from Oxford and from the M40 near Stokenchurch, via Christmas Common.

Alternative starting points are: by the church in **Nuffield**, in the *overflow* car park of the *King William*, at the roadside in **Stoke Row**.

By bus/train: bus 139 from Henley to Nettlebed, including Sunday. Check the timetables.

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