



The Great Wood and The Hamble Valley Skirmett, Hambleden

Distance: 15½ km=9½ miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Chilterns

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Refreshments: Skirmett, Hambleden

Map: Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West) *but the map below should suffice*

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

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Historic villages, woodland trails, hills, views, green meadows

In Brief

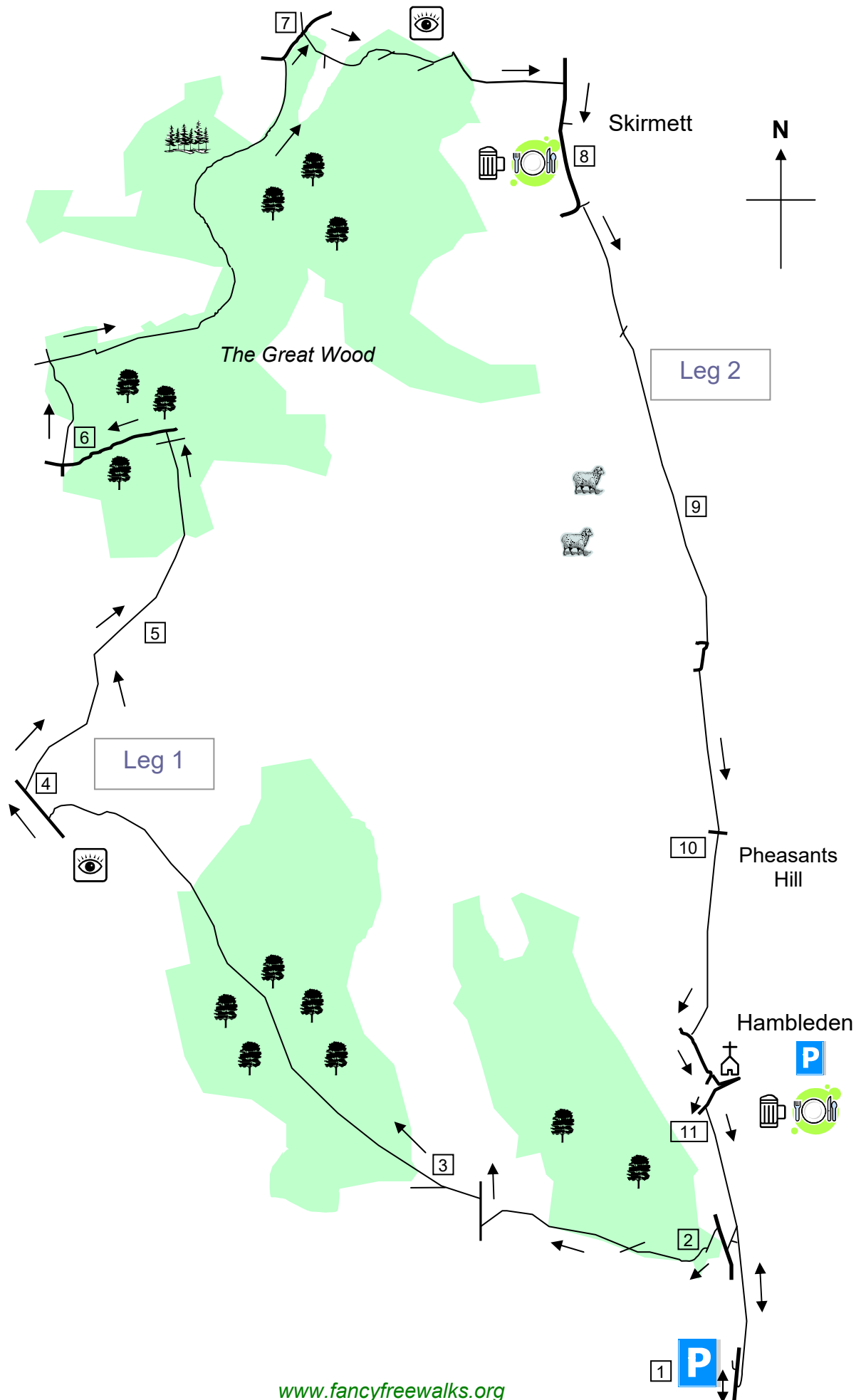
This is walk takes you high over the wooded Chiltern hills down to a picturesque Chiltern village where there is a good pub for lunch or drinks. (To enquire at *The Frog*, ring 01491 638996.) It then follows the green pastures of the Hamble valley to the legendary village of Hambleden near the end of the walk.



There are very few nettles to worry bare legs. You may find some muddy patches in the woodlands, so boots will be a comfort. Your dog can come too because the few stiles all have a dog gate except one which is easily jumped.

The walk begins at the **Mill End car park**, grid ref SU 784 855, approximate postcode **RG9 3BG**, www.w3w.co/worked.dentures.fade. This is 400m=450 yds on the **left** up the Skirmett road from the junction at Mill End near Henley-on-Thames. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



Leg 1: to Skirmett 10 km=6 miles

- 1 Turn **right** on the road out of the car park and in 50m, go sharp **left** through a metal swing-gate and take a path that runs along the edge of the meadow parallel to the road. You have good views ahead of Pheasants Hill and the houses of Hambleton which you will visit on your return. At the far side, go through a small swing-gate (or through the larger metal farm gate just before it) and turn sharp **left** on a track that leads to the road. Turn right on the road and, in 50m, turn **left** on a track uphill, passing a couple of houses.
- 2 Just after the houses, fork **right** up a bank and keep **left** on a path that runs parallel to the path you were on. (This higher rider's path soon gets wider and more interesting than the official footpath down on your left.) Where trees allow, you have views left across fields and the Thames valley. You meet a bridleway crossing diagonally: keep straight ahead, still on a wide path. Your path comes out of the woods and meets a T-junction. Turn **right**, going past a house and, just before a cattle grid, turn **left** at a fingerpost on a bridleway.
- 3 As the path begins to rise up a grassy hill, take the **right** fork, heading for a wood ahead. When you enter the wood, follow a chalky path uphill and, when the path levels out, keep ahead under ash and beech trees. Soon you enter a beech glen with traces of an old fence. There are white arrows on the trees to direct you, as if this were necessary, since you keep generally ahead, avoiding all side paths. *As you go, you may disturb the many pheasants which are bred in these woods and often burst out of the undergrowth near your feet with their raucous cry.* Later your path becomes straight and stony, indicating a historic purpose perhaps. Your path now runs between fences, narrows and zigzags past a bench with good views south, between clipped hedges. You join a drive coming from a house and reach a lane by the small Round House. Turn **right** on the lane.
- 4 In 130m, turn **right** at a footpath sign onto a driveway to Lower Woodend Farm. Keep **right** past the buildings through a (usually open) wooden gate and along the right-hand side of a small meadow. Go through a metal gate and follow the obvious path between wire fences. The path eventually ends where you reach a sunken bridleway. Cross the bridleway, slightly to the left, and go over a stile. (If you have a large dog, this is the only stile without a dog gate; however, the steps are wide and easy to manage.)
- 5 Go straight ahead across a large grassy meadow and through a new, large, metal gate into another meadow. Keep ahead along the left-hand side. (The visible path trims the left-hand corner.) At the other side, go over a stile into a wood. Once again, you have a straight stony path. Your path dips into a beech glade and winds a bit. It soon takes you through a light-coloured swing-gate, next to larger one, and on to a lane, Dudley Lane. Turn **left** on this woodland lane. The lane comes out of the wood opposite a road junction. Turn **right** here over a stile and go straight across a large sheep pasture. At the far side, go into a wood of holly and hawthorn. *Note that you are on part of the Shakespeare Way, a long-distance path running from the Globe Theatre to Stratford-on-Avon.*
- 6 Follow this winding path through Gassetts Wood, going past a fir plantation. *There may be a little wet ground at this point but it will soon clear.* Your path comes down to a wide track by a post with many arrows. Turn **right** on this track. You now have a good easy walk in prospect through the

length of the Great Wood. The path soon side-slips right before a metal field gate and runs with the field on your left. Your path gradually snakes left and then right and, as you finally reach the corner of a meadow on your left, you get your first glimpse of Turville Windmill. You emerge from the wood through a metal barrier to a lane, Dolesden Lane. Turn **right** on the lane.

- 7 After 150m, where footpaths cross, turn right through a small wooden gate into a wood. The path curves left and right and goes through a wooden swing-gate into a small meadow with a good view of Turville, a favourite picnic spot. Avoid a path forking right and instead go straight up the meadow, passing through another wooden swing-gate into the wood. Your path veers left at the top of the slope and levels out. Soon it curves left downhill by a fine bank of beeches. It runs abruptly right and left round two sides of a field. Your destination, Skirmett, is in the valley below, and further to the left, the village of Fingest. The narrow path leads down to a small wooden gate. Keep ahead on a shingle drive to the road in Skirmett. Turn **right**, going past various charming houses and cottages, to reach The Frog.

The Frog at Skirmett is a fairly recent addition ("Skirmett The Frog" – geddit?), a free house and rather classy eatery with a cosy little bar and fine restaurant. Best of all is the garden looking out onto a meadow with quite lovely round wooden tables where a group can sit. Beer includes the local Rebellion brew. The Frog is closed from 3-6 but is open all Sunday till 8.

Leg 2: Return 5½ km=3½ miles

- 8 After possible refreshment, continue south along the road in Skirmett, passing the rest of the village with houses on both sides, including the *Old Crown* where a pub used to be. At the end of the village, turn **left** and, in 20m, turn **right** through a small wooden gate and go straight ahead along a grassy path across the meadow. The path goes through a small wooden gate in a line of hawthorn and continues along the right-hand side of the next meadow. Go through a wooden gate onto a well defined path. The path ends at an unneeded wooden gate. Cross a farmer's track and go past an equally unneeded swing-gate to continue along the left-hand side of the next meadow. In the corner, go through a metal gate and go straight across the centre of a meadow passing a horse chestnut on your left. Go through another swing-gate and continue across the meadow, ignoring a stile on your right and thence through a small wooden gate to a tarmac drive.
- 9 Cross the tarmac drive to a nice straight but rooty bridleway opposite, becoming grassy. You arrive at the hamlet of Coletrope Farm. Keep ahead on a lane and, as you pass the venerable farm buildings, go **right** with the lane for just 5m, then **left** through an old kissing-gate. Keep ahead past a copper beech and a bench, go through another old swing-gate and along the right-hand side of a field, ignoring a wooden swing-gate on your right as you proceed. Go through a wooden gate and along the left-hand side of a narrow meadow. *You may notice beyond the hedge on your left the vineyard of Pheasants Ridge. It is run by volunteers and profits go to Hambleden Church and other charities.* Continue through another old swing-gate and a small meadow and a wooden gate by a modern house and garden, leading to a lane in Pheasants Hill.

- 10 Cross the lane to an enclosed footpath opposite running between hedges. You pass more gardens, each of which has an extension on your right into the Hamble valley. Your path ends at a wooden gate by *Mr Greedy*. *Mr Greedy is a clipped hedge in the shape of that Mr Men character, having just swallowed a rambler.* Keep along the right-hand side of a small pasture, through gates either side of a line of tall pines. Hambleden church now comes into view. Go through a metal swing-gate in a fence. Keep ahead but, half way across, veer **right** and go through a small metal gate on the right-hand edge. Turn **left** on a lane and, where it bends right, go straight ahead through a wooden gate in the wall of the churchyard of the 12th-century St Mary's. *This huge cruciform church is definitely worth visiting with its ancient font, its 'Wolsey Altar' and decorated ceiling. Stacks of old maps, ancestral diagrams and documents can be found opposite the entrance. Teas are sometimes available in the churchyard, as they are in the post office.* Exit through the lichgate into the centre of the village.

Hambleden is famously the 'pretty village of the Chilterns' because of its old unspoilt streets complete with original shop signs. The Saxon name means 'crooked valley'. Its best-known son was St Thomas de Cantilupe (1218?-1282), Bishop of Hereford and trusted advisor to King Edward I, who led a life beset by religious quarrels. The 'Stag and Huntsman' pub is open all day Saturday and is also a hotel. It offers good real local ales such as Rebellion and has a pretty garden.

- 11 After visiting the village, turn **right** along the main street and, just after a dry bridge, go **left** through a metal swing-gate into a large pasture. *Red kites (birds) often scream through the air above you, a great success of re-introduction a few years ago.* At the other side, go through two small gates either side of a farm track, traverse the long meadow and finally turn **right** at a small metal gate and **right** again on the road, taking you back to the car park where the walk began.

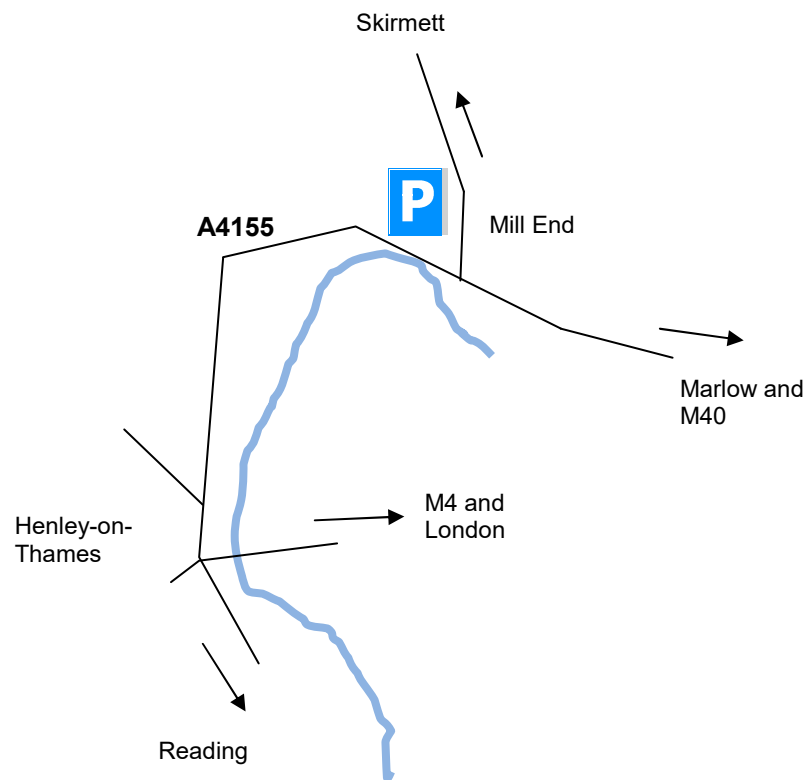
Getting there

By car: to reach the Mill End car park from the London area, either (1) take the M4, turn off at a sign for Henley; after Henley, turn **right** and fork right on the A4155 or (2) take the M4, turn off at a sign for Henley but avoid the town by taking the A404, signposted *Marlow*; turn **left** to go through Marlow on the A4155.

From the M40, turn off at Exit 4 as for *Marlow*, and do as above.

From Reading, go through Henley and do as above.

The Mill End car park can be reached by turning **north** at Mill End, signposted *Hambleden, Skirmett, Fingest*, 400m (450 yds) on the left.



By bus/train: bus 850 from Marlow or Henley stops at Mill End near the start of the walk. Check the timetables.

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