



Whipsnade and Dunstable Downs Studham, Kensworth, Tree Cathedral

Distance: 15 km=9½ miles or 7 km=4½ miles easy walking

Region: Chilterns, Bedfordshire

Date written: 16-jul-2017

Author: Phegophilos

Last update: 27-jul-2020

Refreshments: Dunstable Downs, Studham, Whipsnade

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.

High hills, views, woodland, isolated church, quiet lanes, tree cathedral

In Brief

There's a reason for the shape of this walk, where the map on the next page looks like an *elephant's head and trunk*. But the famous zoo is left to a return visit. Instead you have a series of terrific views from the North Chiltern Hills, delightful patches of woodland, gentle countryside and two genuine surprises.



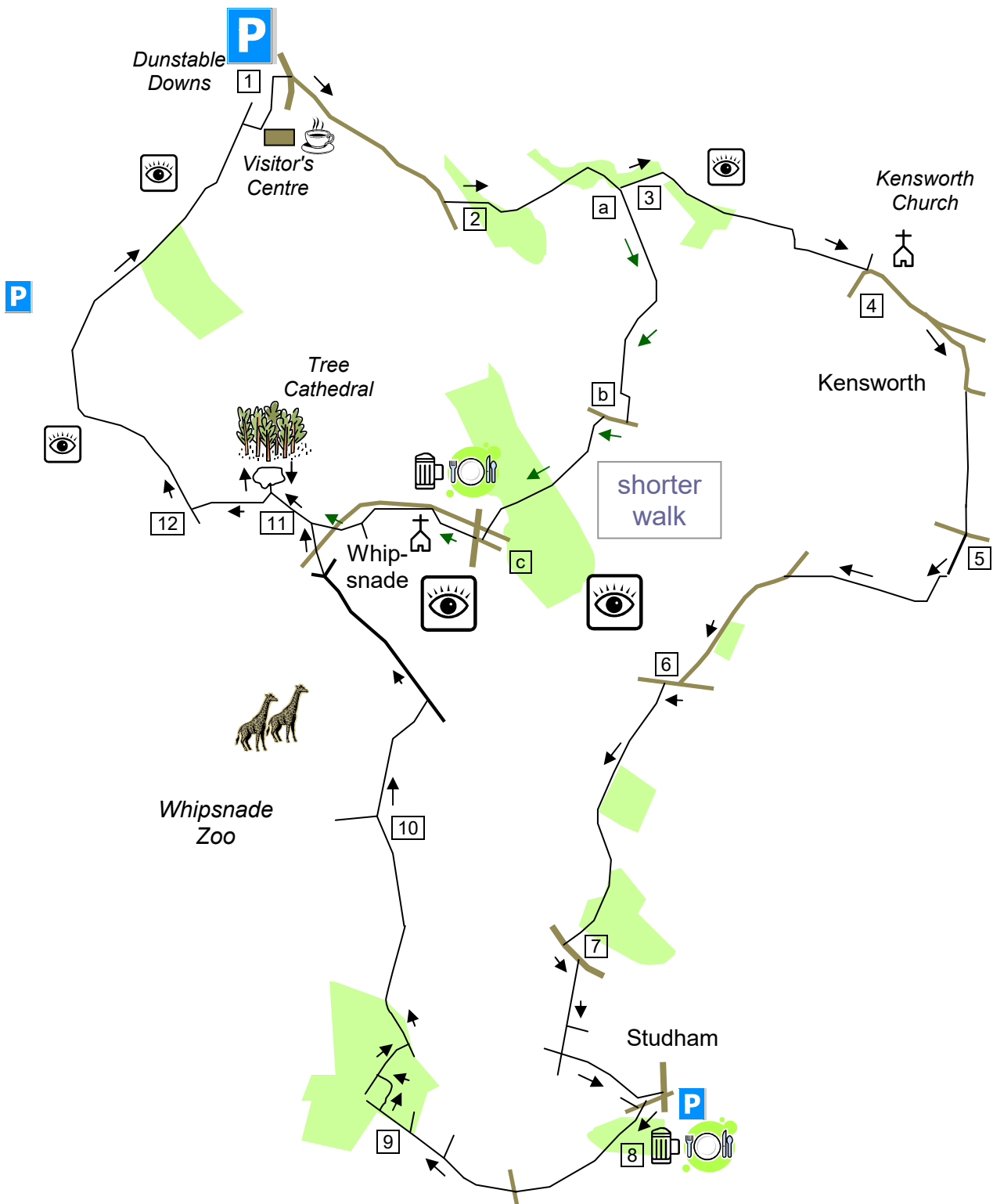
There are some nettles along the way, so shorts are *not* advisable. The paths are generally firm, so walking shoes or trainers are fine, except possibly in winter or after rain. Your dog can come along on this walk but please note that there are long stretches of sheep pasture.

For the church in Kensworth, you may need a key in advance – see below.

There are good places en route for refreshment. To enquire at the *Red Lion* in Studham, ring 01582-872530 or for the *Bell*, ring 01582-872530; for the *Old Hunters Lodge*, ring 01582-872228.

The walk begins at the car park on **Dunstable Downs**, Bedfordshire, postcode **LU6 2GY**. There are several car parks, and perhaps the northern one is best (just north of the junction with Isle of Wight Lane), since it's not gated, www.w3w.co/lions.rushed.famed. Cost is only £3 (2017) for the whole day. If you are doing the full walk, another good idea is to start in **Studham**, postcode **LU6 2QG**, with a mid-walk break on the Downs (there is a free parking area just south of the cross roads). If you are doing the shorter walk, a good starting point is the free **Whipsnade Heath** car park. This is just east of the roundabout crossing of the B4540 and the B4541 to the east of the village; that's a mile or so before the Downs if you are going north. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1 With the great westerly views from Dunstable Downs and with the wind-catcher and brazier on your left, walk along the side of the Visitor's Centre and continue past a large grass car park bordered by a line of stumps. At the far corner of the car park, turn **right** to the main road and cross it over to a minor road, Isle of Wight Lane, passing the Robertson Corner Memorial. *This spot, still called "Robertson Corner", was given to the National Trust by W.A. Robertson in memory of his two brothers, killed in WW1. The lane*

narrows after passing the entrance to Kensworth Quarry. After 750m on this lane you pass a house, *Downs House*. At a signpost, turn **left** immediately after the house, on a footpath.

- 2 You pass through a small wooden gate, beside a meadow, through a wooden gate and onwards into fine woodland. You come out beside a cropfield, now with different views, including the quarry. *Kensworth Chalk Pit is still a working quarry but past excavations have revealed a mass of geological data, including fossils of small animals that lived during the time of the last dinosaurs*. Turn **right** along the edge of the field. After the edge curves left, at a marker post, the path descends to the right under trees. You are in tall woodland, known as Codlings Bank, as you pass a derelict hut. As the path nears a meadow, it zigzags and comes to a junction where you have a choice of a gate on your right or a flight of steps.

Decision point. If you are doing the shorter 7 km=4½ mile walk, go through the kissing-gate on your right and skip to the section near the end of this guide called **Whipsnade Heath Crossing**. Otherwise ...

- 3 Avoid the gate on your right and go up the steps. After a rather steep ascent, you have further to go between thorn bushes to reach the top. *The old quarry (now reclaimed by nature) with its impressive cliffs is visible on your left*. Your path leads you through a kissing-gate and **right** along the edge of a field. Continue similarly into the next field. When another field opens out on your right, shift a little to your right so that you are going along the **left**-hand side of this new field. As you walk along the edge of the field you will see Churchend Farm in the distance ahead. Follow the path across the field to the far side and turn **right** and **left** again, staying by the edge of the field to go through the buildings of the farm. A metal barrier leads onto a tarmac drive. Keep right on the drive to reach, in 100m, a lane and, on your left, a real surprise for such a remote and isolated location.

Kensworth Church stands where the village used to be till all new houses were built instead on Kensworth Common, 1 km to the south, leaving only a few scattered houses. You can see from the sheer size of the church (and the Rectory!) how important the village was in earlier centuries. The church is Norman, of Caen stone and flint, the nave dating from 1150. The tower was added in the 1400s from local Totternhoe clunch stone. There are six bells, cast from the same Whitechapel foundry as Big Ben. The small font shows its age, because fonts constructed after the Reformation had to be large so as to allow total immersion. Stained glass windows and carvings at the west side add to the interest. Unfortunately this isolated church is usually closed. To obtain the key, you should ring Heather Woods on 01582-873492 preferably well in advance. Heather lives in nearby Corner Farm (postcode LU6 3QZ).

- 4 After visiting the church, ignore a lane on your right (Hollicks Lane) and continue in your original direction along a very quiet tarmac lane. You pass a triangular green on your left. Immediately after, fork **right** on a gently ascending tarmac lane. As you pass the huge and grandiose *Old Rectory*, where the lane bends left, leave the lane by going straight on along a footpath beside a crop field following a series of yellow-topped posts. Your path descends between fields and rises again. At the top, go up steps, through a small metal gate onto a straight path alongside a fence. The path is sheltered under tall trees, ash and sycamore, some entwined. At the top, bear **left** on the shingle drive, which leads you to the main road.
- 5 Cross straight over the road onto a very stylish drive, going through a squeeze stile or the open gate. This is the drive to *Blake Hall*, once an

opulent estate as you see from the name *Gate House* for the dwelling on your left. Just before the end of the wooden fence on your left, a marker post directs you to shift **right** on a narrow parallel path. Your path bends **right**, briefly enters the meadow and forks **left** at a marker post on a narrow path beside a fence and two pony pastures on your right. At the end, continue on a track, going past a metal barrier to meet a tarmac lane at a bend. Go straight ahead along this very quiet lane, soon passing Shortgrove Manor Farm. It leads to a T-junction with a Buckwood Lane. Turn **right** on this lane.

6 In 50m, just before a *road narrows* sign, turn **left** on a twisting footpath. **A little care is needed here.** In only 20m, turn **left** at a marker post. The path is nettly at first but this quickly clears to put you on a pleasant woodland path with gardens on your right. Soon there is also a crop field on your left. The gardens belong to the hamlet of Holywell. *If the word "bungalow" always made you think of Clacton-on-Sea and plastic gnomes, come to the exclusive colony of Holywell: here you see the ultimate in big expensive single-storey ranches set in these luxurious manicured gardens.* About 70m after you re-enter the woods, ignore a path on your left. You pass a residential road and your path runs across fields between fences. A bracken section leads into a holly wood and an agreeably long woodland path. Finally you come past a wire fence and houses, leading down to a road. Turn **left** on the footway.

7 In 100m, just before a bus stop, turn **right** through a kissing gate onto a track. Go up the right-hand side of a crop field. After the first field, continue similarly. *Isolated Studham church is visible on your right.* At the next junction, ignore a kissing gate ahead and instead turn **left** along the right-hand side of the same field, on a pleasant grassy path. It finally leads down to a wide grass verge and a road in the village of Studham. Turn **left** across the grass to arrive at once by the *Red Lion* inn.



*Studham was once two villages, one in Bedfordshire and one in Hertfordshire till they were ordered to join around 1900. It is said that Bedfordshire won after the Ombudsman ordered that the first county to install electricity in its "half" could take over the other "half". The church of St Mary is from the 1200s and is just outside the village. Studham is blessed with **two** pubs, both extremely charming and friendly. The "Red Lion" is a family favourite with chairs and tables arranged all together to maintain the atmosphere. The "Bell" is less than 200m left on the main road and is well worth checking out.*

8 After refreshments, with the *Red Lion* on your right, walk (back) along the side road. In 50m, at a fingerpost, fork **left** across the grass in the direction of the *bridleway* sign. Keep right to go straight ahead on a wide mown path, heading for a gabled house. Pass the house on your right and continue along the right-hand side of a cropfield, with a school on your right, for nearly 400m where you meet a tarmac drive. Cross straight over and continue along the right-hand side of the next field, avoiding a path that goes diagonally across the field. After this field, go through a modern kissing-gate into a pasture and keep straight ahead along the right-hand side, ignoring a stile on your right shortly. *Across the meadow on your left, is the historic Studham Hall Farm inside which is a 900-year-old Norman building.* Keep going into the far corner through a kissing-gate into a meadow of tall grass. Continue ahead but almost immediately go **right** into Church Grove Wood.

9 Ignore a path straight ahead and instead turn immediately **left**, so that you are walking close to the original meadow on your left. In 150m or so you come to a T-junction. Turn **right** on a woodland path which bends **left** after 100m. In only 30m, you meet a yellow-topped post. Turn **right** here on a path through a majestic wood of beech, oak and ash. When, in 200m, you reach the end of the wood, you meet a 4-way signposted junction. Turn **left** on a wide path just inside the wood. In 200m, your path emerges from the tall beeches at a marker post and follows the track ahead, along the right-hand side of a crop field with a mature hedge on your right. After one long field and a short one, your path enters woodland and meets a path coming from the left. This is the ancient Icknield Way (IW) which you will be following as far as Dunstable Downs.

10 Keep straight on. Soon a tall wire fence on your left indicates the boundary of Whipsnade Zoo. However, such is the size of the UK's largest zoo that you are unlikely to see any animals. In ½ km you reach the corner of the fence and your path comes down between posts to a tarmac path. Turn **left**. This is Studham Lane, an ancient highway, sheltered by tall trees. In nearly ½ km you come between bollards to a tarmac drive. Immediately avoid a left fork and follow the drive to reach the green in the very scattered village of Whipsnade.

Whipsnade is a tiny village, spread out around the green, and it would be completely overlooked except for two remarkable sights (one visited soon). Whipsnade Zoo was established in 1928 by the Zoological Society of London who owned London Zoo. The idea was for a spacious animal park, the total opposite of the cramped London Zoo, where animals were free to roam, closer to their natural habitat, thus aiding conservation. Visitors can go around on foot, by "bus", on the "Jumbo Express" train (you may have heard the "HOOT!") or in their own car between certain points. The zoo is especially known for its African large fauna, such as cheetahs, lions, rhinos and hunting dogs. The Zoo can be seen from afar because of the huge chalk "lion" carved into the hillside.

Just before a tiny car park, go diagonally **right** across the green, heading for the most distant corner. As you go, cross a road and pass just to the left of a tall red oak. Continue into the corner where you meet a signpost and a NT sign.


[The shorter 7 km=4½ mile walk re-joins the main walk here.](#)

11 Follow a sign for the *Tree Cathedral*, avoiding (for now) the IW and continue along the drive and through a swing-gate. Your best approach now is along an avenue of hornbeam to a seat and an info tablet. Your route will continue by turning immediately **left** before the seat, on the IW. First however, this remarkable site is absolutely *not to be missed* under any circumstances.

Whipsnade Tree Cathedral was created by Edmond Blyth in 1932 as an act of "faith, hope and reconciliation" in memory of three friends killed in WWI. He had visited Liverpool Cathedral and whilst driving over the Cotswolds he fell under the spell of sunlight through trees and hatched the idea of planting groups of different tree species arranged like the parts of a cathedral. In 1960 this nearly 4-acre treasure was gifted to the National Trust. Entry is free.

[You can follow a route of your choice: the author went into the Nave and left into the Lady Chapel with two "owls", the long Cloisters with tall ash, tulip trees, a Chancel with a ring of silver birch, an Easter Chapel \("rabbits"\), a Summer Chapel \("hedgehogs"\), an avenue of whitebeam to complete the circle.](#)

Having turned **left** by the seat (that is, **right** if coming back from the Tree Cathedral), go through a modern kissing-gate in the corner and keep **left** in a large meadow. You pass a piggery and an unnecessary kissing-gate, leading to a modern kissing-gate in the corner. A short path leads to a wooden barrier at a T-junction. Turn **right** on this footpath, still on the IW.

-  12 Your path begins stony and then widens under trees. In 300m, at a marker post, ignore a footpath right. In a further 300m, suddenly you are out onto the open hillside with great views ahead across Central Bedfordshire. Keep straight ahead for 50m, ignoring the first turning on your right, and fork **right** to a metal gate. Go through a smaller metal gate here and keep right along the top edge of the sloping hillside, in the company of innumerable sheep. Dunstable Downs are now visible ahead, although your destination is far short of the distant Five Knolls. To your left, the great views include Ivinghoe Beacon and Wendover (see those other walks in this series) and as far as the Quanton Ridge, with seats for a rest to admire. At the far side, go through a metal gate and keep straight on, ignoring steps on your right. *The airfield at the foot of the Downs is the London Gliding Club. Gliders are launched by a winch cable which can propel the craft at a 40-degree angle to a height of 1000 feet.* Suddenly you come out into the Dunstable Downs Country Park. The tall metal “sculpture” is in fact a wind-catcher serving as a ventilator for the building which is designed to be highly energy-efficient. The brazier is just ahead and to your right the café, loos and shop where the walk began.



Dunstable Downs are a chalk escarpment on the north-eastern ridge of the Chiltern Hills, extending a little further over the Five Knolls, just before the village. It is a huge favourite with gliders and hang-gliders and kites and holds an annual kite flying contest. The modern Visitor Centre, commissioned by the National Trust from a firm of architects, has several ergonomically advanced features. It contains a shop, a café and an info centre.

Whipsnade Heath Crossing

Do this section if you are doing the much shorter 7 km=4½ mile walk, omitting Kensworth and Studham. This section has its own points of interest and you may begin the walk in the Whipsnade Heath car park at section [c](#) below.

- [a](#) Go **right** through the kissing-gate onto an open grassy hillside. Keep ahead along the top of the slope with great views ahead. *You can see your future path, ahead to the right, going past a barn and up the centre of a field.* In 300m, as you pass a redundant kissing-gate, veer very slightly right on a faint path heading for a corner of the fence below. Here the field extends into a small square-shaped section. Cross it diagonally and go through a gap in the opposite corner. Keep **right** up the right-hand side of a meadow, passing a large old neglected barn. Continue on the track uphill and, at the top, continue on a stony track under trees. Just before the track bends right into a farmyard, go **left** through a small metal gate and **right** on a narrow path beside a motor works, out to a tarmac lane.
- [b](#) Turn **right** on the lane, passing historic *Greenend Farm*, and go **left** through a metal gate into a meadow of grass. Take a path straight ahead across the centre. After an unneeded kissing-gate, continue on a straight path under hazel trees beside a large meadow on your right. Your path enters the beautiful woods of Whipsnade Heath. Keep straight on along a wide path. In 200m you come out onto a grassy slope. Keep ahead on a



tarmac path, through a large kissing-gate and a metal barrier, to the Whipsnade Heath car park (alternative start).



From the Whipsnade Heath car park, go out to the road and cross it to a very faint and obscure path opposite, going across the rough grass to a minor road. Turn **right** on this road and cross the main road to a narrow unsigned path on the other side. This path is partially concreted and, after some overhang and nettles, it clears and leads you in 200m to meet the road. Continue beside the road for 50m. *On the other side is the Old Hunters Lodge pub/restaurant a large 15th-century thatch which serves a full menu and bar snacks.* You reach a wide grassy roadside space: veer a little **left** away from the road. *The white house on your left is the old school.* After crossing a tarmac drive, you will see a gate on your left leading to the church. *The Church of St Mary Magdalene is worth a visit, especially for a quiet rest in the churchyard at the back where there are benches and a pretty garden for cremated ashes.* Continue along the grass for nearly 100m where you see a NT sign for the *Tree Cathedral*. Cross the main road here and turn **right** on a semi-tarmac drive. In 100m, at the end of the green, you meet a signpost and a NT sign.

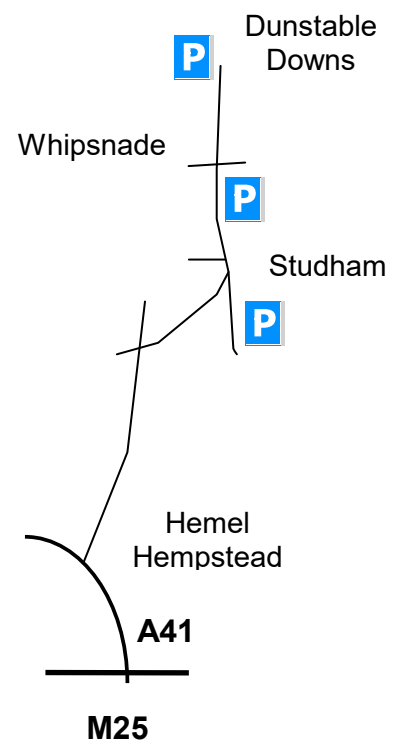


On the other side is the Old Hunters Lodge pub/restaurant a large 15th-century thatch which serves a full menu and bar snacks. You reach a wide grassy roadside space: veer a little **left** away from the road. *The white house on your left is the old school.* After crossing a tarmac drive, you will see a gate on your left leading to the church. *The Church of St Mary Magdalene is worth a visit, especially for a quiet rest in the churchyard at the back where there are benches and a pretty garden for cremated ashes.* Continue along the grass for nearly 100m where you see a NT sign for the *Tree Cathedral*. Cross the main road here and turn **right** on a semi-tarmac drive. In 100m, at the end of the green, you meet a signpost and a NT sign.

You have joined the full walk. Continue now from section [11](#).

Getting there

By car: Studham, Whipsnade Heath and Dunstable Downs all lie off the B4541. If coming from the M25, west or southwest, the easiest route is via the **A41** and **Hemel Hempstead**. From Hemel Hempstead, follow signs for the **A4146 Leighton Buzzard** and the “Elephant” tourist symbol. Nearly 5 miles from Hemel Hempstead, after Great Gaddesden, by the Café and Ashridge Motor Mart, turn **right** at a crossroads on Pedley Hill, as for *Studham*. A different approach is via the M1 and Luton to Dunstable.



By bus/train: bus 34/35 from St Albans Station to Whipsnade Zoo and Dunstable Downs, not Sunday. Check the timetables.

fancy more free walks? www.fancyfreewalks.org