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

Aston Rowant and Christmas Common

Distance: 15 km=9½ miles or 12½ km=8 miles or 6 km=3¾ miles
or 3¾ km=2¼ miles moderate walking

Region: Chilterns Date written: 28-jul-2014

Author: Phegophilos Last update: 21-aug-2026

Refreshments: Christmas Common

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

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.

Nature reserve, high hills, views, woodland, pub

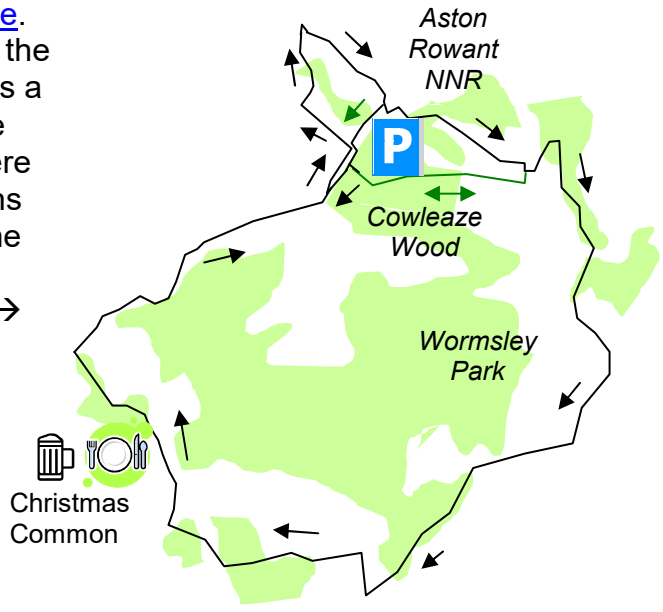
In Brief

This is a walk with legendary views over the Oxford plain from this high escarpment and National Nature Reserve. The main option takes you in and out of typical Chiltern woodland, rich in tall beeches, with open grassy meadows in between and an excellent and popular* stop for refreshments (to make a reservation* at the *Fox and Hounds*, ring 01491-612599).

There are no unavoidable nettles so bare legs should not be a problem. The terrain is generally firm so strong walking shoes or trainers are adequate, except on the longer option in the wetter seasons when boots become a necessity. Your dog will thrive on the shorter options but on the longer option he will have to stay on the lead almost all the way.

The walk begins at the **Cowleaze Wood** car park, near Lewknor, Oxfordshire, nearest postcode **HP14 3YL**, w3w:bronzed.lung.tissue. This car park is really a long track, parallel to the road, with a number of parking bays. There is a charge, as of 2026 (£3 for 8 hours) **but** at the water tower, 150m further down the road, there is a layby which will take 5 cars, no restrictions and **free**. The best place for this walk is at the South end of the car park, near the entrance. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

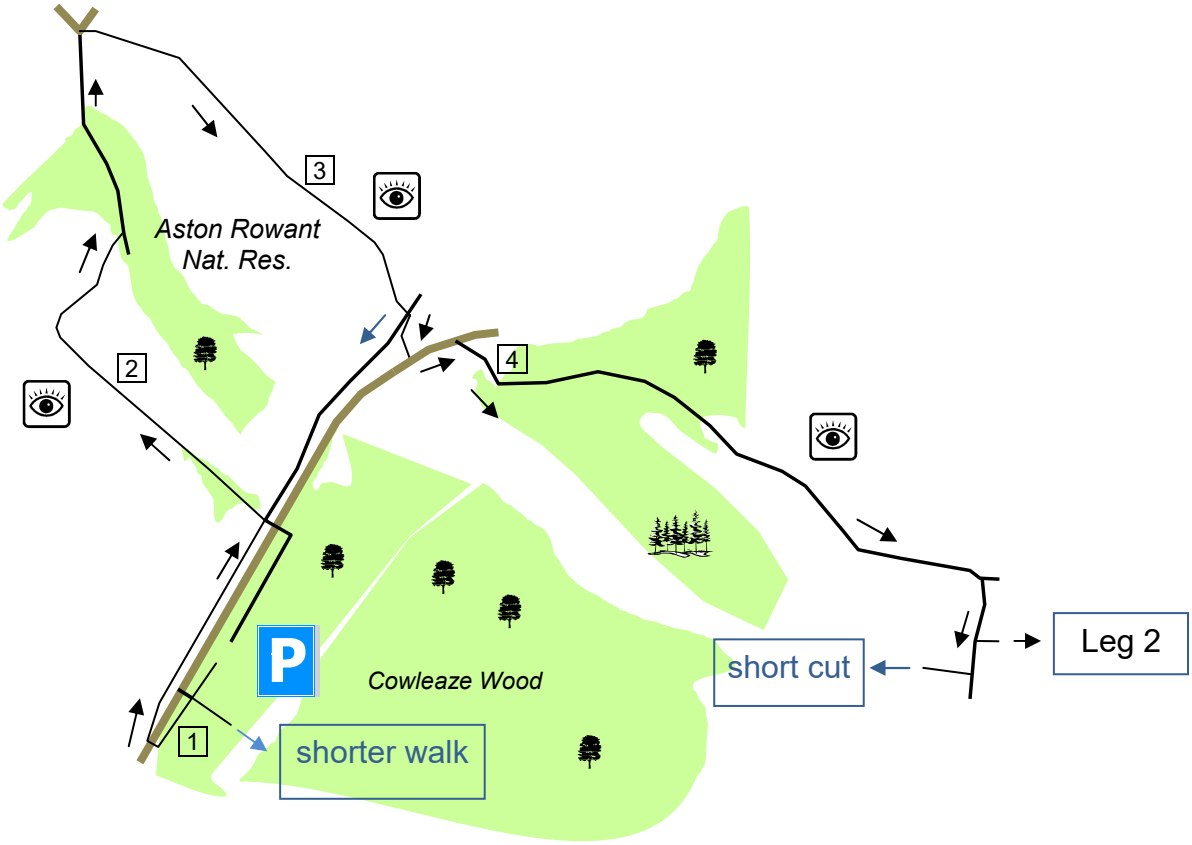
Bird's Eye View



The Walk

Decision point. This walk begins with a scenic looping walk over the Nature Reserve. This is an experience not to be missed. You can postpone it for now and do it at the end of the walk (using the **Cheat's Return**) but it is better done now while you are not too tired. (Remember, the *Fox and Hounds* can serve lunch till 2.30.) The alternative short walk also begins with the Nature Reserve. If you still wish to skip the Nature Reserve, go to the end of this text and do the **Cowleaze Wood Outward** section.

Leg 1: Cowleaze Wood to Vicar's Farm 4½ km=2¾ miles



1 Starting in the Cowleaze Wood car park, walk to the **south** end. (Facing the road, this is at the far **left**.) Ignore a path on the left between posts and go straight ahead over a low bank on a path running parallel to the road. After 150m you reach a tall water tower. Cross the road carefully and go through a small wooden gate opposite into the Nature Reserve.

Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve is run by Natural England and takes its name from a village about 4 km to the north. The chalk grassland supports a number of rare plants such as the Chiltern Gentian, plus many rare butterfly species. The juniper scrub is a favourite habitat of birds such as the chiffchaff, treecreeper, brambling, tawny owl and nuthatch.

There are many routes through the Reserve and unusual the route chosen here is one of several possibilities. Don't take the footpath ahead but turn immediately **right** to find a narrow path that runs along the right-hand side of the sheep pasture, parallel to the road, with views left. At the corner, turn **left** between two wooden sculpture pieces and shortly go through a small metal gate. Keep straight ahead on a level path under ash and oak trees. You pass an information tablet. Keep straight on along the edge of the sloping meadow, carpeted with a huge range of wild flowers in the summer.

You are joined by a path from the right and you pass several benches, giving you a chance to take in the wider views of the Oxford plain. *Shirburn Castle is visible slightly to your left.*

2 Your path descends a bit and turns right through a metal gate. You now have a view (and sound) of the M40 motorway and the contraversial steep cutting made in the early 1970s through the Nature Reserve. The path snakes its way down the flowery hillside and takes you through a small wooden gate at the bottom. Turn **left** on a wide stony track, Hill Lane. Soon you have a field on your left as the track levels out. You reach a junction with a tarmac drive by the large iron gates of Hill Farm. Turn very sharp **right** at a small fingerpost on a footpath, through a small wooden gate. Your path goes along the left-hand side of a large meadow, curving right up to a small wooden gate. Follow the winding path uphill, getting steeper as it goes over Linkey Down, with more information tablets. Near the top, through a small metal gate, the path curves right and opens up on the right onto a wide grassy space. A very small wooden bench offers a chance for rest.

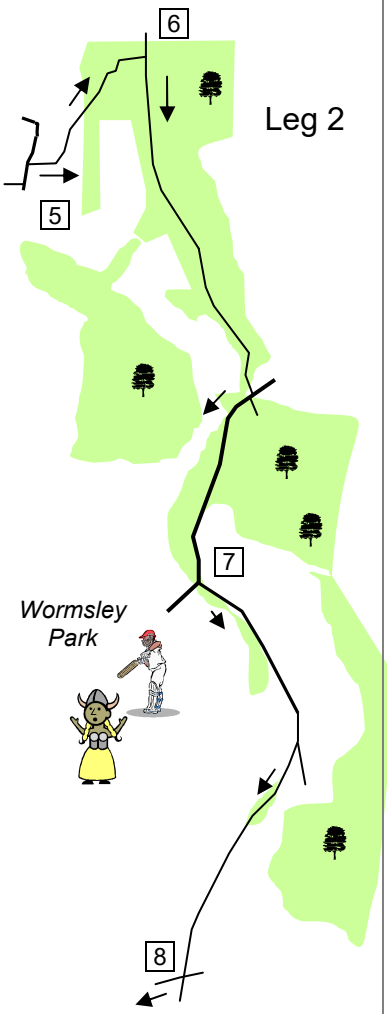
3 Keep to the left-hand side to the far corner and go through a small wooden gate straight ahead, ignoring a small wooden gate on your left. Turn **right** on a tarmac path. In 30m you reach two picnic tables. (If you want to return direct to the car park now, take the **Cheat's Return**, by forking **right** past the tables, continuing for 450m, over a track, **left** to the road to a path into the car park.) Fork **left** past the tables on a wide tarmac path which curves left, becomes narrow and meets the road. Turn **left** on the road and in 50m turn **right** on a tarmac drive marked as a bridleway.

4 Go through the smaller of two metal gates and follow the winding lane past *Upper Vicar's Farm House* on your left on an attractive stretch under trees and then between meadows. About 1 km from the road, the lane comes down to Vicar's Farm. Turn immediately **right**, before the pond and the house, on a tarmac drive. In 120m look to your left to find a little tall wooden gate.

> **Decision point.** If you are doing the **short walk**, omitting Christmas Common and returning direct to Cowleaze Wood, skip to near the end of this text and do the **Cowleaze Wood Inward** section.

Turn **left** through the tall wooden gate.

Leg 2: Vicar's Farm to Christmas Common 7 km=4½ miles

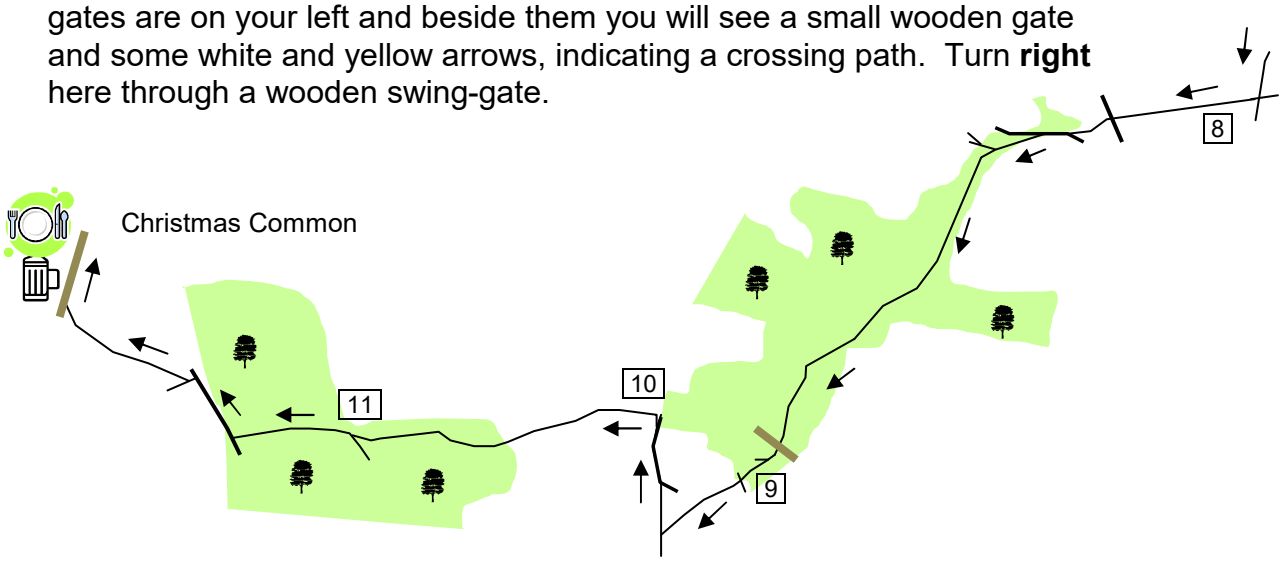


5 Go down a grassy path with the garden of the house and then the delectable *Vicar's Farm House* itself on your left. Your path curves left and takes you through another tall wooden gate. You now cross a sloping meadow diagonally left with another view of the house and its thatched barn. At the top, go over a stile or through a large metal gate. Your path now continues diagonally left up into woodland, with white arrows on trees to assist you. Finally, at the top, you meet a wide crossing path. Turn **right** on this nice wide level path.

6 You will be following this typical varying Chiltern landscape of beechwoods and mixed woodland for nearly 1 km on an especially delightful part of the walk. At one point you cross the border into Buckinghamshire. Towards the end, your path descends under tall beeches within sight of Wellground Farm and eventually meets a tarmac drive. Turn **right** on the drive and immediately ignore a signposted bridleway uphill on the left. Follow the tarmac drive for 500m, ignoring turnoffs, until you come to a very definite major fork. Take the **left** fork, the rough track. (The right fork, which is private, goes to Wormsley Park.)

Wormsley Park is an 18th-century country house, former home to Sir John Paul Getty, Jr. He was an American-born philanthropist, a big benefactor to the National Gallery. He became a lover of cricket, after being introduced to the game by Mick Jagger, and built a replica of the Oval here. Garsington Opera hold their summer season here, putting on three operas, plus extras.

7 After 250m, where the track tails off, ignore a large metal gate on your left but stay near the fence on your left for another 250m to the start of a sloping meadow straight ahead where yellow arrows indicate a fork in your path. Avoid the left fork, which runs uphill between wire fences, and instead take the **right** fork, a narrow path running close to the right-hand side of the sloping meadow ahead. At first the path has a thick hedgerow on the right; then the path runs through bushes and a strip of ash and hawthorn before coming out again next to the meadow on your left. You pass metal gates and a crop field on your right. The next set of metal gates are on your left and beside them you will see a small wooden gate and some white and yellow arrows, indicating a crossing path. Turn **right** here through a wooden swing-gate.



8 **See map on preceding page.** Take a path across the centre of a large sheep pasture. At the other side, go through a wooden swing-gate and cross a tarmac lane. Another swing-gate takes you on a path diagonally left across a meadow. After another swing-gate, veer **right** to join a tarmac lane. In 30m, leave the private lane (which leads to a walled garden) and fork **left** on a wide path under dark hazels, by a white arrow with the signs **SH4** and **CW** indicating the Chiltern Way. More white arrows on trees guide you to a new marker post. Turn **left** here on **SH8** and **CW** and continue straight over a crossing path, with an ornamental urn visible on your right. Your path goes through fine beechwoods and then rises, becoming quite steep, with white arrows to aid you. At the top, the beeches are replaced by lighter trees and your path becomes narrow, running through gorse and bracken. It ends at a tarmac lane.

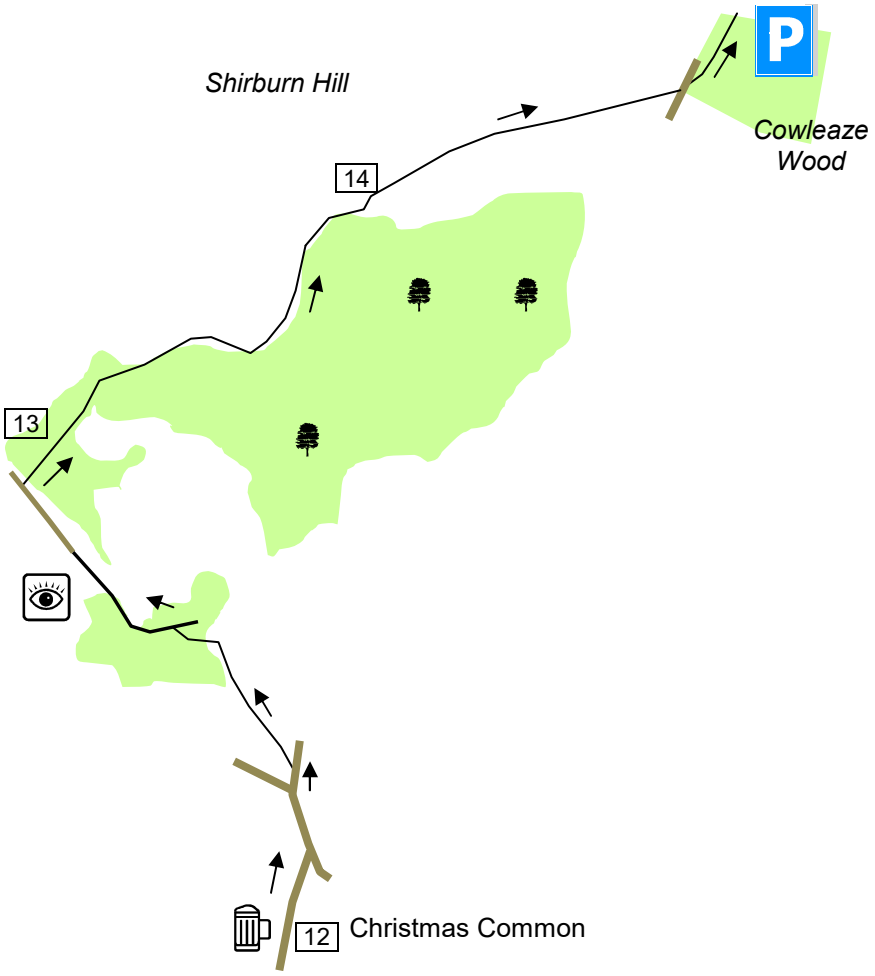
9 Cross straight over the lane on a drive for *Brackendale* and *Barnfield*. In 15m, leave the drive by forking **left** on a grassy path and keep straight ahead through bracken, aiming just to the left of a house. Cross the shingle drive and take a narrow path with the garden fence of *Brackendale* on your right and the neighbouring garden on your left. Emerging into a meadow, follow the path to the end where it bends to the left and reaches a gate. Go through the gate and turn **right** to walk downhill to the bottom of the valley with the crop field on your left and the fenced meadow on your right. After 100m or so, at a marker post turn **sharp right** (important!) thus leaving the CW. In the corner, go through a large metal gate on a path between hedges. You reach a junction by a long brick building. Keep straight ahead on a track with the building on your left, back in Oxfordshire. At the next corner, leave the track to go straight on through a small wooden gate.

10 After the edge of one small meadow, the path takes you through a swing-gate and along the left-hand edge of a large meadow. In the corner, keep **left** to go through a new rather hidden gate into a horse pasture. Go along the left-hand edge, through a gate in the fence, along the left-hand edge and through another gate into woodland. Follow the path straight across the centre of this larch forest, aided by the occasional white arrow, soon with with pastures visible through the trees on your right. You pass a hollow on your left and then a pitiful redundant stile on the bank on your right. Finally you meet a junction of paths with a wide path joining you from the left. That path is part of the Oxford Way indicated by **W18** and **OW** *(and this section of path is shared with another other walk in this series: Fingest, Pishill, Turville)*.

11 Keep straight ahead on what is now **PS3**, a path which winds its way uphill in fine beechwoods. You reach a residential track with Queen and College Woods on your left. Turn **right** on the track. In 150m, just after *Priors Grove Cottage*, turn **left** and, almost immediately, opposite a small garden gate, turn **right** on a path **PS1** through woods. After a short section, aided by white arrows on trees, your path runs beside a cemetery and comes out to a road in Christmas Common. Turn **right** on the road, arriving in 100m or so at the *Fox and Hounds*.

An interesting history of this hamlet will be found in the walk 'Fingest, Christmas Common, Pishill, Turville' in this series. The 'Fox and Hounds' is open all day every day and serves lunch till 2.30pm (not Mon) in any of the small rooms or out in the garden. Beer is Brakspear, plus a monthly guest. New management has taken over recently (before 2014) giving the pub a fresh new public face. It gets popular at lunch time and reservation may be essential (ring 01491-612599).

Leg 3: Christmas Common to Cowleaze Wood 4¼ km=2¾ miles



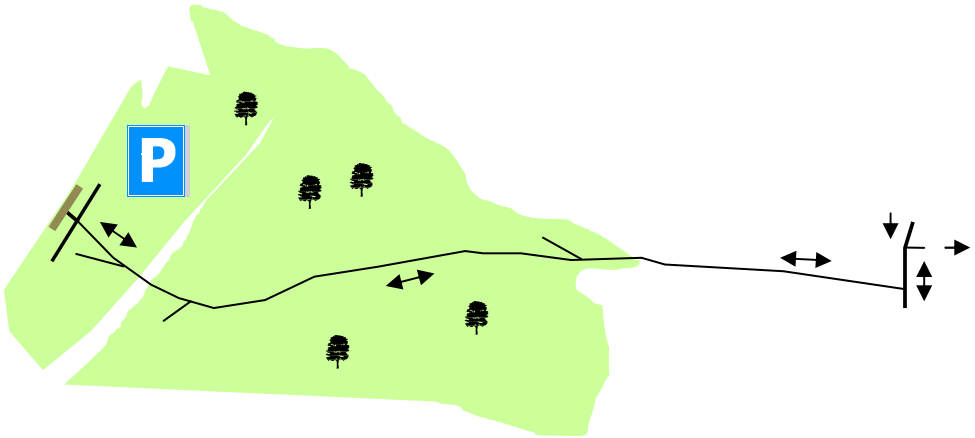
12 After your break, continue along the road, soon passing a road coming from the right. 150m after that, at a triangular junction, continue straight ahead, signposted *Stokenchurch*. In 40m, turn **left** down a bank on a footpath signed as the **OW**, going through a metal kissing-gate. Keep ahead along the left-hand side of a hay field, then along the left-hand side of the next meadow. Ignore a kissing-gate on your left and follow the path, cutting the left-hand corner. The path goes down into hawthorn and through a kissing-gate to a junction. Veer **left** downhill on a wide path. Your path becomes narrow and flinty then opens out with excellent vistas. Continue on the path gently downhill. At the bottom, the path becomes tarmac by *Pyrton Hill House*. 230m from the start of the tarmac, look for a small wooden gate on your right. There are yellow and white arrows here indicating **PY16**. *Don't miss this little gate!*

13 Turn **right** through the wooden gate. The path leads you up to the grassy hillside. Keep straight ahead at all times through this typical downland vegetation of thorn bushes, birch and wild thyme. The path goes through a small wooden gate beside a large metal gate. Keep to the main path near a field on your left. Shirburn Hill looms up ahead – a small sting-in-the-tail of this walk, although you will not have to climb the highest part. The narrow path bends right and left going past several fields. After 1¼ km from the little gate it finally veers right away from the fence and turns **left** through a small metal gate sited next to a large, padlocked, metal gate.

14 Follow the path straight across the meadow. Your route can now be clearly seen on the other side of the valley slanting up to the right. Follow it on a gradient that may be a little taxing at the end of the day. Near the top, go past an unneeded swing-gate and onwards to the edge of a field. Go straight across, over a block stile and over the pasture, setting a course towards the only visible house at the field edge. At the far side, go over a stile and turn **left** on the main road, passing a large water tower. After 50m, veer **right** on a woodland path parallel to the road. It leads back to the Cowleaze Wood car park where the walk began.

Cowleaze Wood Outward 1½ km=1 mile

Do this section if you wish to skip the Nature Reserve at the start of this walk.



In the Cowleaze Wood car park, go through the entrance for vehicles and find a low wooden bar on the other side with some wooden stumps. Take a footpath here into the woods leading away from the road, immediately passing a notice board. The path crosses a clearing under wires following a purple arrow and a white arrow on a tree. Keep straight on avoiding side turnings, both signed and unsigned. You pass a small hollow on your right. Stay on the main path through this beautiful wood with the occasional white arrow to guide you. After a scenic walk, just short of 1 km, your path suddenly ends at a wooden swing-gate with terrific views ahead and a notice referring to the Wormsley Estate. Go straight down a crop field on a narrow path. After the first field go through a new green kissing gate, "Richard (Dick's) gate", and continue down a meadow heading for the swing-gate at the bottom. (If you are only doing the 2¼ mile walk, turn around and retrace your steps back to the car park, or resume at the point marked (*) in the **Cowleaze Wood Inward** section below). After the gate, turn **left** on a tarmac lane. In 50m, turn **right** through a small tall wooden gate. *Don't miss this little gate!*

Continue now from Leg 2 section 5.

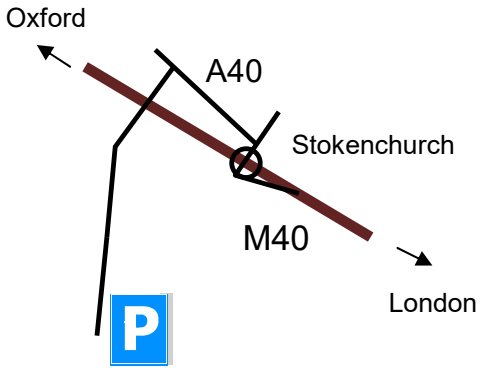
Cowleaze Wood Inward 1½ km=1 mile

Do this section if you wish to omit Christmas Common and return to Cowleaze Wood, making a shorter walk.

See map above. Ignore the tall wooden gate and continue on the tarmac lane. In 50m, at a yellow arrow on a post, go **right** through a swing-gate and go straight up a meadow (*), heading for a new green kissing-gate, "Richard (Dick's) gate". After this gate, keep straight ahead on a narrow path through a crop field. At the top, go through a swing-gate and take a path straight up through the woods. After 40m, avoid a right fork, continuing in the direction of a white arrow on a tree. Stay on the main path through this beautiful wood with the occasional white arrow to guide you. You pass a small hollow on your left. Shortly after it, **avoid** a left turn indicated by white arrows on a tree and continue dead straight, going over a clearing under wires. Immediately fork **right**, ignoring a white arrow on a tree. At the end of this woodland walk, just short of 1 km, you arrive at the Cowleaze Wood car park, where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: Cowleaze Wood car park is about 3 miles west of Stokenchurch, Bucks. The best route is via the M40 to Junction 5 (Stokenchurch). Turn right over the M40 as for the village but take the A40 left, signposted *Oxford, Lewknor*. After ⅔ mile, just before a welcome sign for Oxfordshire, turn left on a road showing *Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve* on a brown tourist sign. The car park is 1.7 miles on the left. The entrance is towards the south end of this very long car park. It is best to park at the south end for this walk.



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