



Chilham

Distance: 11 km=7 miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Kent

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Refreshments: Chilham

Map: Explorer 137 (Ashford). *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Medieval village, parkland, river, hills, views, sheep pastures, woodland

In Brief

This is a walk of huge variety and interest through a historic part of Kent, starting and ending in one of Kent's most picturesque Tudor villages. You begin on a remarkably quiet and easy long cul-de-sac tarmac lane which takes you deep out into the country and points you onto a woodland trail leading to parkland and a great house. The middle section is a totally charming trip down and up long valleys with only sheep as companions. The last section takes you through the mysterious labyrinth of Church Wood where you need to be on your guard, following the very precise directions in this guide, to emerge safe and sound next to the Mill on the River Stour.



The last part of this walk takes you through brambly undergrowth, making it essential to cover your legs (and possibly your arms too). However, even at the height of summer vegetation, the path is well marked, making progress quite comfortable. Boots could be optional because there are very few muddy sections, although during the damper months this situation could change. Your dog can come too!

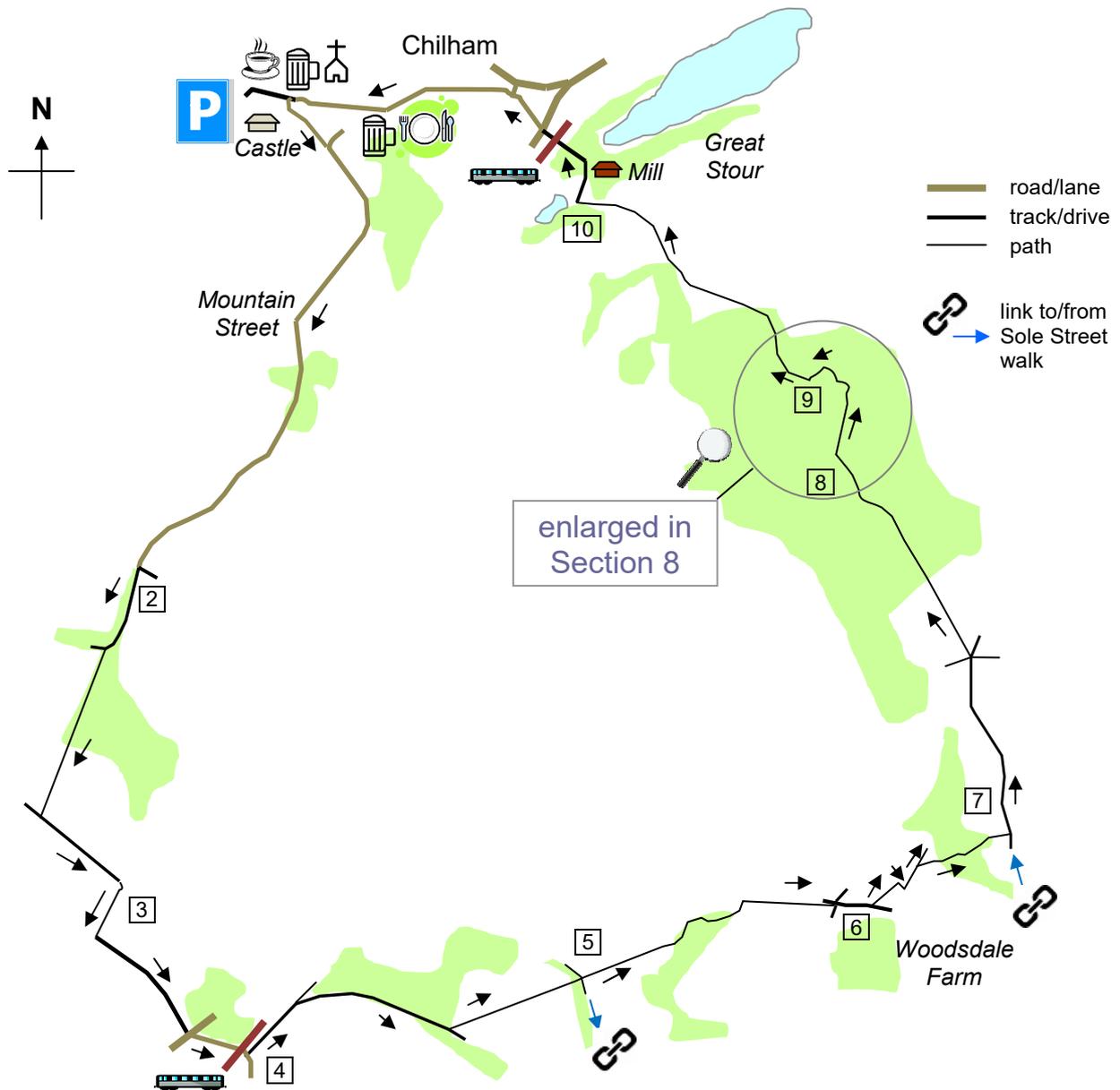
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The walk begins at the large **free** car park in **Chilham**, near Canterbury, Kent, postcode **CT4 8BY**. The car park is signed off the A20 road just as you approach the village. It has a loo. You can also arrive via **Chilham Railway Station**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

You have probably seen Chilham even if you haven't been there! Because it is often used as a setting for a Jacobean or Elizabethan TV drama, so perfect is the village square with the half-timbered Tudor Lodge (1370-1410), Tudor Cottage, and the "White Horse" Inn. The "Woolpack" pub will be encountered later. Shelly's Tea Rooms are also inviting. Cumberland House (1470-1510), Orions Cottage and Burgoyne's (1450-1480) are on The Street. Chilham was a bedding-down place for pilgrims as it stands on the Pilgrims Way (and our more modern North Downs Way).



- 1 Starting in the large free car park off the A20, walk up the lane into the village square and spend some time marvelling at the Tudor houses, the castle, the inn and the church.

St Mary's church dates from the 1200s, although an earlier Saxon building may go back to the 600s. The style is English Perpendicular and the church is a must-see for its large number of ornate funerary monuments. The most notable is a huge monument to Lady Mary Digges (d.1631), wife of the well-

named Sir Dudley Digges, builder of the current castle, depicting four seated figures representing cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and courage). Outside, the cemetery is remarkable for its lovingly tended graves festooned with colourful objects relating to the deceased's life and passions.

A historical mystery surrounds Chilham church. When St Augustine's Abbey at Canterbury Cathedral was demolished during the Reformation, the ornate, gilded, shrine housing the saint's body was removed to Chilham. It remained in the church until 1541 when it disappeared. No trace of the shrine or the holy relic within it has ever been found.

Cross the square to the great iron gates with a view of Chilham Castle.

Chilham Castle also dates from the 600s but the later stone version was built for King Henry II. Only the keep (central tower) remains but it is still almost intact. The castle was briefly occupied by the French Dauphin in 1216 as part of a failed rebellion by English nobles aiming to place him on the throne of England. (It was the young Henry III who prevailed.) In the late 1200s a colony of herons were established at Chilham and they have lasted ever since. A tradition (similar to the Tower of London) states that the castle will fall if the herons do not return to nest on St Valentine's Day.

Sir Dudley's new great house is most unusual, having a hexagonal design. The original Jacobean plasterwork survives, showing an eagle (the Digge emblem) grasping a sheaf of corn (the Kempe emblem) in honour of his wife. The gateway to the new estate (now called Chilham Park) was designed by Inigo Jones in 1616.

The castle gardens are open to visitors on Tuesdays, June-Sept. Below the manor there are three garden terraces with large topiary. From here you can look down to a lake. There are also trails through the grounds, around the lake, and through the various gardens, designed by Lancelot "Capability" Brown.

Facing the Castle, take a lane, School Hill, just to its left. You pass the school and *Elephant House* and meet another lane. Veer **right** on Mountain Street (marked as a *cul-de-sac*, so predictably quiet). You have the wall of the Castle grounds on your right and soon it allows a view of the house with its vineyard. You pass various cottages and their gardens. In between a timbered cottage and a little brick cottage, ignore a footpath on your left. Finally you are in open country. *Chilham Castle Park is used for horse trials and you can see the imaginative horse jumps.* The tarmac ends at a small parking spot where a track goes off left to Hurst Farm.

- 2 Keep straight on along a wide track marked with a red arrow indicating a "byway", passing under tall beeches. Soon, the byway turns right in front of a large metal gate. **Leave** the byway here by continuing straight ahead through a small metal gate on a footpath, identified by a yellow arrow. Your path runs along the left-hand side of a cereal field, giving you great views ahead to Godmersham Downs. The path goes between hedges and leads out to a junction with fields and a stud farm. Turn **left** on a track between hedges. You come out into a parkland belonging to Godmersham Park, with weeping willows and other ornamental trees.
- 3 Turn **right**, taking a peek at the House through a large metal gate, and follow the same line along the mown grass, between trees, heading for a low redbrick building which turns out to be the gatehouse. *Godmersham Park is now "abdo College" for trainee opticians.* Go through a small heavy wooden gate and immediately turn **left** through the smaller of the metal gates. Keep left on the tarmac drive, going over a bridge across the reedy River Stour. *Kent's second river is especially delightful at this spot, drooped by a*

procession of weeping willows. You pass a small house with a dovecote and come out to the main A28 road.

- 4 Cross straight over the main road, a fraction left, onto The Street in Godmersham village. Continue through the village and under the railway. Immediately turn **left** on a tarmac lane marked as a *cul-de-sac*. Where the lane curves right past *Orchard Cottage*, avoid the footpath straight ahead and stay on the lane. After you pass a few more houses, ignore a private drive to *Valence Dane*. Shortly after this, go **left** over a narrow stile and take a footpath across a crop field (you can see the path up ahead leading to the wood on the crest). *You have joined part of the Stour Valley Walk, a 54-mile=87 km walk from Lenham to Pegwell Bay, near Ramsgate.* When you reach the top, go up a short steep slope, out into a field to meet a crossing path.

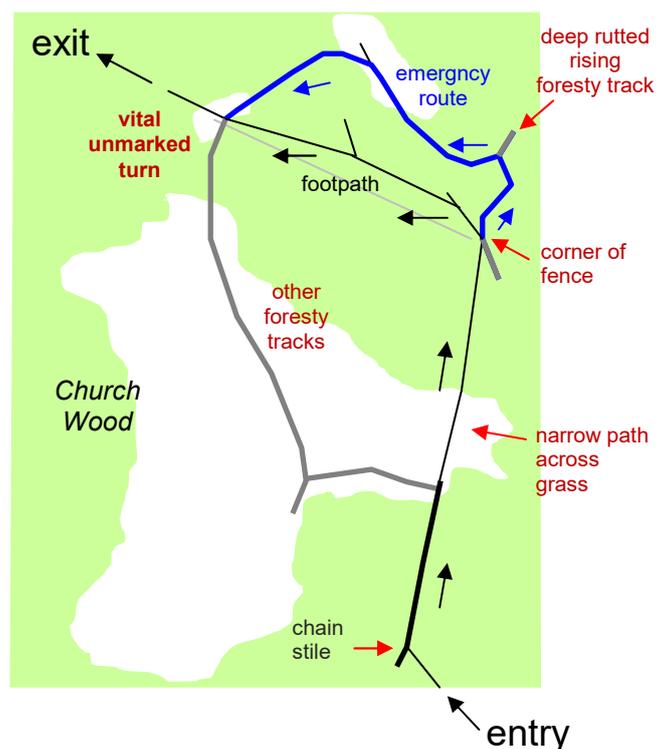
Decision point. If you would like to extend this walk to Sole Street with more scenic views and an excellent inn, turn **right** on the crossing path, joining the *Sole Street and Eggringe Wood walk* at Section 3. Otherwise ...

- 5 Continue straight ahead on a rising path across the centre of the meadow of waving grass. At the top, your path veers left along the top of the field. In 150m, turn **right** into the woods where you see a tall signpost with the word *footpath*. A similar signpost quickly turns you **left**. A grassy path between trees and shrubs leads you out, over a stile, into a long sheep pasture with terrific views ahead. Walk the length of the pasture, over a stile in the bottom left-hand corner, into the hamlet of Woodsdale Farm. Avoid a track sharp right but veer **right** on a shingle drive going past a flowery redbrick house. Your route becomes a woodland track.

- 6 In just 80m, at a signpost, turn **left** on a short path leading to a stile (**careful shaky**) into a pasture. Cross the pasture to some large metal gates and go over a stile here into a long meadow. Immediately turn **left** uphill beside a wire fence. About half way up, veer off diagonally **right**, heading for a stile on the edge of the wood, thus **avoiding** the stile in the corner. Take a rather unclear overgrown path uphill through the dark trees, over woodland debris. Soon there are old vehicle tracks which you can follow. As you come up out of the wood, there is a short overgrown section where you need to watch your footing. Where you reach a crop field, turn **right** along the weedy edge for 80m where you see a *keep to the footpath* sign ahead and a rider's gate on your right. Turn **left** here on a green bridleway running between two gone-to-seed fields.

- 7 You will be following this easy bridleway for 800m. Your next junction point is marked by a tall white pole and a thick marker post with yellow and blue arrows. There are paths left and right here, whilst your path ahead forks. Avoid the paths left and right but take the **left** fork, thus leaving the right-forking bridleway [Apr 2021: **care! some walkers found this junction unclear**]. Go across a crop field [May 2022: **illegally cropped over? you may need to tread through the crops**] heading for a gap in the trees. When you reach the gap, you will find a yellow arrow and a (rather shabby) stile with a gap large enough for an Irish wolfhound. The grass path runs between willow saplings and you need to watch your footing because of a shallow trench cut along the line of the path. The treescape now changes to mature trees of every kind alternating with brambly lighter verdure. After 350m snaking through the wood, finally you come through a chain stile out into a space which in 2019 showed signs of forestry management.

8 At the time of writing, this section through Church Wood had been distorted by heavy vehicles and a careful way-around was described (the “emergency route” in the adjoining minimap). The route is now restored and is much easier. Do not wander off to the right! From the chain stile, keep to the **left** of the wire fence on your right to come out in only 60m into an open space. There are vehicle tracks to your left across the space, but your direction is a path which forks **slightly left**. This brings you to another fork with a yellow arrow on a post. Take the **left** fork again here. It leads to the right of a wire fence to continue straight on on a narrow almost hidden path, through grass and wildflowers into trees on the other side. Your path is clearer now as it runs under oaks, heading for a wire fence with wooden posts visible 70m ahead. Follow the fence (on your left) to go over another chain stile and now follow yellow footpath signs on a clearly-marked the path.



9 Your path goes down into a deep beechwood and passes a yellow arrow, confirming that you have found the correct path. You come through an avoidable chain stile. The path continues down under low trees, through another chain stile, through a coppice and finally out into a cereal field. Take a clear path diagonally **left** across the field. At the other side, slip past a large metal gate and turn **left** on a track. In 80m, as the track bends left, go **right** at a yellow arrow on a path between cereal fields. *Note the small wooden cross, a memorial to a fighter pilot who was shot down near here and killed in 1940.* The path elbows left, following the edge, then dips suddenly down into woods. After a crossing path, you descend more steeply with the Great Stour down on your right. You come out to be greeted by a view of Chilham Mill, the river and a bridge, framing a memorable picture.



Chilham's large corn mill is the best preserved on the River Stour. The huge watermill is 14½ feet in diameter and nearly 8 feet in width. It drove a remarkable collection of wheels and cogs, belts and pulleys.

10 Turn **right** over the bridge and follow a tarmac drive past the mill, over the river and over a level crossing. You come out onto the main road. **Chilham Railway Station is 300m on your right.** Cross straight over the road onto Bagham Lane opposite, using the tarmac footway. Follow the minor road as it bends left, avoiding a junction on the right which lead to the major road. Stay on the minor road, using the footway, until you reach the start of the village and the *Woolpack Inn*.



The “Woolpack” is a 600-year-old inn, supposedly haunted by a friendly “Grey Lady” who is often seen wandering among the huge oak beams and inglenook fireplaces. The inn has a huge patio with an olive tree which is as old as the inn. Ales are Shepherd Neame. Food is honest meaty favourites. The Woolpack is also a hotel in case you fancy staying the night.

Pass to the right of the *Woolpack* and continue up The Street passing many more Tudor properties, ending in the square, from where the driveway leads down to the large car park where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: the simplest way to Chilham is via the A20 road. If coming from the London area, take the M20 motorway and come off at junction 8 (*Leeds Castle*). Follow the A20 for 17 miles through Lenham, forking left at Charing. The large free car park is signed clearly on your right as you approach the village.

By bus/train: regular trains to Chilham station from London St Pancras or Victoria. (Turn **left** on the main road, **left** on the Ashford Road and **right** on Bagham Lane in section 10.) Check the timetables.

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