



Kintbury and the River Kennet

Distance: 13½ km=8½ miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire

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Refreshments: Kintbury

Map: Explorer 158 (Newbury) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Village, woodland, green meadows, nature reserve, canal

In Brief

This is a wonderful and always interesting walk in two parts. Starting in the picturesque little town of Kintbury, the first, and longer, part takes you through the gentle undulating country south of the town, visiting prosperous hamlets, woodland, part of the Inkpen Common nature reserve, one or two farms and a huge historic country estate. The second part is an easy walk back along the River Kennet with a chance to watch the canal boats

cruising by and passing slowly through the locks.

There are several inns in Kintbury at the start or end of the walk (to enquire at the *Dundas Arms*, ring 01488-658263).



This walk is a tribute to the

Adventurous Walks books and uses a roughly similar route to one in those books.



There are nettles and brambles along the sides of the paths but they are easily avoidable, so wearing shorts should not be a problem. The ground underfoot is generally firm with good paths, tracks, lanes and a towpath.



There are several stiles but they generally have a gap for your dog.



The walk begins in the little town of Kintbury, West Berkshire, postcode **RG17 9UR**. There is roadside parking, especially in Newbury Road (sharp left, www.w3w.co/decompose.lentil.beaters) or near the church (right at the crossroads), or in the car park next to the railway near the *Dundas Arms*, if you tell them you will be a customer. You can also come by **rail** to Kintbury Station. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

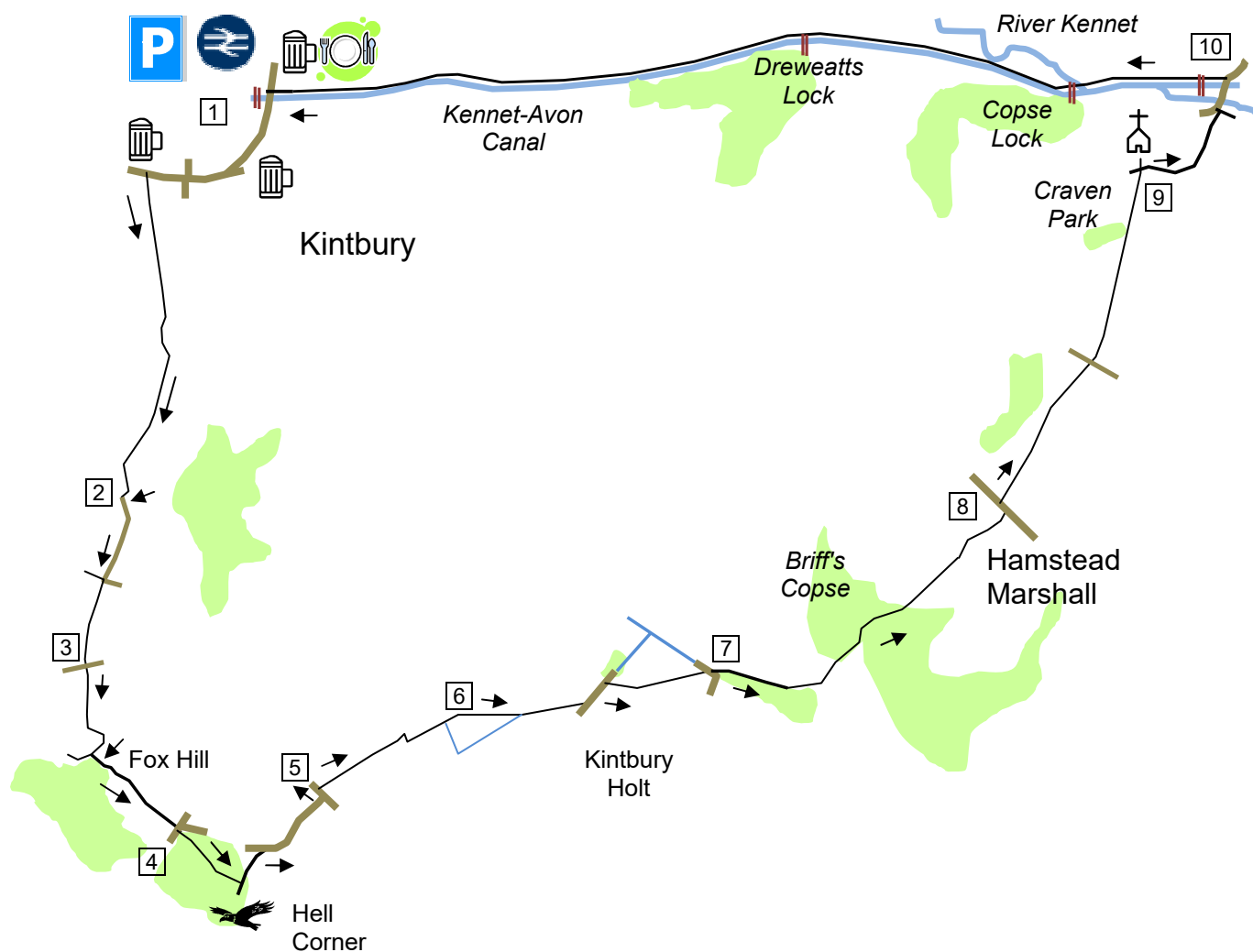


Kintbury is worth a closer look, especially the region near church (turn right at the crossroads). The village goes back at least to the 300s when a Roman settlement was here. The name is Anglo Saxon after the Kennet River although the name of the river is Celtic. The church (usually closed) was built just after the Conquest in 1066 but the 'new' tower was built in 1195. According to a legend, the Great Bell of Kintbury fell into the river Kennet but the local witch stopped it being fished out. The novelist Jane Austen visited Kintbury several times since her sister Cassandra was married to the local Rev, "the best preacher and the best rider to hounds" according to none other than George III probably before his madness (referring to the Rev, not the sister). The church was once linked with highwaymen since there are supposedly tunnels connecting it with the 'Blue Ball' Inn. This pub was also the centre of the so-called Kintbury Riots where a rabble marched through the surrounding country protesting at the lack of jobs and smashing farm machinery. They were rounded up in the 'Blue Ball' by Col. Charles Dundas and Lord Craven (of which more later). Most were sentenced to transportation, narrowly escaping the gallows, but one of them is said to have got away by hiding in the pub's huge copper!



Apart from the 'Blue Ball', Kintbury has two other pubs. The 'Prince of Wales' is a small traditional pub in Newbury Street. The bigger and posher 'Dundas Arms', near the station, is visited at the end of the walk.

The Walk



Writer Robert Harris (“Enigma”, “Conclave”, “Precipice”,...) lives in the old vicarage in Kintbury. If you are starting the walk at the station or near the *Dundas Arms*, you might take the path on the north side of the canal, cross the first bridge, explore the church and churchyard, and take a straight, narrow alley (unsigned but actually “The Croft”) from the southwest corner of the churchyard, joining the walk at the *Blue Ball*.

- 1 Take the main Station Road, leading away from the river and the station, through the town, passing the *Old Post Office*, as far as the *Corner Stores*. Cross straight over a crossroads and continue on the High Street, passing the *Blue Ball* pub. Immediately after the pub, go **left** by a footpath sign on Titcomb Way, a tarmac drive. Where the drive quickly bends left, leave it to keep ahead between fences on a path which soon runs on a pleasant sheltered course under trees. At the end of the path, go through a small wooden gate, diagonally **right**, through another wooden gate, over a bridge and **left** again on a path that runs along the left-hand side of a large meadow. At the end of the path, go through a small wooden gate and continue straight ahead, as directed by a yellow arrow, up the left-hand side of the same meadow. At the top pass through an opening in the hedge and keep ahead across the middle of the meadow following a well-defined path that keeps to the left of some newly-planted trees. The path eventually veers to the right and brings you out onto a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on this lane, Back Lane.
- 2 Ignore a footpath sign on your left and stay on this lane for 350m, ignoring another footpath on your left just before a house. Where the lane finally bends sharp left, ignore a footpath right by a large wooden gate and go straight ahead through a small metal gate. Your path is well defined, going up the right-hand side of a rather rough meadow, to the right of some newly-planted trees, and through a metal gate. Continue the same way up the right-hand side of the next meadow, heading towards a large modern house. At the top right-hand corner, go through a metal gate and between fences to a lane, Kintbury Road.
- 3 Cross the lane to negotiate a small metal gate and continue straight on, soon going along the right-hand side of another meadow beside a wire fence. In the far corner, go **left** through a small metal gate and along the top of the same meadow, passing a nice lawn and garden on your right. At the corner of the garden, go **right** as indicated and through a small metal gate. Follow the tall garden fence of *Jangles* in the hamlet of Fox Hill, leading out into mature woodland. Turn immediately **left** so that you are still following the tall fence. Your path goes over a white bridge across a stream and graduates to a gravel drive. Follow the drive past Willow Farm and various houses and cottages until, in 350m, you come to a road junction of Rooksnest Lane and Heads Lane.
- 4 At the junction, cross straight over to a noticeboard and wooden gates leading onto Inkpen Common, a dramatic change of terrain. Go through the swing-gate to follow the main mossy path amidst birch, heather and gorse. *Inkpen Common is part of what used to be a large stretch of common moorland. It is now looked after by the Wildlife Trusts as a protected habitat for many of the rarer species of plants, reptiles and birds.* Keep to the main path, avoiding a right fork that leads to a seat. At a marker post, go straight over a permissive footpath. At the next marker post, keep dead straight on a rather narrow brambly path, avoiding the easier path that forks away to your right. Keep ahead through a wooden swing-gate to a shingle drive. Turn **left**, going past houses and superior bungalows. *This village is called Hell*

Corner: no one knows why. At the end, turn **right** on a tarmac lane (Heads Lane again). As the lane bends left, stay on it, avoiding a footpath on your right. After 250m on this quiet lane, you reach a T-junction.

- 5 Turn **left** at the T-junction and, in 30m, turn **right** the *Coach Houses* near Holt Lodge Farm onto a grassy path that runs beside a stony drive, soon going through a small metal gate. Where the drive bends left into a farm, turn **right**, before the farm gate, through a new metal gate and head along the left-hand side of a meadow. At the other side, go through another new metal gate into a pasture. *If there's livestock in the field and they worry you, you should be fine keeping to the edge; in extremis you are probably justified in using the adjoining field.* Keep straight ahead across the centre of the pasture to a small metal gate visible ahead under a large oak.
- 6 Go through the gate and follow a path along the left-hand side of a crop field. In 50m the edge of the field turns sharp left at a corner. Keep ahead, ignoring a marked footpath on your left, veering a good fraction **right**, across the centre of the crops, heading well to the **right** of a large redbrick house you can see ahead. [Feb 2021: the path was not visible, walkers headed just to the left of the large oak mentioned below.] [Jan 2026: in winter, when the oak is hard to make out, you can use a rough compass bearing: pause at the corner and focus on the direction you just walked during the last 50m from the gate; your new direction is **right by 25 degrees**, almost **due east**; on the clockface if the last 50m was **2pm**, your new direction is **3pm**.] This route is usually clear but when it was researched in August, the field had been planted with six-foot-high maize which seemed to form a dense and impassable barrier. Persistence paid off. If this is the case, do *not* give up! There *is* a way through. The secret is: walk straight in and look down at the ground. The narrow path can be seen. As a guide, you will be aiming for a large oak, just visible if you are tall, on the other side. If you still feel you cannot do it, go back to the stile and turn **left** (i.e. **right** from the direction you came) and follow the edge of the field, after 80m **left** at the corner and 300m further to find the next yellow arrow to re-join the walk. In 200m, you reach the edge of the field. Bear a fraction left, following the edge, in the direction of a yellow arrow. In 250m, you reach a tarmac lane, Burgess Lane. Turn **left** on the lane. Just before the above-mentioned redbrick house, *Burgess Holt*, turn **right** over a wooden bridge and through a makeshift metal gate in the wooden fence into a meadow. Walk, bearing to the left of some newly-planted trees, the full length of the meadow to a wooden swing-gate which gradually comes into view as you proceed. Go through the gate and over a 3-plank bridge (*don't miss!*) and then pass through a wooden swing-gate into another meadow. Go straight ahead, eventually passing through another wooden swing-gate on the other side. Turn **right** here on Watery Lane. Almost immediately leave the lane by turning **left** up a semi-tarmacked track signposted *Watermans*.
- 7 In 400m, where the track curves right, leave it by bearing **left** into a field by a signpost with two pointers. Take a path that bears left, as directed by the **first** pointer of the signpost. At the other side, veer **right** beside the woodland, passing another fingerpost on your left. In the corner, go **left** over a stile into the woods of Briffs Copse. Take a small path **straight ahead** which almost immediately turns right. As a guide, you should pass a twin marker post after 10m or so. After a short section through bracken, your path runs clear through this lovely wood, winding at first, then straight, then winding again till it veers left up to a small wooden gate leading you into a meadow. *Rarely, there are young livestock in the field but you should be fine keeping to the edge.* Keep ahead, going diagonally **right** across the field towards the village of Hamstead Marshall which you can see in the

valley below. *The local farm, Elm Farm, raises water buffalo and they may be grazing in the adjoining pasture.* At the end, go through a small wooden gate beside a large metal gate and straight ahead on a gravel track. At a pair of wooden gates, go through the smaller gate and follow a tarmac lane past some kennels to a road in Hamstead Marshall.

- 8 Turn **left** on the main road and, immediately after the ex-pub and two houses, turn **right** on a track marked as a bridleway. Go through a small metal gate beside some larger ones, keep straight on between farm buildings and follow a very wide grassy path between fields. After 650m, at the top, there is a bench seat offering some respite from the gradual ascent and a chance to admire the view of where you have been walking. Go through a small metal gate to a lane, Park Lane. Cross straight over the lane, a fraction left, to a swing-gate leading onto a heath which is one corner of Hamstead Marshall Park. Go straight up through bracken and continue on a narrow path up to a wooden swing-gate leading into a large sheep pasture. Walk the full length of this wide parkland, passing on your left the corner of some woodland, part of the garden of the present-day Craven House. St Mary's church is now visible straight ahead. As you pass by, your eyes are drawn to those three pairs of isolated gateposts standing isolated in the middle of the field, topped by orbs and urns. These gateposts give you an impression of the enormous sweep of the once vast mansion of Craven Park. As you near the church, pass through a wooden gate onto a wide sandy track. *Three more pairs of gateposts can be seen to your left.* Your route is **right** on the track. First, however, it is worth going through a wooden gate into the churchyard. You need to come back through the gate to continue your walk.

The 12-century church of St Mary seems so far from the village. This is because where you are now is the 'real' Hamstead Marshall, the site of castles (the bumps in the ground are the remains of a motte and bailey) and the great park. William Marshall, First Earl of Pembroke (1146-1219), after whom the village is named, was a loyal knight who served five rulers, including Richard the Lionheart during his foreign escapades and King John at the signing of Magna Carta. His father John Marshall had been a Norman soldier and statesman who, ironically, helped bring about the end of the Norman dynasty when he switched allegiance from King Stephen to the fearsome Matilda, leading to the (earlier) civil war known as 'The Anarchy'.

In Tudor times the estate passed to a loyal servant to Elizabeth I, Sir Thomas Parry, who built a fine mansion. A dreadful legend relates that a midwife was brought late one night to the magnificent palace of Hamstead Marshall and told 'save the mother at all costs' and afterwards 'throw the baby into the fire'. The mother was none other than Princess Elizabeth, future Queen, but whether this horrible 'Tudor cover-up' is fact or only folklore is not clear.

From the 1660s, the estate passed to the Earls of Craven. Lord Craven built a 'glorious palace' here as a gift to the 'Winter Queen' of Bohemia, Charles I's sister, also called Elizabeth. The vast extent of palace can be seen in those gateposts in the park. The house burned down and the Cravens later moved into nearby Hamstead Lodge and lived there till quite recently.

- 9 Having turned right on the sandy track, stay on it as it bends left and goes down an avenue of trees. At the bottom, turn **left** to go through a swing-gate beside a cattle grid and turn **right** on the road. The road leads over a sluice by Hamstead Mill, then over the River Kennet at an especially delightful spot, dominated by weeping willows. The road goes over the Kennet Canal which you will be following back to the start of the walk. Immediately opposite a fingerpost, turn **left** through a small wooden gate onto the tow path.

The Kennet-Avon Canal was built, around the year 1800, to transport goods between Bristol and London. The Avon was already navigable as far as Bath and the Kennet, which meets the Thames at Reading, had been made navigable as far as Newbury. The idea of a canal had been mooted ever since Elizabethan times. The route was finally planned by the Scottish civil engineer John Rennie. The chairman of the new company was the local politician (also a Scotsman), Charles Dundas. The canal was sixteen years in construction. It incorporated 105 locks, two aqueducts and a tunnel under Severnake Forest. Gradual decline came in the mid-1800s with competition from the Great Western Railway. In modern times a great revival came with pleasure boating and a long restoration programme resulted in the legally protected waterway you see today.

- 10 Immediately after you join the tow path, you pass Hamstead Lock, after which the river and the canal come together. All four locks on this stretch were built between 1718 and 1723 under the supervision of the engineer John Hore of Newbury. All the locks are of the simple type with a gate at each end, operated by hand and without the aid of a lock-keeper. They are all grade II listed 'buildings'. A bridge crosses a sluice and a side channel. A long bridge shortly takes you over the river as it meanders away to your right. The next lock is Copse Lock. The tow path is now beautifully surfaced to allow pleasure craft owners to disembark. You will hear trains thunder by as the main Reading-Taunton line runs parallel close by. On your right, running parallel, is a small arm of the river (the main river is further away). You pass a pillbox, one of the old war-time fortifications that made up the so-called GHQ line. The next point of interest is the arch bridge by Dreweatts Lock. A bridge takes you over a 'peg and bar' sluice where the canal's lengthsmen would maintain the water level in the canal. This is followed by another pillbox and a brief muddy section. A long section follows with overhanging trees. Another brick arch, Shepherd's Bridge, is soon followed by a view of the first house of Kintbury. The gently flowing River Kennet is in view again on your right. A long bridge takes you over a sluice where an arm of the river flows out. You will now see a number of canal boats tied up as the railway station and the road bridge come into view, with Kintbury Lock just beyond. Turn **left** over the bridge back into the town where the walk began.



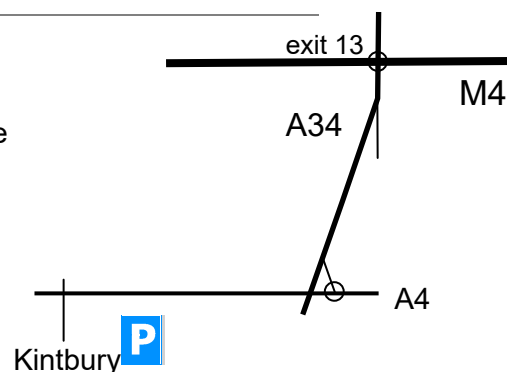
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For final refreshments, the 'Dundas Arms' is unmissable on the other side of the bridge. This Grade-II listed Georgian inn dates back at least to the end of the 1700s when it served the many navvies who were constructing the canal. The chairman of the project, Charles Dundas, organised a river procession in celebration. As well as serving food, the Dundas Arms is a mecca for real ales and has six on tap, half of them regular, including the golden "Sundance", half rotating. The Dundas has loos which, during the 2020 lockdown, were open.

Getting there

By car: Kintbury is about 5 miles west of Newbury, just south of the A4 road from which it is signposted. For most visitors, the easiest approach is via the M4 and the A34. Come off the M4 at exit 13 and take the Newbury bypass south. After 3½ miles, exit as for *Donnington, Speen*. Turn **right** on the A4, direction *Hungerford*. After 4 miles, Kintbury is signed on the **left**.

By train: frequent trains from Newbury, Reading, London to **Kintbury Station**. Check the timetables at *National Rail Enquiries*.



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