



Hambleden, the Weir, Medmenham *Pheasants and Thames Pasture*

Distance: 19 km=12 miles or 16 km=10 miles easy walking

Region: Chilterns, Berkshire

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Maps: Explorer 171 (Chiltern Hills West) & 172 (Chiltern Hills East)

but the maps in this guide should be sufficient

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

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River, villages, woodland, views

In Brief

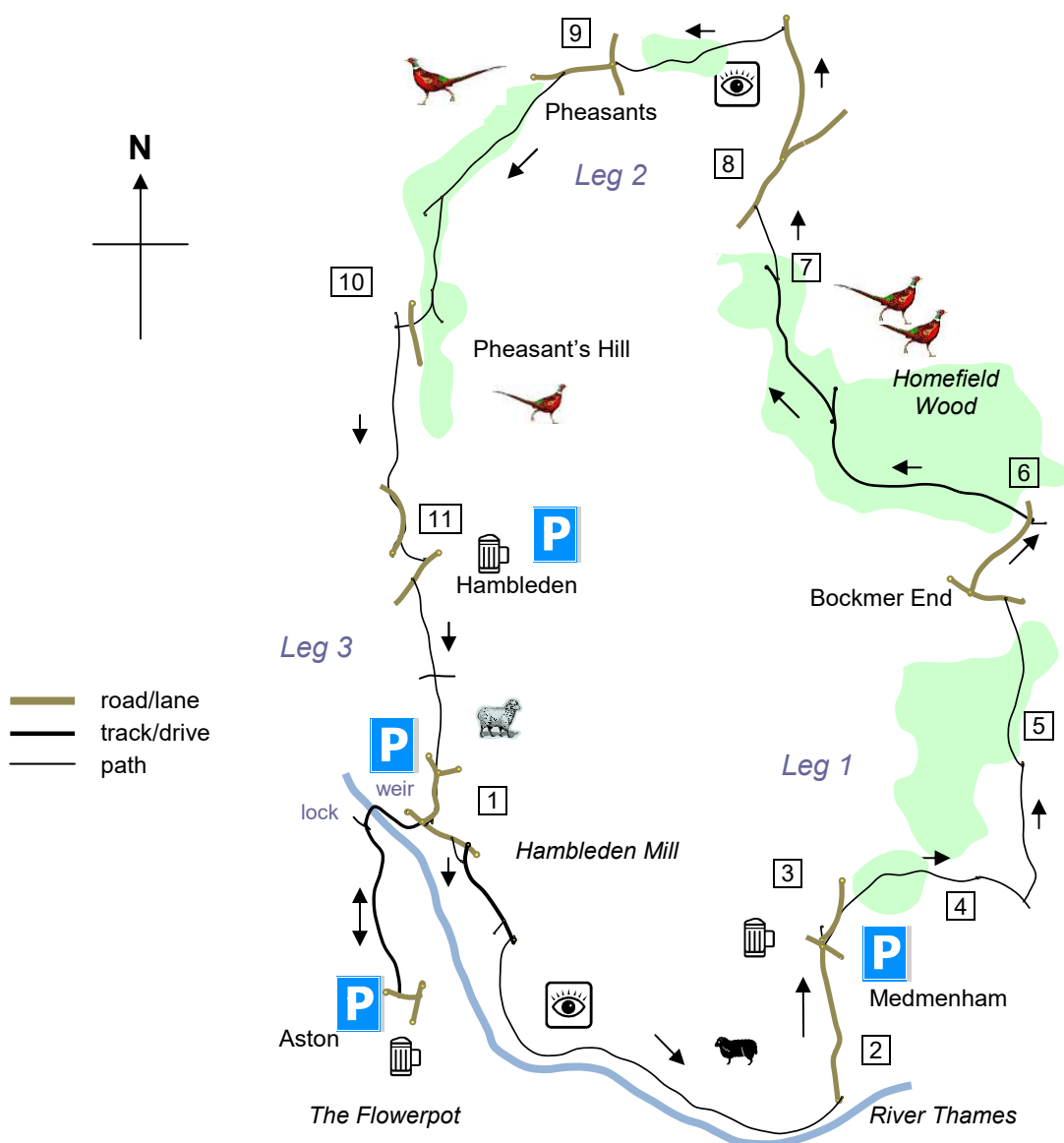
This is a walk of great variety beginning at the Thames and then in typically wonderful Chiltern woods. It begins with an exhilarating crossing of the River Thames by a very long weir and passes through two of the most enchanting villages of the region.



There are some nettles en route so long trousers are recommended but not essential. This walk is not ideal for a dog because of the sheep fields and the sensitive woodland sites. The going is easy and good walking shoes are sufficient.

The walk begins next to the **Flowerpot** pub in the tiny hamlet of **Aston** (grid ref SU 785 842, www.w3w.co/chops.dumpling.soon, postcode **RG9 3DG**). **You need to park your car before opening time** (11am or 12 noon on Sunday). The *Flowerpot* is fantastically popular and you can't use the pub's car parks as a non-patron (unless you can buy Granny a double gin and leave her in the pub). The pub is open all day at weekends. There are some spaces on the road outside the pub but they may be all used up if you come late. So arrive before it opens, turn **left** alongside the pub and park close to the wall on the left. Another possibility is to continue on the lane to the *right* of the pub, down to the river where there is space for several cars: from here you can turn left along the Thames path for 600m to join the walk. Alternative starts are at the **Mill End** car park (approx postcode **RG9 3BG**), in **Medmenham** (park in the village, postcode **SL7 2EZ**) and **Hambleden** (at the official car park, postcode **RG9 6RP**). They cut out 1½ miles=2 km but you would miss the fabulous double crossing of **Hambleden Weir**. It is also perfectly possible to join the walk from Henley or Marlow. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



Mini-maps are provided for some more intricate sections.

Prelude 1½ km=1 mile

With *the Flowerpot* on your right, after 30m along the lane, turn **right** on a track which is also the entrance to the overflow car park. Go through a wooden swing-gate and follow the excellent tarmac drive as it winds towards to river, shortly ignoring a footpath right. On reaching the riverside, turn **left** to Hambleden Lock.

Hambleden Lock was built in 1773 but the weir could go back to pre-Norman times (the mill is mentioned in the Domesday Book). The eccentric lock keeper from 1777, Caleb Gould, lies buried in nearby Remenham churchyard. He is remembered for baking bread for bargemen, eating a dish of onion porridge every night, wearing a long coat with many buttons and walking each day to Hambleden, marking a cross on the ground on arrival. He died aged 91, and the epitaph on his grave stone quotes from The Beggar's Opera: "This world's a jest / and all things show it / I thought so once / but now I know it".

Turn **right** at a fingerpost and cross over the lock, following the long path over the weir that crosses the Thames. On the other side, exit to the road between two white cottages. Turn **right** on the road (you may need to switch carefully to the footway on the left and back again).

Leg 1: Mill End to Homefield Wood 7½ km=4½ miles

- [1] In 100m, immediately after Mill End Farm, turn **right** on a pebbly track by a small car park. Turn **left** with the track, follow a narrow unmarked footpath and join a lane going straight ahead. *The lane is part of the Chiltern Way, a 200 km=125 mile circular walk. The year 2022 is its 22nd anniversary.*

The field on the right is the site of the excavation of a complex many-roomed Roman villa, possibly with a surrounding ditch and mosaic floor and out-buildings which extend to beyond where you are walking now. But the most grisly find is of the bones of 97 infants which appear to have been killed at birth. The excavation was filmed by the BBC for 'Digging for Britain'.

Ignore all turnings off into properties and, at the end of the lane, go through a large kissing gate into a field. Turn immediately **right** in the field and follow it round **left** where it meets the river, entering a field. After about 200m, at a break in the trees, you see Culham Court on the opposite bank.

Culham Court was once Britain's most expensive country house because it was up for sale at £35m in 2006. It was the home of the extravagant 5th Duke of Marlborough. When King George III was entertained there, hot bread was brought specially by horse relay, wrapped in flannels, from his favourite baker in London.

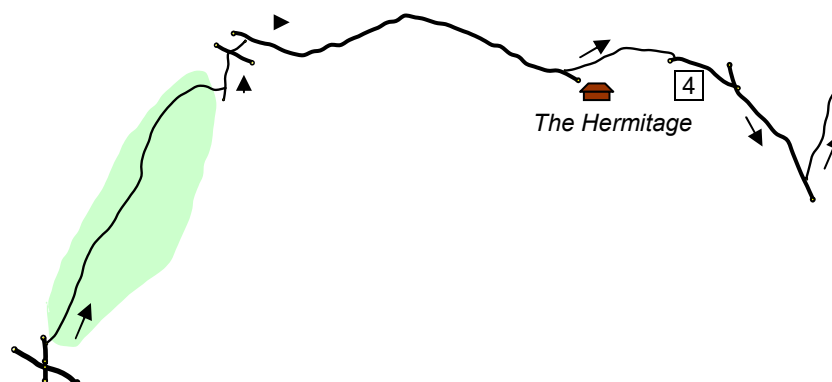
Go through a wooden gate into a large sheep meadow, with a bench seat at each end, and walk the whole length beside the river, finally going through a metal kissing gate and across another bigger meadow. In 1 km, where the river curves left and right, go through a wooden gate to a grassy bank. *On the left is The Medmenham Ferry Monument recording the successful lawsuit that established its public ownership.* Go over a bridge and turn **left** on the lane, leaving the riverside.

The house over on your right is Medmenham Abbey, originally a 13th-century Cistercian Abbey but now really just a folly. It was hired during the mid-1700s by Sir Francis Dashwood of West Wycombe to host the goings-on of the notorious Hellfire Club (see the walk "Dizzy Heights and Hellfire Woods" in this series).

- [2] Follow Ferry Lane through the picturesque village of Medmenham. Soon you pass some wonderful topiary by the oldest half-timbered cottages. *In the front of Fortescue House are two guns that were (they say) dragged 1500 miles to end the siege of Ladysmith during the Boer War.* On the left is the fine church of St Peter and St Paul, worth a visit, and over the road the *Dog and Badger* pub (Whitbread) which is open all day at the weekends. Continue over the main road up Bockmer Lane and, in just 10m, turn **right** at a sign onto a narrow footpath leading steeply uphill.



3 See mini-map:



The path leads up through woods, curving right more steeply up to a high area of tall beeches that was once a Bronze Age hillfort surrounded by a bank, as shown on an information board. Follow the main path, assisted by occasional white arrows on trees. It winds through mixed woodland and in 250m passes another info board which explains more about Medmenham Hillfort and the tribe that occupied it. Shortly after, you meet a track close to a field on your right. Turn **left** on the track, cross a shingle driveway and go through an old metal kissing gate on a narrow path to a house, the *Old Laundry*. Turn **right** on the drive passing the *Old School*. Stay on the drive for 400m until shortly before the brick pillared gates of *The Hermitage*. Veer **left** 30m before the gates, as indicated by a white arrow on a tree, across the grass, and follow the boundary fence, finally coming out by *Pheasantry Cottage*.

4 Go down the drive, keeping right in 100m where a drive joins from your left. Continue for just over 100m along the drive as it curves right and straightens. Now look for a small, almost hidden, signpost, pointing into the woods. Turn sharp **left** here on a narrow rising woodland path. This path runs parallel to a meadow down on your left. In 350m, after passing a tall wire garden fence on your right, you reach a marker post with two yellow arrows. Choose the path straight ahead. The path winds its way through varied woodland for 350m and finally comes out to meet the corner of a field. Turn **left** through a swing-gate and immediately **left** again through the first of two tall wooden gates.



5 Keep to the fenced path between woodland and a flowery meadow on your right. Continue straight on uphill on a winding path through shrubs, clearings and patches of woodland. Your route goes through the fine tall beeches of Widefield Wood, guided by those occasional white arrows. In late spring, there are bluebells aplenty. Nearly ½ km after the gates, you come down a dip and up again. In 100m or so, as you enter a laurel grove, your path veers **left** (in 2017 beside an area on your right where the alien laurels have been cleared). Keep left, following more white arrows. Finally the path wheels left and crosses a farm drive via two wooden stiles. Take a path diagonally across a horse pasture. In the opposite corner, go over a stile and turn **left** on a tarmac lane, going past a house *Widefield*. Soon ahead of you are the red roofs of Bockmer End. Just before the hamlet, turn **right** on a lane signposted *Lower Woodend*. The lane descends and becomes forested. At the bottom it passes a footpath on the right. A little further down, turn **left** past a metal barrier into Homefield Wood.

*Homefield Wood has it all. It is in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is one of only two locations in the UK for the military orchid (*Orchis militaris*) and it supports other orchids and rare butterflies like the white-letter hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*), as well as glow-worms.*

Leg 2: Homefield Wood to Pheasant's Hill 4½ km=3 miles

6 See mini-map:



Follow the main wide path through the wood under tall conifers, including redwoods, going over several very narrow crossing paths. After nearly 1 km, the path starts to wheel right and you soon meet another narrow path which joins you from the left at a marker post, part of the Chiltern Way. Ignore this path and continue straight ahead for about another 150m to a fork where the narrower (unmarked) official footpath continues straight on. Instead, take the wider **left** fork, a forestry path, gently uphill. In 350m, at the top of the slope, you reach a multiple junction with various marked paths leading off. Keep straight ahead on a footpath marked "21". The path curves right and crosses a drive with fields visible on each side. After 100m through a plantation of conifers, you pass a disused gate with a pheasant preserve on your right. After 200m, you pass the disused exit gate. 70m further, you reach a post with a single yellow arrow. You now need to take special care as the next path is obscure.

7 Go another 25m and look to your right for an obscure narrow path leading into the brambles. (Since the original time of writing, the path has been swallowed up in undergrowth and it has been moved a short distance. A walker has provided this alternative: ignore the swallowed-up path and go a further 20m. Opposite a large covered car port; look **right** for a prominent holly tree - it's very visible even through the foliage of other trees. Head for the holly tree on an unclear path, now take a really clear, slightly sunken, path to the **left** of the holly tree: it leads down to the *corner of the fields* described below.) Turn **right** on this path and head straight down through low brambles towards a field. But after only 30m, keep **left** to pass a tall holly tree on your left. Very shortly the path suddenly becomes a much clearer, straighter and wider path going down under trees. You reach the *corner of the fields*. Keep straight ahead on a path between fields. (You may notice on your right a very old wooden sign shortly after the

start of this path with faded letters indicating an old local footpath.) Follow the path out to a lane by *Holywick House*. Turn **right** on the lane.

- 8 In 250m, at a fork, take the **left**-hand option, running between open fields. This country lane is so quiet that there is grass growing in the middle. In ½ km, you pass scrub woodland on your left. Just over 100m further, turn **left** at a footpath sign past an old, disused, swing-gate. Proceed gently uphill along the right-hand side of a field. After 200m, at the far side, cross a track and go straight ahead on a narrow path into Bushes Wood, just to the left of a farm track. This pine wood has occasional white arrows to guide you. *This wood also has sensitive flora and nesting birds and you must keep to the path.* At the other side, keep ahead on a path just inside the wood with a crop field visible on your left. Finally, continue between two fields to reach a lane in the hamlet of Pheasants. Cross the lane to continue on Colstrop Lane.

- 9 Follow the lane past cottages, a little pond on the left and then *Beeches Farm House*. Before the lane begins to go downhill, just after a barn, turn **left** through a metal kissing gate into a fine beech wood. In 30m, fork **right** on a lesser path, leaving the farm track which curves away left. Your path curves left and becomes a fine high path with forest below on your right. After a 500m stretch where the path descends gently, you come to a fork. Avoid the descending path on the right and take the **left** fork, the rising path indicated by a white arrow on a tree. The path crosses a wider path diagonally. *Soon you have fine views below of the Hamble Valley, summer foliage permitting.* In 750m, near the edge of a field on the left, you come to another fork. This time, take the **right** fork. The path descends more steeply and reaches a lane at Pheasant's Hill. Cross the lane and go down steps opposite on a very narrow passage between houses. Cross a track and go down a drive opposite. The route is **left** at a signposted narrow crossing path. *However you may wish first to walk a little further to the little metal kissing gate. The grassy meadow here under the weeping willow is a good picnic site with a view of the Hamble Brook, the Great Wood on the other side, gentle cow pasture to the right and possibly blackberries if it is late summer.*



Leg 3: Pheasant's Hill to Mill End 4 km=2½ miles

- 10 Having turned **left** on the narrow path, you are back on the Chiltern Way. After 150m or so between hedges and gardens, go through a wooden swing-gate into a meadow. Looking back, you have a glimpse of the Windmill at Turville. *Notice too one of the Mr Men carved out of a hedge behind you, gobbling up a hiker so only the boots are visible. Probably Mr Greedy. This amusing piece of topiary has been there as long as can be remembered.* Continue through a wooden swing-gate and an old metal kissing gate into another meadow with Hambleden now in view ahead, then into the next meadow by another kissing gate. Veer **right**, aiming well to the right of the church to go through a kissing gate. Turn **left** on the lane and, after it bends left, continue ahead into the churchyard of the 12th-century St Mary's. *This cruciform church is definitely worth visiting with its ancient font, its 'Wolsey Altar' and decorated ceiling. 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 ales such as Brakspear and Lodden and has a pretty garden.

11



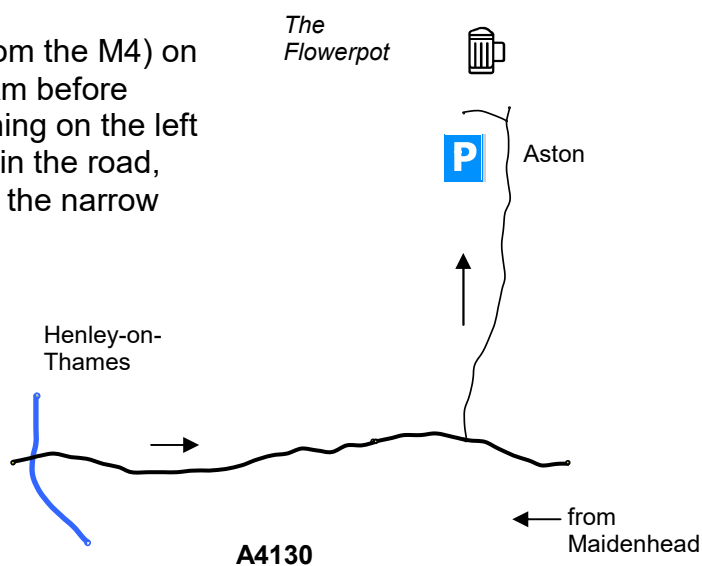
After visiting the village, turn **right** on the road. The old Post Office on your right serves teas and snacks. Just after the little bridge, turn **left** at a footpath sign through an old metal gate into a meadow. Keep ahead on a path along the length of the meadow. At the other side, go through two small metal kissing gates either side of a farm drive. Continue along the next meadow with the road on your right. The path finally exits through a metal kissing gate at a road junction. The Mill End car park is just to your right. Ignore the lane on the left and follow the major road for the rest of the route, down to the main road at Mill End. Turn **right** on the road.

Postlude 1½ km=1 mile

In a few metres, turn **left** between the two white cottages and retrace your steps over the weir to Hambleden Lock. Turn **left** along the riverside and follow the winding lane back to the *Flowerpot* where the walk began. Of a weekend, you will find a throng of people and their cars crowded around yours.

Getting there

By car: If coming from the east (e.g. from the M4) on the **A4130**, this is about 1 mile=1½ km before Henley-on-Thames. Just after a turning on the left for Cockpole Green etc. and a bend in the road, turn **right** signposted **Aston**. Follow the narrow lane to the pub.



By bus: Arriva 800 from Reading or Marlow, Arriva 850 from Reading, Marlow or Henley. Check the timetables.

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