



Swyncombe Church and Ewelme Park

Distance: 11½ km=7 miles

easy walking

Region: Chilterns

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Refreshments: picnic or a country pub after the walk

Map: 171 (Chiltern Hills South) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Historic church, woodland, hills, views

In Brief

The little secluded church of Swyncombe is an unexpected treasure of the Chilterns. This country walk preserves the isolated quality of the whole landscape, with long woodland treks, distant views and green meadows. You will see just one small quiet village (Cookley Green) along the way – the rest of the route sees very few human settlements. This also means: no pub or café. But, the route is situated in an area with some of the best Chiltern pubs to visit after the walk.



This walk is also part of the 25 km=15½ mile **Bix-Ewelme chain walk**, beginning either in the Warburg Nature Reserve or in Ewelme. Look for the “chain link” icons in the margins and the “chain link” symbols in the map.

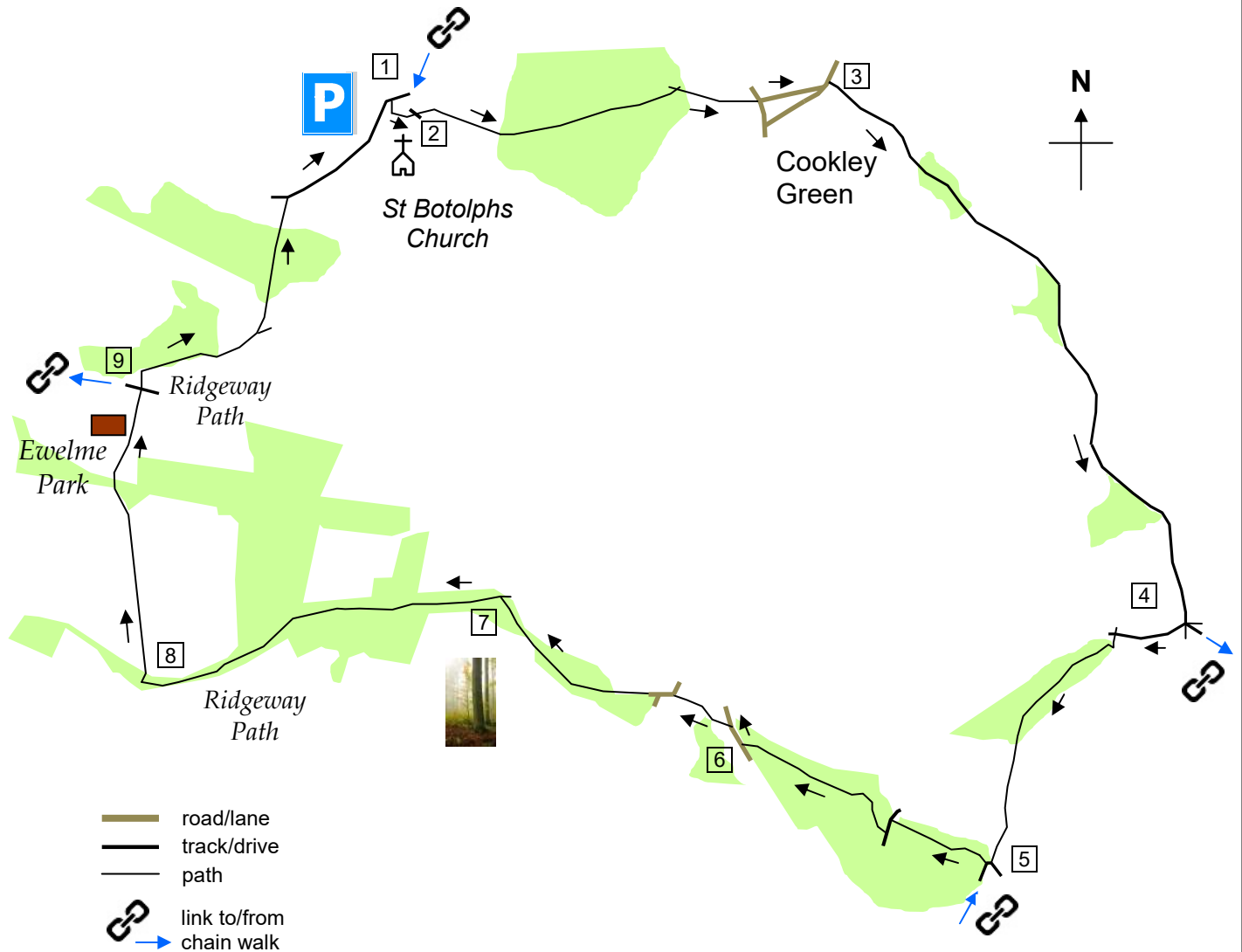


? Generally, the paths on this walk are clear and wide; but inevitably, in high summer, there will be brambles and other undergrowth, which might make shorts uncomfortable, unless you bring a stick to clear the path. Underfoot the ground is fairly firm, so any strong comfortable footwear should be fine. This walk should be ideal for your dog.

The walk begins at St. Botolph's church, **Swyncombe**, Oxfordshire, near Henley-on-Thames, www.w3w.co/closer.difficult.reply, postcode **RG9 6EA**.

There is parking along one side of the driveway beside the church, but please keep in mind worshippers who need to park on a Sunday, or wedding or other family gatherings for which the church is a popular site. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



The Bix-Ewelme chain walk joins this walk here.

- 1 Starting from the track beside St Botolph's Church, go through a small gate into the churchyard.

This tiny early Norman church with nave, chancel, semi-circular apse, arched altar but no tower, was significantly restored in early Victorian times. Nevertheless, it retains (literally) its medieval atmosphere. There are two bells, but one is hung in a small tiled cover above the south door. The church comes alive every winter when a large carpet of snowdrops springs up in the churchyard. One Sunday in early February, known as "Snowdrop Sunday", local musicians play in the church whilst gifts, tea and cakes are on sale.

Continue to the other side of the churchyard, going down a path lined with cup-shaped yews, looking back at the bell over the porch. Go out through a gate and veer **left** across the grass. Avoiding a path on the left, keep ahead between clipped bushes and immediately fork **left**. This path takes you back to the tarmac driveway you were on, opposite the corner of a fence.

2 Cross the tarmac driveway on a path with a ranch fence on your left. Go through an old metal kissing-gate and go across a sheep pasture just to the right of a circular enclosure of trees. Taking in your final view back over the plains of Oxfordshire, go through a swing-gate into the woods. Keep straight on through Church Wood ignoring all paths leading off. The light ash gives way to dark beech. At the end, turn **right** on a lane into the hamlet of Cookley Green. As you reach the green, leave the lane as it bends away right and veer **left** along the left-hand side of the green, continuing past cottages to meet a main road. Bear **left** on the main road and, in 20m, turn **right** on a drive with a sign for the Chiltern Way (CW).

3 You pass various cottages, the last one being Stocking Farm Cottage. (As *Raymond Hugh's Adventurous Walks* book points out, this name comes from the "stocks" or tree stumps that are found nearby.) In nearly 1 km, you reach a T-junction by a post with blue arrows. Turn **right** here, thus leaving the CW. (The path left leads up to Russell's Water.) The path curves left so that you have regained your original direction, going very gently downhill. Avoid all turnings off, namely a bridleway off to the right, a wooden gate and footpath left and another right. This sheltered valley sometimes defies the prevalent climate and you may find patches of mud here even during a dry spell. Finally you reach a junction of five paths with a small signpost and signs for the CW.



For the next link in the Bix-Ewelme chain walk, ignore a stile on your left, take the **next** path on the **left** and switch to the *Warburg Nature Reserve and Nettlebed* walk, continuing from section [7](#).

4 Take the **first** path **right**, a hedged track marked as a *Chiltern Way extension*. In 250m, just before an overhanging tree, look for small wooden gates and go through the **left**-hand one. Go up the right-hand side of a meadow and quickly right-left through a wooden gate into a large wood known as *Berrick Trench*, a Site of Special Scientific Interest. After a pleasant, gently rising 500m, you emerge through a small wooden gate to the head of a long green valley. Go straight ahead on a faint path and through a wooden swing-gate in the far left corner. The path is now a strip of lawn, running beside a pond and a bench – a delightful spot for a pause! The path narrows and comes out onto a cinder drive beside two houses. Turn **right** on the drive.



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5 Continue on grass beside the fenced lawn of the larger house. Your path re-enters trees with meadows visible on the right and an occasional white arrow to confirm your route. It goes down a dip, probably an old sawpit, and meets a concrete track for Westwood Manor Farm. Turn **left** on the track. In just 30m, at a white arrow on a tree, turn **right** on a path that runs just this side of a line of beeches. Keep to the path, always following the line of beeches, as it curves immediately right and then left. Here, ignore a small path on your right. The magnificent beeches seem to grow taller as you go. Finally, your path emerges at a road. Turn **right** on the road.

- 6 In 80m, just before some cottages and a sign for Park Corner, turn **left** on a tarmac lane. In about 250m, at a T-junction, bear **left** on another lane. Where the lane bends left in just a few metres, leave it to continue straight ahead on a track, Digberry Lane, marked as a bridleway. Your track passes some isolated cottages and a wooden gate. Your path runs through a wide strip of woodland. After some distance, you come to a T-junction with a field ahead. Turn **left** here on a similar woodland path.
- 7 Your path crosses a farm track obliquely: keep on the main path through more woods. After around 250m, at a marker post, you meet a footpath with a gate to your right. Again, ignore these and continue ahead. *If you pass this way in late spring, the bluebells here are particularly abundant.* After some distance, you pass a fenced-off enclosure on your left, concealing a small reservoir. The path leads between fence posts, by a large field on your left. Soon, you reach a 4-way fingerpost in colour-on-black, the distinctive livery of the Ridgeway Path. Turn **right** here, thus leaving the wood and joining the Ridgeway.
- 8 A clear path leads you across a large field. At the other side, continue through trees. At another fingerpost, veer a fraction **right**, still on the Ridgeway. You have extensive views left across Oxfordshire to the Didcot power station. Soon you pass, on your left, a large house *Ewelme Park*.

Ewelme Park was once a great deer park and royal residence, now much reduced and with a 20th-century reproduction of the original house. The land was originally owned by Geoffrey Chaucer's son, Thomas, and passed to the de la Pole family but was seized by Henry VII because of "treason". It was in the care of Sir Henry Norris at the time that Henry VIII found, in his "adultery" with Anne Boleyn, an excuse to be rid of her for good. It passed to his daughter Elizabeth I and her favourite, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, visited the Park just before his execution. There is obviously something in the country air.

Shortly after the house, you reach another 4-way fingerpost.



For the Bix-Ewelme chain walk, turn **left** here on a track, thus leaving the Ridgeway and switch to the *Ewelme* walk from the "chain link" point in Section 6.

- 9 At the 4-way junction, go straight over, thus staying on the Ridgeway. After passing a large shed of Ewelme Park Farm, turn **right** as directed by a 2-way fingerpost and keep straight ahead along an avenue of maple and beech. Soon you have a cereal field on your right, followed by one on your left. At a 3-way fingerpost, ignore the right fork, staying beside the field. The path goes down into a wood known for some reason as *Jacobs Tent* and descends fairly steeply. After 250m, your path emerges through a metal kissing-gate into a long grassy meadow. Continue down the left-hand short side to go through another kissing-gate and thence to a T-junction with a wide track. Turn **right** on the track to arrive in 400m at St. Botolph's church where the walk began.

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Getting there

By car: Swyncombe Church is just outside the village of Cookley Green, which lies on the B481 between Nettlebed and Watlington. Coming from the London area, the easiest way is via the **M40**. Come off at junction 6 (*Watlington*). Turn **left** onto the B4009. In 3 miles, in **Watlington**, follow signs for the B480 (B481) and follow this road for 3 miles into Cookley Green with its beech avenue. At a junction, turn **sharp right** as for *Swyncombe Church* and, in 100 yds, keep left with the road. The church is 1 mile on the **left**.