

Why? To enjoy wonderful walks in some of England's most attractive countryside



The view from West Wycombe Hill across the Chiltern Hills in the evening sun

GET AWAY...

For the Weekend!

THE CHILTERN IS A FANTASTIC ALL-YEAR DESTINATION THAT IS INSPIRING WHATEVER THE WEATHER

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

The gently rounded Chiltern Hills are criss-crossed by a vast number of paths, remnants of ancient highways connecting settlements. Our Neolithic ancestors used the Ridgeway and the Icknield Way for trading, following the high routes over the chalk hills. Iron Age communities constructed Grim's Ditch, lined with banks and trenches. Tree-lined sunken or hollow ways typical of the Chilterns may be relics of Anglo-Saxon routes used for moving cattle.

Today, these ways provide 1,200 miles of paths and I was itching for some walking!

With woodland edging the field and the sun rising in shades of pink over the Thames below as we had breakfast, our first site at Bennets Wood Farm was perfect.

The sunshine was a bonus as we set off walking to Goring-on-Thames, immediately

picking up a tree-lined and sunken section of Grim's Ditch.

Climbing a steep, short-cropped, grassy hillside, I was imagining the profusion of flowers that would be here in summer when we spotted a pair of red kites overhead.

On top of Holies Down the beech woodland was stunning in the low sun. We followed paths around Lough Down, ringing a warning bell as we crossed the golf course and made our first acquaintance with the Ridgeway to reach the Thames.

The Ridgeway national trail travels over the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns for 87 miles and is part of the original 250-mile Neolithic route from Dorset to Norfolk.

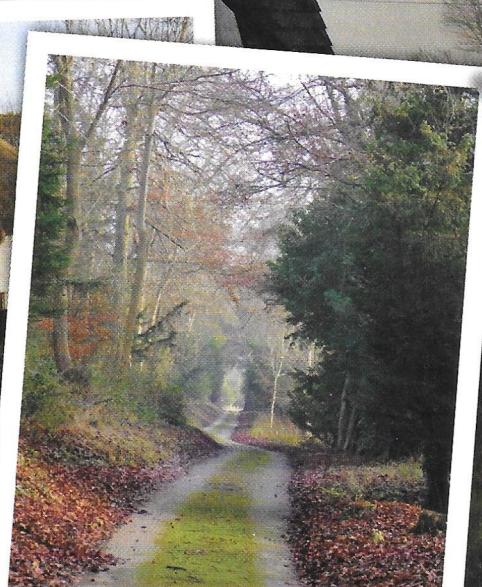
Streatley and Goring-on-Thames are twin villages on opposite banks of the Thames at what has long been an important crossing point, although it wasn't until 1837 that a ➤



MAIN The beautifully restored smock windmill at Lacey Green

BELOW LEFT Pretty houses by the River Thames in Goring-on-Thames

BELOW RIGHT The Chilterns are criss-crossed with attractive lanes and paths



INFORMATION

-  nationaltrust.org.uk/hughenden
-  visitgoringandstreatley.co.uk
-  hellfirecaves.co.uk
-  laceygreenwindmill.org.uk
-  nationaltrust.org.uk/ashridge-estate



TOP TIPS

If you don't want to walk up the hillside to the **Dashwood**

Mausoleum there is a car park behind the church, which can be found by following the road past the caves

From May to September, visitors can climb the tower of

St Lawrence's Church on West Wycombe Hill (small charge) to enjoy the view

 westwycombevillage.co.uk

ABOVE An evocative statue at Hughenden Manor

RIGHT The church in Streatley is typical of the Chilterns with flint stones, a short tower and a red-tiled roof

FAR RIGHT The Disraeli Monument on the Hughenden Estate remembers Benjamin Disraeli's father

bridge permanently joined the two villages. The stretch of the Thames at Goring-on-Thames is particularly lovely and Goring lock and weir is great for river watching.

With no shortage of options, we chose Goring-on-Thames' oldest pub, The Catherine Wheel, for its name, cosy fire and flagstone floors as much as its tasty food.

The village heritage trail points out buildings of interest and I couldn't resist seeking out the Ferry House, which has had a string of famous residents.

Oscar Wilde and WWII commander, Arthur (Bomber) Harris, lived in this large house and Mike Hailwood, the motorcycle road racer, learned to ride a motorbike here.

We walked off lunch along the Thames path to the red-brick Isambard Kingdom Brunel-designed railway bridge and the chalk grassland of Hartslock Nature Reserve. In the halcyon dusk, we took the direct route from Goring-on-Thames back over Holies Down to the 'van.

The fields were white with frost and the sky blue as we drove through pretty Chiltern villages to Hughenden Manor, near High Wycombe, the next morning.

This handsome, red-brick Victorian mansion is owned by the National Trust and was the much-loved home of the nineteenth century British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli was not born into a noble family and owning a country seat was vital for an ambitious Tory MP.

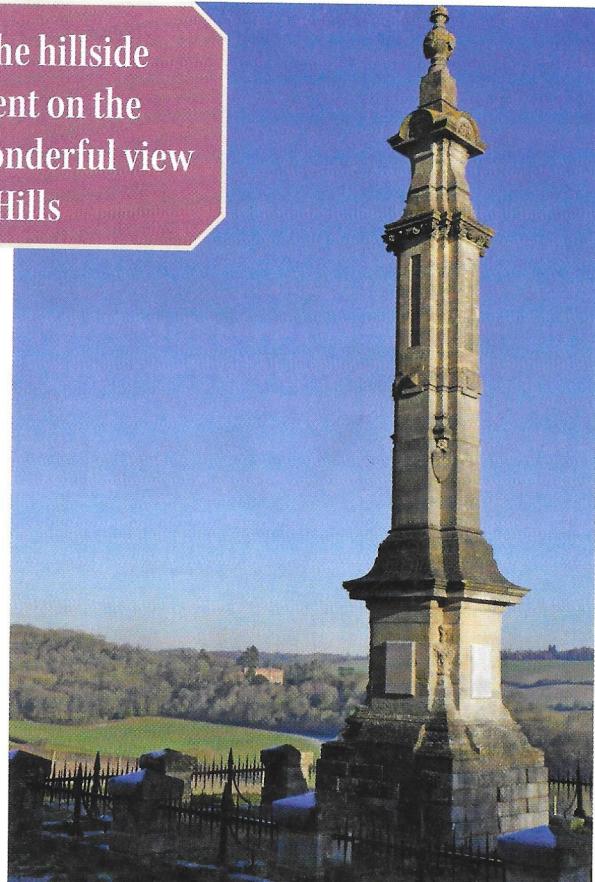
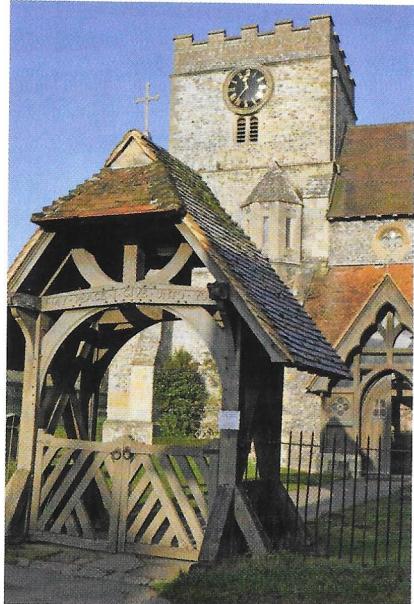
There is a good system of paths on the Hughenden Estate and, in the sunshine, we followed the Monument Walk through the woodland. Climbing the hillside to the Disraeli Monument, which honours Disraeli's father, we had a glorious view over the Chiltern Hills and to Hughenden Manor nestling among the trees.

We returned by the church, where there is a memorial from Queen Victoria to Disraeli, her favourite prime minister. We enjoyed the warmth on the sunny south-facing parterre before reluctantly, in the lovely weather, entering the house to see rooms as they were when Disraeli lived here.

A contrasting part of Hughenden's history is as an undercover base for target map making during WWII. The basement exhibition gave us a fascinating insight into the work involved.

Spitfire squadrons took millions of aerial photographs over Europe, which were then examined for potential targets.

Must do Walk up the hillside to the Disraeli Monument on the Hughenden Estate for a wonderful view over the Chiltern Hills



Maps were drawn at Hughenden by over 100 cartographers and artists and delivered each night to Bomber Command and distributed to 50 airfields for bombing raids.

A stunning sunset looked on the cards, so we drove the short distance to picturesque West Wycombe to watch from the hilltop Dashwood Mausoleum. The village is part of the Dashwood's West Wycombe Park Estate, now in the ownership of the National Trust.

Sir Francis Dashwood's employment creation scheme paid workers to dig chalk from West Wycombe Hill for a new road to High Wycombe. The resulting cave is now known as the Hellfire Caves, having been used as the meeting place for the debauched and exclusive Hellfire Club.

Despite being dissected by the busy A40, there are many splendid medieval buildings to admire in West Wycombe. Most impressive is the Church Loft; a timber-framed building with brick infill from the fifteenth century; this has a fine clock hanging over the street and was probably originally a pilgrims' hostel.

As sunset approached we set off up the steep flanks of West Wycombe Hill along an old sunken path, the evening sun shining through the trees.

At the top, as well as the huge

mausoleum, is St Lawrence's Church. Sir Francis restored the medieval church and added an incongruous Venetian-inspired gilt ball to the top of the tower. As the sun briefly transformed the landscape to gold, we turned our backs on the dominating hexagonal stone mausoleum and enjoyed the view over the Chilterns.

By next morning, fog had settled, so we headed for Pulpit Hill near Princes Risborough in search of native box woodland. Unsustainable use during the nineteenth century means that there are now only three box woodlands in England and the patch near Pulpit Hill is the largest.

We climbed through beech trees draped in bright green lichen that appeared unreal in the fog, following a spaghetti junction of footpaths and bridal ways. After crossing the top of Pulpit Hill, the site of an Iron Age hill fort, we picked up the Ridgeway and the open flanks of the hills.

With the chalky soil sticking heavily to our boots, we were cocooned in the fog with little visibility. Out of this veil of cloud a kite silently emerged, close enough to startle me. The grassland gave way to woodland around Chequers, the prime minister's country retreat, and we became fanciful, debating whether the couple following us through ▶

Essentials

HOW LONG

Three nights

WHEN

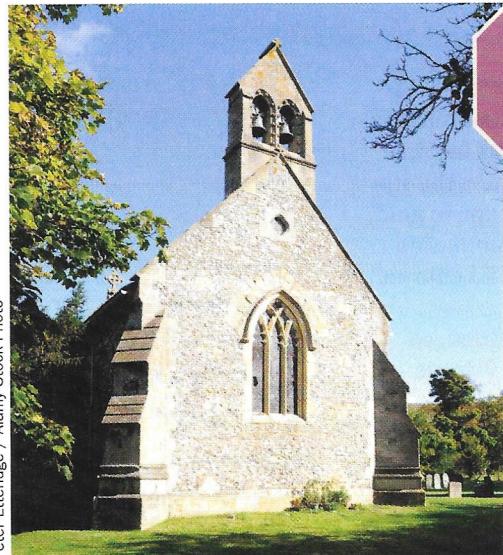
We visited in December but it's perfect any time of year

HOW MUCH

Fuel average 34mpg (500 miles)	£80
Site fees.....	£40.80
Entrance fees two adults: Hughenden Manor.....	£20.90
Tolls M6, with C&M Club discount.....	£11
Parking Tring Railway Station	£4.40
TOTAL	£157.10

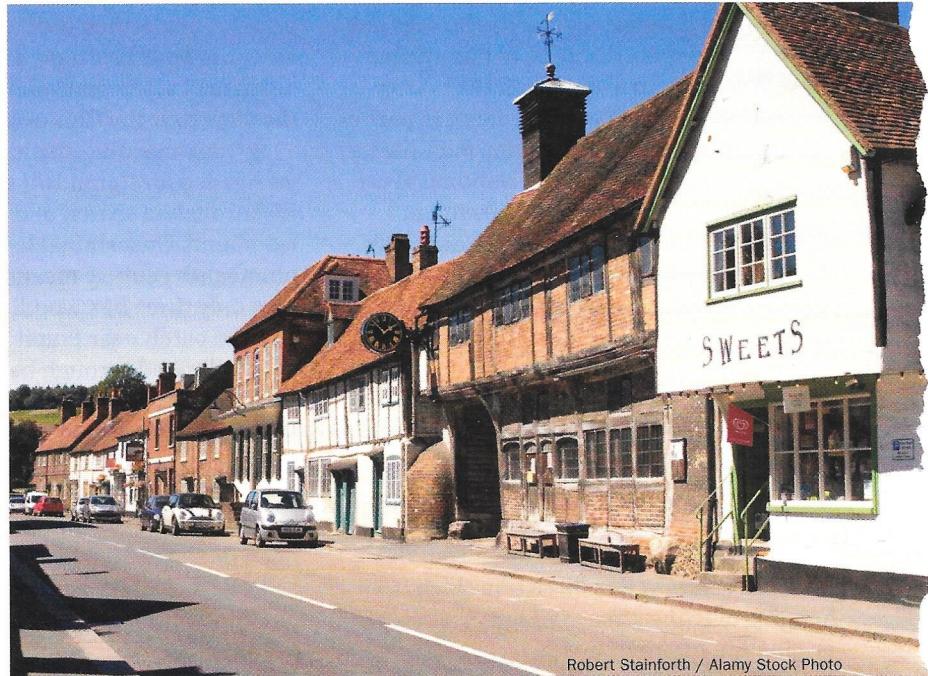
BELOW Goring-on-Thames is perfect for river watching





Peter Ettridge / Alamy Stock Photo

Must see Visit the Church of All Saints in the pretty village of Little Kimble to see the ancient wall paintings



Robert Stainforth / Alamy Stock Photo

the murk were secret service agents.

A sign told us that we had reached the box woodland on Great Kimble Warren. It was like nothing I have seen before. The dense thicket of evergreen tumbled down the steep hillside – it is woodland fit for a fairytale.

We passed through the village of Ellesborough, which has an attractive church with blue-grey flint walls and interesting gargoyles, before carrying on to Little Kimble as I had heard of another ecclesiastical gem. Passing a man wearing a bowler hat and striped trousers, I wondered if he was another spy trying to fit in, or if it was just the normal attire for a weekday in the rural Chilterns.

The stunning wall paintings in Little Kimble's tiny church, which survive from the fourteenth century, didn't disappoint. Although some of the paintings are now just fragments that give a hint of previous splendour, such as the birds and hands of St Francis, there are some where their vibrancy shines across the centuries, including the figure of St George – still resplendent with his sword and shield. This extraordinary church also has a section of beautiful medieval floor tiling in the chancel.

Eager to shake off the misty shroud by finding higher ground, we were lucky at Lacey Green as we walked to the beautiful restored windmill in sunshine. Dating from

ABOVE West Wycombe High Street; medieval floor tiles in the church at Little Kimble; the exterior of Little Kimble's church

The campsite

Bennets Wood Farm CL,
Southridge, Streatley,
Berkshire RG8 9ST

01491 872377

caravanclub.co.uk

All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £5

Wyatts Covert C&M Club
Site, Tilehouse Lane,
Denham, Bucks UB9 5DH

01895 832729

caravanclub.co.uk

All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20.70

ALTERNATIVE SITE

Premier Parks
Hurley
Riverside,
Hurley, Berkshire SL6 5NE

01628 824493

hurleyriversidepark.co.uk

1 March – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £15

the seventeenth century, this is the oldest smock windmill in England.

It fell out of use around 1915 and into disrepair and has been lovingly restored by volunteers. The four-sailed windmill doesn't open all year, but we still enjoyed admiring its exterior. As we left, the fog started to return and I turned back to see the windmill iridescent and dramatic in the veiled light.

Our final walk followed in the footsteps of drovers in the northern Chilterns. Parking the van at Tring railway station we briefly picked up the Ridgeway again to the pretty village of Aldbury.

Already an ancient village at the time of the Domesday Book, the Icknield Way and Grim's Ditch also pass this way.

We climbed the wooded hillside to the Bridgewater Memorial on the National Trust's Ashridge Estate and followed the tree-lined Prince's Riding, a wide grassy clearing to Ashridge House. Kicking beech leaves, we strolled back down the hillside to the Grand Union Canal at Cow Roast, a corruption of Cow Rest, telling us this was an ancient rest stop for drovers on their way to London markets.

We had trodden in the footsteps of our ancestors from the Neolithic, Iron Age and medieval times in the Chilterns. It felt apt that our last path – the towpath back to Tring station – followed a route created by our industrial era forebears. **mmm**