

Wessex

The land of Wessex has a rich past. In prehistoric times, the chalky, grass-covered hills were inhabited by Stone Age and Bronze Age peoples and here they built their great monuments, such as Avebury and Stonehenge – magical, mystical sights that still awe visitors today.

In the 9th century, Wessex was one of several British kingdoms, and was ruled most famously by King Alfred the Great from his capital at Winchester. The name is a derivation of 'West Saxons' – the modern-day counties, elsewhere in Britain, of Essex and Sussex have similar derivations (although there's no place called Nossex) – and at its greatest extent the kingdom of Wessex included much of western and southern England.

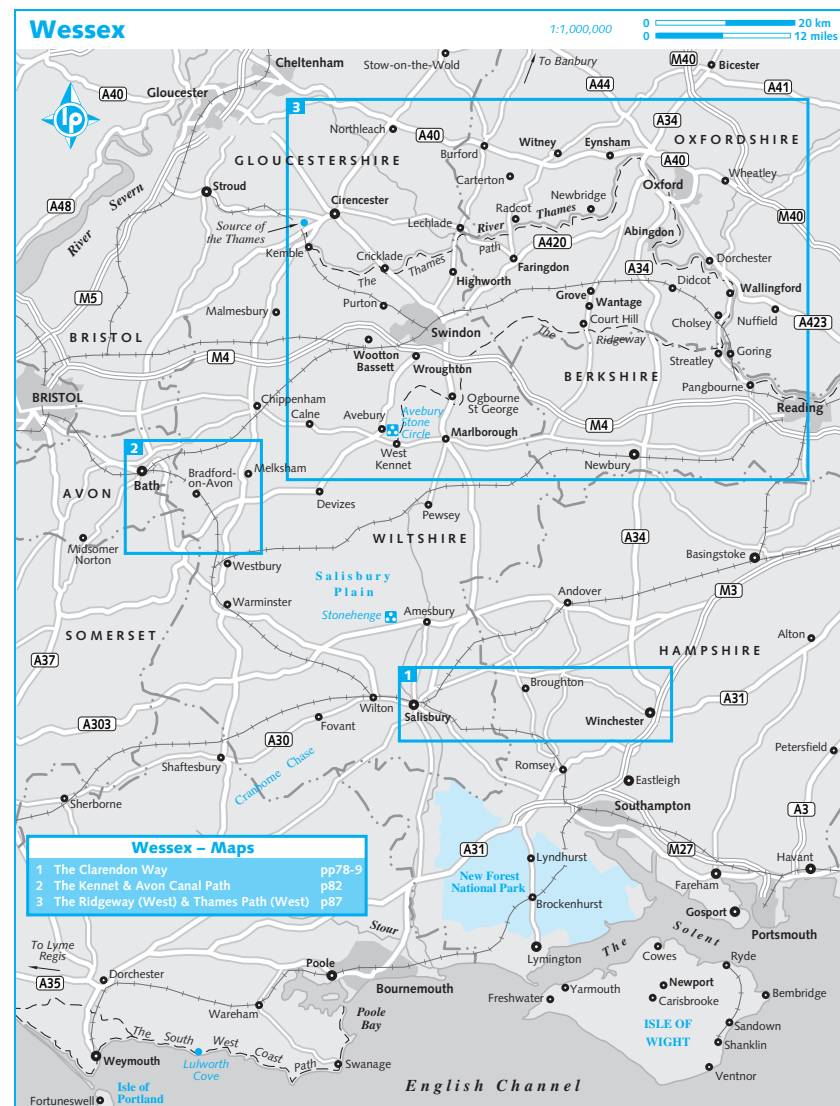
In more recent times, the Wessex name was resurrected and immortalised by the author Thomas Hardy (1840–1928). Hardy based many of his pastoral novels in this part of Britain, including the much-read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Today, Wessex no longer officially exists as a county or a kingdom, but the name is used as a convenient catch-all for the area covered by the counties of Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, Wiltshire and Berkshire, and much of the western Thames Valley.

As in Thomas Hardy's day, Wessex is still a largely rural region, and there are many opportunities for walking within easy travelling distance of the popular tourist centres of London, Salisbury, Winchester and Bath. Most routes are straightforward, often spectacular without being overbearing, and can be walked at any time of the year. If you're new to walking in Britain, or just new to walking, Wessex could be a very good place to start.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Going mystic at **Avebury Stone Circle** (p85)
- Striding through history, past burial mounds and forts, on **The Ridgeway** (p83)
- Marvelling at audacious early engineering on the **Kennet & Avon Canal Path** (p80)
- Strolling along the leafy banks of the **River Thames** (p88), Britain's best-known waterway
- Following Roman footsteps on the **Clarendon Way** (p74) between Salisbury's and Winchester's awesome cathedrals



INFORMATION

This chapter covers a wide area – a good third of southern England – with four contrasting routes suggested as walking tasters: the shorter Clarendon Way and part of the Kennet & Avon Canal Path, plus sections of the timeworn Ridgeway and the bucolic Thames Path.

Together, these trails make up a fascinating set of walks through varied scenery and many centuries of history, from the Neolithic stone circles at Avebury to the grand designs of the early industrial era. They will take you along Roman roads, medieval manor houses, through battlefields and past cathedrals and castles.

When to Walk

The walks in this chapter can be done at any time of year, although there's a better chance of good weather in the spring, summer or autumn months (April–October).

Maps & Books

For route planning, Wessex is covered by three maps in the Ordnance Survey (OS) *Travel Map – Tour 1:100,000* series: No 7 *Hampshire*, No 9 *Dorset & Somerset East* and No 22 *Wiltshire*. For more detail, maps covering individual walks in this chapter are listed in the Planning section of each route description.

There seems to be no single walking guidebook for the Wessex region covered by our chapter. Most 'Wessex' guidebooks tend to concentrate on Dorset – for example, *Walk Dorset* by Charles David, with colour maps and photos, and GPS information – and most cash in on Hardy too, such as *Pub Walks in Hardy's Wessex* by Mike Power and *In the Steps of Thomas Hardy: Walking Tours of Hardy's England* by Anne-Marie Edwards.

Information Sources

There are many tourist offices in Wessex. Useful ones near the walks we describe are listed in the individual route descriptions. Online, good tourism websites include www.visitsouthwestengland.com and www.visit-hampshire.org.uk. Also good is www.dorsetforyou.com; follow links to 'Enjoying' and 'Tourism'.

Also worth a look is www.wessex.me.uk – a slightly homespun but very comprehensive website, centred on Chard in Somerset but covering the entire Wessex region, with lots of links and information on subjects ranging from King Arthur to soccer clubs.

GATEWAYS

Major gateway cities for Wessex include Bath, Salisbury and Winchester. Although not *in* Wessex, Oxford is a handy gateway to the eastern side of the region and Cheltenham is a handy gateway for the northwest. All these places can be very easily reached from London and all parts of Britain by National Express coach and train services.

The main Transport chapter at the end of this book has more information about travel around the country, and lists several

public transport inquiry lines providing details of both national and local bus and train services.

THE CLARENDON WAY

Duration	9–11 hours
Distance	27 miles (43.5km)
Difficulty	easy
Start	Salisbury (opposite)
Finish	Winchester (p76)
Transport	bus

Summary A long but straightforward walk on good paths and tracks, through woods, farmland and villages, and over rolling hills.

This is an ideal introduction to walking in Wessex, with a clear route and sense of direction, plus a healthy dollop of history. It starts and finishes at the ancient cathedral cities of Salisbury and Winchester, respectively, and takes its name from the medieval Clarendon Palace, now ruined, which is passed on the walk a few miles east of Salisbury. The route also passes several Bronze Age tumuli (ancient burial mounds) and a Civil War battle site, and just for good measure follows the remains of a Roman road. There's even a pyramid.

It's also a walk through today's Britain – a classic southern English landscape of water meadows, crystal-clear chalk streams, tranquil woods and farmland, plus cosy pubs, noble manor houses, neat thatched cottages, comfortable homes and narrow country lanes frequented by large, expensive cars.

PLANNING

The Clarendon Way can be walked in either direction, although going west to east, as described here, is likely to be more comfortable, with the wind (or rain) behind.

Even though the landscape is mostly flat and undulating, the Way requires nine to 11 hours' walking, so you're looking at 10 to 12 hours overall. This can be quite a push in one day, particularly if you make any sightseeing pauses, so you may prefer to do the walk over two days. Access to the start and finish is good from London, and it makes an ideal weekend break from the city, with some comfortable accommodation options.

WARNING: CLARENDON MARATHON

In early October each year, the Clarendon Marathon takes place. Thousands of runners cover the route we describe here – from Winchester to Salisbury – some in less than four hours. If you want inspiration, come and watch. If you want a quiet walk, come at another time!

If you're on a tight budget, though, there are no camping or hostel options along the route and you're forced to do the walk in one go. In that case it's worth staying a night in Winchester, taking the first bus to Salisbury and walking back, unencumbered by a large backpack, to spend a second night. Alternatively, you can do the first 20 miles or so, as far as Farley Mount, then get a taxi into Winchester.

Maps

Waymarking along the Clarendon Way is mostly good – the symbol is a bishop's mitre (ceremonial hat) – but a map is definitely required.

The route is covered by the Ordnance Survey (OS) Landranger 1:50,000 maps No 184 *Salisbury & the Plain* and No 185 *Winchester & Basingstoke*. For more detail, you'll need OS Explorer 1:25,000 maps No 130 *Salisbury & Stonehenge*, No 131 *Romsey, Andover & Test Valley* and No 132 *Winchester, New Alresford & East Meon*.

Books

The only book on this route is *The Test Way & the Clarendon Way* by Barry Shurlock, but it's out of print and hard to find – although some tourist offices may have copies.

Information Sources

There are large and efficient tourist offices at both ends of the walk – in **Salisbury** (☎ 01722-

334956; www.visitsalisbury.com; Fish Row), near Market Sq, and **Winchester** (☎ 01962-840500; www.winchester.gov.uk; The Guildhall, High St; ☒ closed Sun Oct-Apr). Both have comprehensive accommodation lists and will make free bookings for you on their patch (ie in the city and immediate surrounds). For accommodation outside the area there may be a charge. These two tourist offices also sell a good selection of maps and local walking guidebooks. The websites also include walking information.

Other useful websites include www.visit-salisburyuk.com and www.visitwinchester.co.uk

NEAREST TOWNS

The 'nearest towns' to this route are the cities of Salisbury (at the start) and Winchester (at the end) – both of which have many sleeping and eating options. Places to stay and eat along the route are detailed in the walk description.

Salisbury pop 43,335

For many visitors, Salisbury means one thing: **Salisbury Cathedral** (☎ 01722-555100; www.salisburycathedral.org.uk; requested donation adult/child £4/2), a truly majestic place of worship, topped by the tallest spire in England. But there's more. **Markets** have been held twice weekly for more than 600 years and the stalls still draw large crowds. The town's architecture, including some very beautiful half-timbered buildings, is a blend of every style since the Middle Ages, while just beyond the outskirts stands the ancient site of **Old Sarum**, with remains from the Iron Age and Roman eras, and a place of council for William the Conqueror.

SLEEPING & EATING

The busy **YHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 770 6018; salisbury@yha.org.uk; Milford Hill; dm £18) is an attractive old

SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

Salisbury Cathedral is, quite simply, one of the most beautiful cathedrals in Britain. The architecture is uniformly Early English, a style characterised by pointed arches, graceful flying buttresses and a rather austere feel. This uniformity is thanks to its rapid construction, between 1220 and 1266 – a remarkably short time for such a mammoth project in the days before tower-cranes and reinforced concrete. Inside the cathedral there's a model of how the medieval construction site would have looked. Note the wooden scaffolding and not a hard hat in sight.

building surrounded by gardens, just east of the city centre. Nearby, just off Millford Hill, **Byways House** (☎ 01722-328364; www.bed-breakfast-stonehenge.co.uk; 31 Fowlers Rd; s/d £45/65) is a good-value, walker-friendly place.

The main street for B&Bs is Castle Rd (between the inner ring road and Old Sarum); it's a busy road but very handy for the centre. Nearest the city is a cluster of B&Bs including **Leena's** (☎ 01722-335419; 50 Castle Rd; d £56-80), **Victoria Lodge** (☎ 01722-320586; www.viclodge.co.uk; 61 Castle Rd; s/d £50/65); **Edwardian Lodge** (☎ 01722 413329; www.edwardianlodge.co.uk; 59 Castle Rd; d from £54) and **Hayburn Wyke** (☎ 01722-412627; www.hayburnwykeguesthouse.co.uk; 72 Castle Rd; d from £46).

Salisbury has a wide range of places to eat, from greasy fast-food outlets to very fine restaurants; with a quick stroll around the market square and surrounding streets, you'll soon find something to suit your taste and budget. Of the good pubs doing food, we like the **Haunch of Venison** on Minster St and the **Wig & Quill** on New St.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Salisbury is linked by regular National Express coaches to London and other parts of the country. For train travel, Salisbury is effectively on the outer edges of London's commuter belt, so there are frequent trains to/from the capital, as well as to/from the Midlands and the southern coast of England. For local transport between Winchester and Salisbury, see right.

Winchester

pop 41,420

The venerable city of Winchester has a long and varied history. It was an Iron Age fort, a Roman town and a Saxon settlement, and most famously the capital of King Alfred the Great – making it the most important city in England for many years until a young upstart called London took the mantle in the 12th century.

The top sight here is **Winchester Cathedral** (☎ 01962-857200; www.winchestercathedral.org.uk; adult/child £4/free) – though it's less dramatic on the outside (and arguably more impressive on the inside) than its neighbour. According to tradition, the weather on St Swithin's feast day (15 July) dictates the weather for the next 40 days. A quick prayer here for good conditions during your walk couldn't hurt.

The centre has a lively high street, a fascinating array of old buildings and a good collection of bars and restaurants.

SLEEPING & EATING

As a major stop on the tourist track, Winchester has an extremely wide choice of places to stay – although many get full in the summer months.

Budget accommodation options include **St Margaret's** (☎ 01962-861450; www.winchesterbandb.com; 3 St Michael's Rd; s/d £30/50), which has basic accommodation with shared bathrooms. More attractive is **29 Christchurch Rd** (☎ 01962-868661; www.fetherstonkilke.com; s £30-50, d £60-70), an elegant Regency home with a lovely garden, en suite rooms and great vegan breakfasts on request. Out of the city centre, in the St Cross area, **Brymer House** (☎ 01962-867428; www.brymerhouse.co.uk; 29 St Faith's Rd; d £65) offers similar quality, but charges a £10 supplement for single-night stays on the weekend.

Also in St Cross, and handy for Clarendon Way walkers, **67 St Cross Rd** (☎ 01962-863002; s/d £35/55) is an unassuming-looking but welcoming place on St Cross Rd near where it's crossed by the Clarendon Way. Nearby **54 St Cross Rd** (☎ 01962-852073; martinblockley@uwclub.net; s/d £32/52) is another walker-friendly place. Also just off the route, but back up the hill near the junction of Romsey Rd and Stanmore Lane, is charming and peaceful **Dawn Cottage** (☎ 01962-869956; dawncottage@hotmail.com; 99 Romsey Rd; d £70).

For food, the **Bishop on the Bridge** (☎ 01962-855111; 1 High St; mains £8-10; ☺ lunch & dinner) offers pub grub, with a pleasant terrace next to the river. Other pubs we like include the old-style **Eclipse Inn**, near the cathedral, serving homely food in quaint surroundings, and the eclectically decorated **Wykeham Arms** (Kingsgate St) for good beer and meals.

Up a step, **Chesil Rectory** (☎ 01962-851555; www.chesilrectory.co.uk; 1 Chesil St; lunch £15, 3-course dinner £49) serves great meals and occupies the oldest house in Winchester.

For food and drink on the walk, there are many shops and supermarkets in Winchester city centre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Winchester is easily reached by train from London (one hour, up to 50 services daily) and many parts of the country, such

as Southampton (20 minutes, 40 daily), Brighton (1½ hours, four daily), Birmingham (2½ hours, 12 daily) and Manchester (four hours, three daily).

National Express (☎ 08705 808080; www.nationalexpress.com) coaches link Winchester with London (two hours) and various other parts of the country, with frequent services throughout the day.

To get back to the start of the walk, local bus 68 runs between Winchester and Salisbury (1½ hours, roughly every two hours, less frequently on Sunday); all services go via Stockbridge, some via Broughton and some via King's Somborne.

If travelling by car, Winchester is just off the M3 motorway, which links Southampton with London.

THE WALK Salisbury to Broughton

4–5 hours, 11 miles (17.5km)

The route starts at Salisbury Cathedral and heads east out of town along Milford St (the street between the cathedral and Market Sq). Begin by following signs for the YHA hostel ('Youth Hostel') – there are no specific signs for the Clarendon Way. Go under the inner ring road, up Millford Hill, down a suburban path called Millford Hollow and along Millford Mill Rd, which crosses the River Bourne. Surprisingly quickly, you're out of the city and in the country.

Keep heading east along a lane called Queen Manor Rd, and – about 2 miles from the start of the walk – look out for the first noticeable waymarks on the right, directing you onto a path across a field and up King Manor Hill. Looking behind, the path points straight back towards the cathedral, still towering above any other building in Salisbury.

From the top of the hill, continue through woodland and pass the ruined remains of **Clarendon Palace** where, in 1164, Henry II hosted an early skirmish in the long power struggle between crown and church. Present was the infamous 'turbulent priest', Thomas à Becket, who was killed six years later in Canterbury at the king's behest.

At a fork just after the palace, keep straight on the main track for 100m, then branch left (do not follow the wider track that leads eventually to Pitton Lodge) and

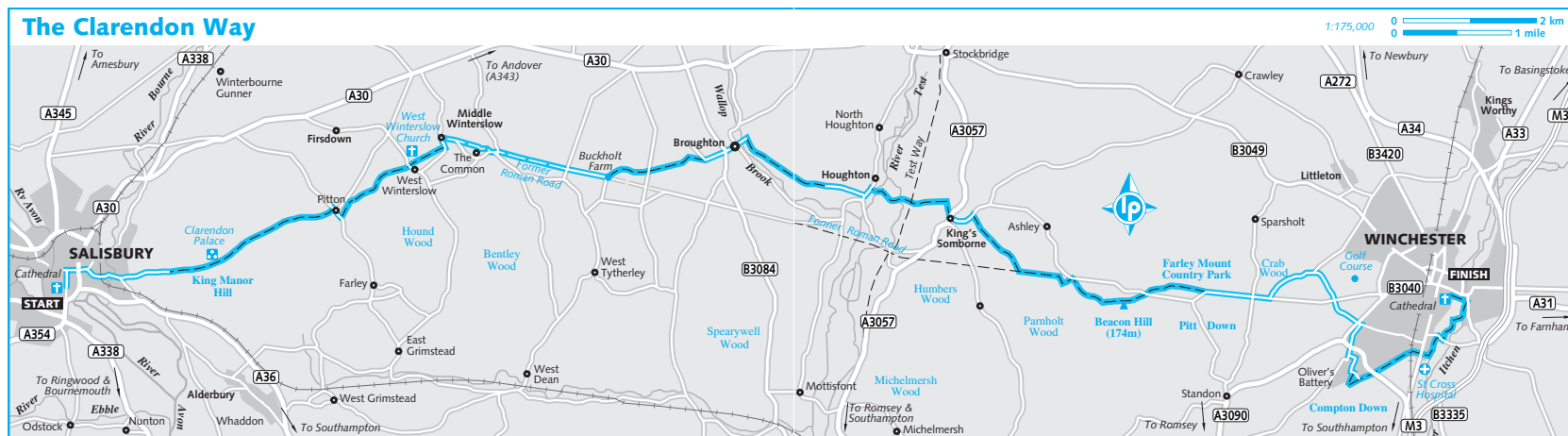
follow narrow footpaths and tracks through pleasant woodland all the way to the pretty little village of Pitton. From the crossroads, head southeast briefly (nearby, the **village shop** sells drinks, food and ice creams), pass the **Silver Plough** pub, and turn immediately left (north) into a lane lined with houses. The lane leads to a path that takes you over the hill to reach a road opposite the very attractive flint **church** in the tiny settlement of West Winterslow.

Cross the road and go down a track with the church on your left. Go through a gate and follow the paths across a couple of fields (potentially confusing, so keep a close eye on your map), eventually leading northeastwards to the village of Middle Winterslow.

Go through the village to its northern side, where the route turns sharp right along a road called the Causeway. This former Roman road originally ran between Old Sarum, near Salisbury, and the port of Clausentum, near Southampton. The map reading becomes easier for a while – you pretty much go straight ahead for several miles – and, now that you've crossed from Wiltshire to Hampshire, the signposting is much better, too.

Follow the route of the Roman road along a track along the northern edge of Middle Winterslow with fields on your left and the backs of houses on your right. On the eastern edge of the village (called The Common) the route comes down, meets the tar lane for a few hundred metres, then rejoins the route of the Roman road down a gravel track called Eastern Common Hill. Follow this though a nice section of fields and woodlands, over a lane, then up the farm lane to Buckholt Farm. Beyond here, the Clarendon Way leaves the Roman road, veering directly east over a hilly area before descending into the sleepy village of **Broughton**.

If it's time for a rest, Broughton's fine brace of pubs, the **Greyhound** and the **Tally Ho**, await the weary walker. There's also a **village shop**. If you plan to spread the walk over two days, this is pretty much the halfway point. Local B&Bs include the clean-lined and modern **Old Coach House** (☎ 01794-301527; www.ochouse.co.uk; d £50), and the cosy and historic **Yew Tree House** (☎ 01794-301227; pandjmutton@onetel.com; s/d £35/56).



Broughton to King's Somborne

1 hour, 3 miles (5km)

Before leaving Broughton, take a few moments to admire **St Mary's Church** and the fine dovecote in its churchyard, demonstrating that intensive animal rearing is not a new invention. Battery pigeons were raised in this circular structure in medieval times, and 3½ tons of young pigeons were slaughtered each year.

The route now leads along Rectory Lane out of Broughton, over Wallop Brook and behind some large houses. It then heads across fields to Houghton, from where a narrow lane leads to two footbridges across the crystal-clear waters of the River Test. A rash of 'private' signs indicates that this is a premier trout stream. If there is one thing that the English value highly, it's their fishing rights, and rumour has it that even Prince Charles was made to join a waiting list to gain membership of the local angling club.

Just after the river, the route crosses an old railway track, which is part of the Test Way, another long walking route through Hampshire. If you want to call it a day, turn left (north) here along the Test Way to reach the small town of Stockbridge, where you can catch a bus to Winchester or Salisbury. Stockbridge also has several pubs and B&Bs.

If you're carrying on, go up the steep hill, then follow the lane down to King's Somborne – yet another pretty little village

although, straddling the busy A3057 road, it's not as peaceful as others.

If you're going for the all-in-one-day option and didn't stop in Broughton, then you might be tempted by the **Crown Inn** at King's Somborne – good beer and bar meals will slake any walking thirst or hunger. Across the green on the other side of the main road, the **village shop** (closed Sun), with a bench by the stream, is an alternative spot for refreshment and rest.

King's Somborne to Winchester

4½–5½ hours, 13 miles (21km)

Leave King's Somborne on the lane that heads northeast towards Ashley, then at the edge of the village take a path on the right. This leads uphill through fields and woods to briefly join the Roman road once again, before zigzagging its way through more fields and taking you up to the summit of **Beacon Hill**. This splendid view point is topped by a curious, pyramid-like monument marking the burial place of a horse that, in 1733, tumbled into a local quarry during a hunt. Apparently, neither the horse nor its rider was injured, and the grateful owner changed his mount's name to Beware Chalkpit. The horse would go on to win several races.

If it's a weekend, you're likely to meet a few more horses and a few more people as, for the next couple of miles or so, the route crosses **Farley Mount Country Park**, with a rather confusing tangle of walking

paths and bridleways. The Clarendon waymarks disappear at some junctions but, if in doubt, follow the bridleway (marked by red poles with horseshoe symbols) through the woods. The Clarendon Way once again meets the Roman road, which is now also a modern road, then branches off to loop north and then south past farms and a golf course.

The country lane becomes a suburban street as you enter the outskirts of Winchester. At a junction with the busy B3040, go straight onto Stanmore Lane, then immediately right on Oliver's Battery Rd. Go along this for 500m, under a busy road, then past **Oliver's Battery**, the site where Cromwell forced the city to surrender during the Civil War – though today it looks like a patch of grass surrounded by a housing estate.

Keep going through the fiddly minor suburban streets until you reach the open grassland of Compton Down. Turn sharp left (almost back the way you have just come) along a couple of narrow footpaths, over the main road on a footbridge and down a narrow sunken track (the remains of an old road into the city) to finally reach a railway line, which you cross on a bridge to meet a main road (the B3335).

Turn right here, then turn left just before a pub called The Bell. Nearby is St Cross' Hospital, a charitable home founded in 1137 for '13 poor impotent men so reduced in strength as rarely or never able to

raise themselves without the assistance of one another'.

From here the Way leads across beautiful water meadows beside the River Itchen, before going through a series of narrow streets and arches round ancient Winchester College. At **Wolvesey Castle**, the official Clarendon Way goes to the right, through a little stretch of river-side park, to end at the City Mill. Nearby is the **Bishop on the Bridge** pub, which has a nice terrace overlooking the river – this may be just the spot for a celebratory pint and bite. You can then continue along the main street to end your walk at the grand door of **Winchester Cathedral**.

WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL

Winchester Cathedral was built between 1079 and 1093, shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Compared with Salisbury, the architecture is a mix: in the 13th century the cathedral was extended in the Early English style, and from the mid-14th century the nave was rebuilt in a late Gothic style called 'perpendicular', characterised by large windows, fan vaults and an emphasis on vertical lines. The cathedral's internal detail is truly awe-inspiring and outshines the comparatively mundane exterior. This makes an interesting contrast with Salisbury Cathedral, where the outside is wonderful and the inside less dramatic.

THE KENNET & AVON CANAL PATH

Duration	4–5 hours
Distance	10 miles (16km)
Difficulty	easy
Start	Bath (p110)
Finish	Bradford-on-Avon (opposite)
Transport	train

Summary A flat and easy waterway walk through delightful countryside with a good taste of Britain's early industrial heritage.

Canals were the railroads and motorways of their day; busy routes transporting cargo across the country. Now they're loved as tranquil leisure routes for boaters, cyclists and walkers, and are a great way to stroll effortlessly through some of Britain's countryside. The Kennet & Avon Canal Path is just such a route, and the walk we describe here follows one of its most interesting sections, from the historic city of Bath to the neat market town of Bradford-on-Avon, following the canal as it traverses the landscape via a fascinating series of bridges, tunnels and aqueducts. Other attractions include decorated boats, good bird life and some very nice canal-side pubs.

PLANNING

This linear walk can be done in either direction. We describe the route from Bath to Bradford-on-Avon, assuming you'll return to Bath by train. You could, however, overnight in Bradford-on-Avon, catch the train to Bath, then walk back.

BARGE BACK IN

The Kennet & Avon Canal was built between 1794 and 1810 to join London and Bristol, two of the most important ports in the country, by an inland route. The canal linked the River Avon to the River Kennet, a tributary of the Thames, so that barges called narrowboats, towed by horses, could carry goods up one river, along the canal, then down the other river. The project was completed before the days of mechanisation, so most construction was done by workmen called navigators ('navvies') using little more than picks and wheelbarrows.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, canals had to compete with railways for the movement of freight. Then came road transport. Trains and trucks were quicker than barges, and by the 1960s much of the Kennet & Avon Canal was abandoned and in an unusable state. However, since the early 1980s dedicated enthusiasts have rebuilt the canal, providing a modern waterway for a whole new generation of narrowboat owners – not to mention many more activities never foreseen by the navvies. Today, people in pleasure cruisers, rowing boats and canoes enjoy the canal, while anglers sit on the bank, and walkers and cyclists (and still the occasional horse) follow the towpath.

Adding time for lunch and admiring the aqueducts, you will probably need about six hours to complete the walk.

Alternatives

If you don't want to go all the way to Bradford-on-Avon, you can walk as far as Avoncliff (8.5 miles from Bath), and from there catch a train back to Bath.

If you've got more time, you can continue along the canal from Bradford-on-Avon to Devizes. This provides a change of scenery – from enclosed river valley to open farmland – and includes the 'flight' of 16 closely stepped locks at Caen Hill, one of the most spectacular features on Britain's entire inland waterway system. The distance from Bradford-on-Avon to Devizes is 11.5 miles (18.5km), requiring another five to six hours of walking. If you do the extension, it brings the total distance from Bath to Devizes up to 21.5 miles (34.5km), which most people will need nine to 11 hours to cover. However, because the route is flat and easy underfoot, strong walkers could do it in around seven or eight hours – not too demanding on a long summer's day.

Maps & Books

The OS Landranger 1:50,000 maps No 172 *Bristol & Bath* and No 173 *Swindon & Devizes* cover the route described here. For more detail on the whole canal and a bargeful of very useful information, the *Kennet & Avon Canal Map & Guide*, published by GeoProjects, is highly recommended.

The Kennet & Avon Walk by Ray Quinlan covers the whole canal, plus river walks at either end, from the mouth of the Avon, near Bristol, to Westminster in central London.

Information Sources

Tourist offices are located at **Bath** (☎ 01225-477101; www.visitbath.co.uk) and **Bradford-on-Avon** (☎ 01225-865797; www.bradfordonavon.co.uk). A very handy information source is the site of the **Kennet & Avon Canal Trust** (www.katrust.org), responsible for much of the canal's restoration work. See also www.bathcanal.com. For more general information, see www.waterscape.com/walking.

NEAREST TOWNS

The nearest town to the start of this walk is the city of Bath (see p110) – regularly linked to all parts of the country by train and National Express coach, and with accommodation and facilities for all tastes and budgets, as befits a major tourist destination.

Bradford-on-Avon

Before you catch your train back to Bath from the end of the walk, there are several options in Bradford-on-Avon for food and drink. Our favourites include the **Dandy Lion** pub, the bar at the **Swan Hotel** (note the Moulton bicycle hanging on the wall – it was invented here) and delightful **Mr Salvat's Coffee Room**, last modernised in the 17th century.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Bradford-on-Avon, buses go regularly back to Bath, but it's far easier to use

the train, with about 20 trains per day each way (about 15 on Sunday). For onward travel, you can also get a bus or train from Bradford-on-Avon to Salisbury or the south coast.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

Getting to the start of the walk is easy. With your back to the Bath Spa train station entrance, go right and follow the footpath sign under the railway arch, then over a footbridge crossing the River Avon. Turn left, then after 50m turn left again to reach the start of the canal near the lock gates separating it from the river. That's the tricky navigational bit over! You keep to the towpath now for the rest of the walk.

For transport from the end of the walk, see left.

THE WALK

Leaving the lock-gates that mark the start of the Kennet & Avon Canal, you also leave behind the hubbub of trains and traffic. Indeed, there's probably no quieter, or more attractive, way of leaving Bath.

The towpath sits nicely beside the canal as you pass a few more lock-gates and grand **Cleveland House**, straddling the canal, where you cross to the opposite bank. Next the path runs beside **Sydney Gardens**, once a very fashionable quarter where two more bridges were built to hide the lowly narrowboats from sensitive aristocrats. It's worth leaving the canal briefly for a quick stroll around.

You soon reach Bathampton (2.5 miles from the start) where the **George Inn** serves

HISTORY-ON-AVON

Largely thanks to its position on the river, Bradford-on-Avon holds plenty of historic interest, so it's worth having a look around. The **Town Bridge** dates from 1610 and is noted for its 'lockup' (small prison) built into the central pier.

Near the bridge, some magnificent **mill buildings** line the river. These date from the 17th and 18th centuries when Bradford-on-Avon reached its peak as a weaving centre and West Country wool was highly prized across Britain and Europe.

Up on the hill overlooking the town is the tiny Saxon **church of St Laurence**. It was established in the 7th or 8th century, but was put to secular use and eventually forgotten when a new church was constructed. It was rediscovered around 1856 and has been returned to its original condition.

On the edge of town, near the canal, is the medieval **Packhorse Bridge**, over which produce was carried to the immense **Tithe Barn** – built in 1341 and still standing today despite 100 tons of stone tiles on the roof.

drinks and food, and the **Raft Café** (on a tied-up barge) serves coffee and sandwiches to take away. If it's too early for a stop, continue along the path, now heading south. After Bridge No 181 (they are numbered from Reading, so you can start counting down) there are woods on the right, while a beautiful stretch of countryside unfolds to your left.

About 5 miles from Bath, a footbridge takes you onto the right (west) bank, just before the main canal does a sharp left turn and leaps across the River Avon on the remarkably ornate **Dundas Aqueduct**, named after the first chairman of the canal company but designed by engineer John Rennie.

Just before the aqueduct, another small canal branches off (ie goes straight) from the Kennet & Avon. This is the Somerset Coal Canal, another long-term restoration project – worth following for 500m or so along to **Brassknocker Basin** and the very pleasant **Angelfish Café** (open daily for teas, snacks and lunches). Also here are some public loos, a bike- and boat-hire outlet and an exhibition about the canal's history.

The main route continues along the towpath and over Dundas Aqueduct, then clings to the wooded valley side, skirting above the village of Limpley Stoke. Look out for the sign in the hedge to the **tearoom** if you need hot drinks or cakes.

Another few miles brings you to **Avoncliff Aqueduct** – longer, higher and even more splendid than Dundas. This takes you back

across the River Avon, and you have to loop down under a tunnel to reach the towpath on the other side of the canal.

If it's time for refreshment, the popular **Cross Guns** (☎ 01225-862335; www.crossguns.net) serves good beer and food, with tables outside if it's a sunny day and a fire inside if it's cold. There's also a nearby **tearoom**.

The last 1.5 miles of towpath takes you into Bradford-on-Avon. Look out for the famous medieval **Tithe Barn** on your left – this is well worth a visit (see boxed text, p81). Just behind the barn are several craft shops and a small friendly **café** around a courtyard-like garden.

The end of this walk is marked by a bridge over the canal. Next to the bridge is the **Lock Inn Cottage** (☎ 01225-868068; www.thelockinn.co.uk; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), a busy pub-café with canal-side gardens, no-frills interior and a vast array of drinks, snacks and meals, including the famous Boatman's Breakfast. You can also rent bicycles and canoes, which may provide an alternative way of covering the route. Nearby, the **Canal Tavern** does a range of bar meals.

Before leaving the canal, cross the road to see the lock and basin – once Bradford-on-Avon's port. Nearby, the **Barge Inn** (can you see the theme here?), with its pleasant canal-side garden, is another option for drinks or meals.

From the end of the walk it's less than 800m to the centre of **Bradford-on-Avon** (p81).

THE RIDGEWAY (WEST)

Duration	3 days
Distance	44 miles (71km)
Difficulty	easy
Start	Avebury (p85)
Finish	Goring (p86)
Transport	bus
Summary	A popular and straightforward national trail through high, rolling chalk hills and farmland, with great views and a rich historical background.

The Ridgeway is dubbed 'Britain's oldest road'. Archaeological evidence confirms that this ancient route has been used for at least 5000 years, and as you walk here today the landscape oozes a palpable sense of human history.

In reality, the original Ridgeway did not follow a single linear route, but rather a series of tracks and paths across high chalk hills, avoiding swampy plains or forested valleys and making travel easier for early Stone Age walkers. It was one of many such ancient routes that linked southwest England with the east coast. For today's walker, the western part of the Ridgeway National Trail is an ideal year-round route, especially good in summer when mild gradients, dry paths and fine views make the walking effortless and enjoyable.

Although the original Ridgeway crossed the country, the modern Ridgeway National Trail follows only part of this ancient route and is divided into two very distinct sections. The western section, described here, crosses the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) over open country with few roads and villages, providing excellent views when the skies are clear and a bleak grandeur when the storm clouds brew. Historical reminders abound, as the route passes Stone Age burial mounds and Iron Age forts, as well as passing near the massive stone circle at Avebury.

PLANNING

This route description covers the western section of the Ridgeway, from Avebury to Goring in the Thames Valley. Beyond Goring, the eastern section of the Ridgeway winds through the very different landscape

of the Chiltern Hills – also an AONB, but more densely populated with numerous villages and small towns, along with notably more woodland. If you want to do the whole Ridgeway, see boxed text, p88, for some brief information. As with all LDPs, you can do just a small section of the Ridgeway or a circular route taking in a stretch of the main trail.

Whether you do all or just some of it, the Ridgeway is a linear route and, as a national trail, is well waymarked with acorn symbols and signs. We recommend going west to east, to keep the wind mostly behind you.

The national trail officially starts at Overton Hill, an uninspiring car park next to the busy main A4 road west of Marlborough (although the 5000-year-old burial mounds nearby, where archaeologists have found the remains of adults and children, are somehow made all the more poignant by the lorries that rumble past obliviously). A much more interesting option is to start at the fascinating Avebury Stone Circle – an appropriate introduction to this walk through ancient British history – and join the Ridgeway from here, missing the first few miles of the official route.

You will need to add a few extra miles to the stated distance to get to/from your accommodation as there's only one village actually *on* the route. All others are a mile or two away, and even then places to stay and eat are limited, so careful planning is required (as are advance reservations in summer).

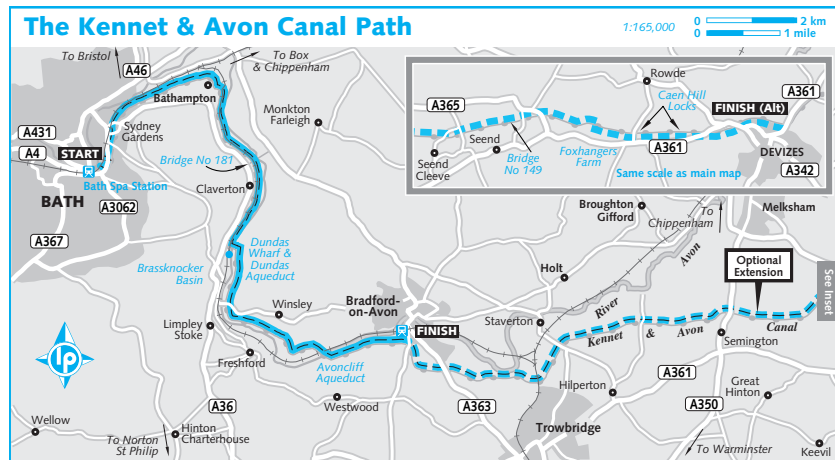
Most walkers do this section in three days, and the most convenient stages are:

Day	From	To	Miles/km
1	Avebury	Ogbourne St George	9/14.5
2	Ogbourne St George	Court Hill	21/34
3	Court Hill	Goring	14/22.5

Hours given in the description are walking times only – remember to add extra for lunch, sightseeing, rests etc.

Alternatives

Day 1 is short (to allow for a visit to Avebury Stone Circle before setting out) and Day 2 is long, although not too arduous,



and easily possible for fit walkers. Alternatively, on Day 1 you can continue beyond Ogbourne St George to either Bishopstone or Ashbury; both villages have B&B options. This makes Days 1 and 2 about 15 miles each.

When to Walk

You can do this route at any time of year. In winter the paths can be muddy and the bare chalk slippery, but it's not too difficult if you take care – although you'll need good waterproofs if the rain comes in when you're up on the high sections!

Maps

The western section of the Ridgeway is on OS Landranger 1:50,000 maps No 173 *Swindon & Devizes* and No 174 *Newbury & Wantage*; these maps are fine, as the going is straightforward. Very useful is Harvey Maps 1:40,000 *The Ridgeway* strip map; the strips are wide enough to show villages off the route where you might divert for accommodation and, like all Harvey maps, are waterproof and hard-wearing. It also very usefully shows water points.

Books

The official national trail guide is *The Ridgeway* by Anthony Burton, with good detailed description, background information and extracts from OS 1:25,000 maps, although these are only useful if you don't detour more than a few miles off the route. Highly recommended is *The Ridgeway* by Nick Hill, full of background and route information with easy-to-read, walker-specific line maps.

Absolutely invaluable is *The Ridgeway National Trail Companion*, published by the National Trails Office and covering accommodation, services and facilities along

or near the trail. Organised in a logical fashion, it also lists recommended maps and books, provides background historical and wildlife information, and even shows where your horse can get a drink.

The National Trails Office also produces *Walks Around the Ridgeway*, which describes a good selection of circular walks including sections of the main national trail.

Information Sources

For general accommodation and transport inquiries, the main tourist website for this area is www.visitkennet.co.uk. Tourist offices near the route include **Avebury** (☎ 01672-539425; all.atic@kennet.gov.uk), **Swindon** (☎ 01793-530328; www.visitwindon.co.uk), **Marlborough** (☎ 01672-513989) and **Wantage** (☎ 01235-760176; www.visitvale.co.uk).

For walking information, your first contact should be the **National Trails Office** (☎ 01865-810224; www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway). For information on Avebury and some other historic sites, see also www.nationaltrust.org.uk/Wessex.

Guided Walks

The National Trails Office organises a series of guided walks along the Ridgeway, ranging from a few hours to all day long.

GETTING AROUND

The Ridgeway is well served by various local buses, including the handy X47, which runs close to the central section of this route on Saturdays. For more details, the *Ridgeway Bus & Train Guide* is a very handy leaflet, available (free of charge) from local tourist offices or by mail from the national trails office. You can also download the leaflet as a PDF from the national trails website (<http://nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway>).

WARNING – WATER & RUTS

Just because you're in comfortable southern England, don't be lured into complacency on the Ridgeway. There are very few settlements along the way (meaning very few cafés or pubs for lunch-stops), so it's best to carry supplies and enough water – especially in summer – as this route through puerous chalk land is above the spring line, with only occasional opportunities for refills.

Most of the western section of the Ridgeway consists of rights of way defined as 'Byway'. This means walkers share the route with mountain bikers, horse riders and 4WDs that churn up the ground in wet weather, making walking tricky. In some areas, separate footpaths run parallel to the main track, giving walkers a chance to avoid the ruts.

NEAREST TOWNS Avebury

The village of Avebury is surrounded by a gigantic **stone circle** (see boxed text, below), larger than Stonehenge, plus several other historic sites and an excellent **museum** to draw the crowds, so there are several accommodation options.

SLEEPING & EATING

Places to stay in Avebury include **Manor Farm** (☎ 01672-539294; High St; d from £70). Nearby is **The Lodge** (☎ 01672-539023; www.aveburylodge.co.uk; d £95-225) – luxurious, eclectic and historic.

There are other options outside Avebury. Just west of the village, in the 'suburb' of Avebury Trusloe, is small and down-to-earth **6 Beckhampton Rd** (☎ 01672-539588; d £50). A mile north, in Winterbourne Monkton, the **New Inn** (☎ 01672-539240; www.thenewinn.net; s/d £50/60) offers good pub food and accommodation. About 1.5 miles southwest of Avebury at East Kennet, the **Old Forge** (☎ 01672-861686; www.theoldforge-avebury.co.uk; d from £50) offers good quality rooms with en suite bathrooms. Two miles southeast of Avebury at West Overton, there's comfortable B&B at **Cairncot** (☎ 01672-861617; www.cairncot.co.uk; d £50).

For a drink, lunch or evening meal, the **Red Lion** (☎ 01672-539266; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is picture-postcard twee on the outside but a regular pub on the inside. It serves pretty standard pub fare, plus breakfast is available until 10am.

When it comes to retail, aspiring druids can stock up on charms and Celtic goodies at **Henge Shop**, while walkers can load their rucksacks with chocolate bars and takeaway sandwiches from the **village store**. There's also a **tearoom** next to the museum, and the National Trust's very own **Circles Restaurant**.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The gateway town of Swindon can be easily reached from most parts of the country by National Express coach and by train (Swindon is on the main line between London and Bristol). You can then take the 49 Trans-Wilts Express bus, running about 10 times daily (less on Sunday) between Swindon and Trowbridge via Avebury and Devizes.

Alternatively, you could get a train to Pewsey (on the main line between London and southwest England), from where Avebury is a scenic 6-mile walk.

AVEBURY STONE CIRCLE

The stone circle at Avebury dates from around 2600–2100 BC, making it roughly the same age as Stonehenge, its more famous neighbour. With a diameter of about 350m, Avebury is also one of the largest stone circles in Britain, and it's well worth spending some time here before you set off along the Ridgeway.

The site originally comprised an outer circle of 98 standing stones, many weighing up to 20 tons, although they're not worked to shape as at Stonehenge. The stones remained largely intact through the Roman period, when the site may already have been a tourist attraction, and from around AD 600 a Saxon settlement grew up inside the circle. In medieval times, when the power of the church was strong and fear of paganism stronger, many of the stones were deliberately buried. Then, in the early 18th century, stones were broken up for building material as the village began to expand.

Modern archaeological surveys commenced in the early 20th century. In 1934, under the supervision of Alexander Keiller, buried stones were located and resurrected, and markers were placed where stones had disappeared. The wealthy Keiller actually bought Avebury in order to restore 'the outstanding archaeological disgrace of Britain'.

The modern roads into Avebury neatly cut the circle into four sectors. To see everything, start from the High St and walk round the circle in an anticlockwise direction. In the southwest sector there are 12 standing stones, including the Barber Surgeon Stone where the skeleton of a man was found buried. The southeast sector starts with the huge Portal Stones – the entry into the circle from an ancient road. The northwest sector has the most complete collection of standing stones, including the massive 65-ton Swindon Stone – one of the few never to have been toppled.

Goring

The western section of the Ridgeway National Trail ends at the sleepy little town of Goring, a historic crossing point on the River Thames and also on the Thames Path National Trail (see p88).

SLEEPING & EATING

Budget options are limited to the basic but friendly **Streatley YHA Hostel** (☎ 01491-872278; streatley.yha.org.uk; dm £16), on the west bank across the bridge from Goring. Nearby, **The Bull** (☎ 01491-872392; www.thebullatstreatley.com; d £70), a 15th-century former coaching inn, serves meals and has six cosy rooms. Solo walkers can stay at **3 Ickneild Cottages** (☎ 01491-875650; s £25), a traditional place with one single guest room.

In Goring itself, budget options start with the **Queens Arms** (☎ 01491-872825; s/d £30/60), a straightforward pub near the station on the edge of town, with no-frills accommodation (and no breakfast available). Two other options include **Melrose Cottage** (☎ 01491-873040; melrose@fsmail.net; 36 Milldown Rd; s/d £30/50), a family-run B&B about 800m from the path, and **Northview House** (☎ 01491-872184; hi@goring-on-thames.freereserve.co.uk; Farm Rd; s/d £30/50), a conveniently located B&B surrounded by trees.

For cosy rooms and good food, the cottage-like **John Barleycorn Inn** (☎ 01491-872509; s/d £45/55, mains £8-13) is worth a stop. Just up Station Rd is the **Catharine Wheel** (☎ 01491-872379; £8-12), another recommended place to eat and drink. Top of the lot is the **Miller of Mansfield Hotel** (☎ 01491-872829; www.millerofmansfield.com; High St; s £90, d £100-130) with classy rooms, contemporary decor and fine food in the restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Goring is on a main train line between London and Reading, Oxford and Stratford-upon-Avon, with very frequent trains in both directions.

THE WALK

Day 1: Avebury to Ogbourne St George

4–5 hours, 9 miles (14.5km)

This first day of the route leads through classic Wiltshire Downs scenery, with rolling hills of grass and wheat, and occasional clumps of trees on the horizon. The whole area is dotted with mysterious mounds and ancient standing stones.

From the Red Lion pub, cross the main road, pass the tourist office on your right, and head east along a narrow lane called Green St, which soon becomes a rough track, leading uphill through fields to meet the Ridgeway 1.5 miles from the village. Turn left here and keep going for three days!

About 5 miles from Avebury the route goes through the dramatic earthworks of **Barbury Castle**, an Iron Age hillfort. The area is now a country park with public toilets and a good **café** at the warden's bungalow. There's also a water tap.

Beyond Barbury the route approaches the northern edge of the downs and the views get better – across to the giant town of Swindon and the more scenic Vale of White Horse. Follow Smeathe's Ridge across open farmland and descend to the village of Ogbourne St George.

OGBOURNE ST GEORGE

On the edge of the village, a good budget choice is **Foxlynch Farm** (☎ 01672-841307; camp sites for 2 £10, B&B s/d £20/40). The **Parklands Hotel** (☎ 01672-841555; www.parklandshotel.co.uk; s/d £50/75) is also a bar and restaurant, and the friendly owners can provide packed lunches and baggage transfer by arrangement. The nearby **Inn with the Well** (☎ 01672-841445; www.theinnwiththewell.com; s/d £40/50) has more of a pub atmosphere, serving up good beer and traditional bar food, with more elaborate meals in the restaurant.

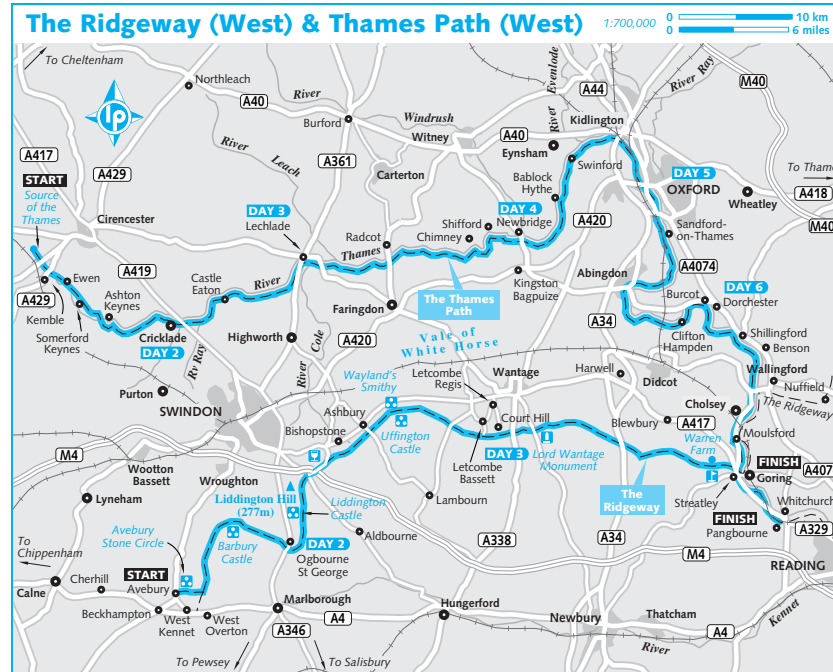
Day 2: Ogbourne St George to Court Hill

8–10 hours, 21 miles (34km)

This is a long day, but the route is straightforward and not too tiring. With an early start you should have no problems.

From Ogbourne St George you soon burn off breakfast with a stiff ascent to rejoin the Ridgeway. The trail continues up to **Liddington Hill**, the highest point on the route at a dizzying 277m. Nearby is Liddington Castle, another Iron Age fort, reached by a permissive footpath and offering a fine panorama, spoiled only by the scar of the M4 motorway.

You descend a chalky track and walk along a busy road for about 200m, before turning right onto a lane that crosses the M4 and leads to the hamlet of Fox Hill and the welcoming sight of the **Shepherds Rest**



(the only pub actually *on* the western section of the trail), offering breakfasts, fresh coffee, lunches and evening meals.

About 200m beyond the pub, the Ridgeway leaves the asphalt behind and rejoins the rough track. Over the next few miles the surface switches between grass, shale, gravel and bare chalk – slippery when wet. If it's dry, this is one of the finest sections of the route, passing over high ground with more wonderful, sweeping views to the north. (If the weather is hot, remember to carry enough water for this stretch.)

The next feature on the Ridgeway is **Wayland's Smithy**, where legend tells of horses being left overnight and reshod by morning, although in reality it's an unusual 'chamber barrow' burial site. About a mile further along the trail is yet another fine Iron Age fort, **Uffington Castle**, from where you get views across the Vale of White Horse, with the chalky outline of the aforesaid animal cut in the turf just below. (For more on white horses, see the boxed text, p95.)

Another fine, rolling section of open downland follows, with the path ahead

often visible for miles. As you continue, do stop occasionally and look back – the views are stunning that way, too. The route crosses a main road at Sparshot Firs, and the final few miles of today's stage lead past Letcombe Castle (you guessed it: another Iron Age fort) to reach another main road (the A338) at Court Hill.

COURT HILL & LETCOMBE REGIS

About 500m north of the trail are the **Ridgeway Information Centre**, with a good exhibition, and delightful **Ridgeway YHA Hostel** (☎ 0870-770 6064; www.yharidgeway.org.uk; dm £16), which has an appropriately historic atmosphere in a series of converted barns with an oak-beamed dining room, excellent views over the Vale and a choice of family rooms.

The nearest B&Bs are at Letcombe Regis, about 1.5 miles northwest. They include **Quince Cottage** (☎ 01235-763652; www.rboden.supanet.com; s/d £35/60), a lovely 18th-century thatched building. You can also stay and get evening bar food Tuesday to Saturday at the **Greyhound Inn** (☎ 01235-771093; d £60).

ONWARDS THROUGH THE CHILTERN

After your jaunt along the chalky downs, if you want to keep going along the Ridgeway National Trail, the next three days take you through the very different landscape of the Chiltern Hills. This broad band of hills runs roughly southwest to northeast, from the banks of the River Thames to fizzle out near the towns of Aylesbury and Dunstable. These are the nearest 'proper' hills to London, covered in a mix of woods and farmland, and are a very popular walking area, especially at weekends. There's an excellent network of footpaths, but don't expect wilderness: the area is also dotted with well-to-do villages, especially popular with wealthy London commuters. The trail ends at Beacon Hill near Ivinghoe and the whole Ridgeway route is 85 miles (136km) long, usually covered by walkers in six days.

If these places are full, the nearby town of Wantage (famous for being the birthplace of King Alfred) has a wider choice. First choice should be the friendly **Regis B&B** (☎ 01235-762860; www.regisbandwantage.co.uk; 12 Charlton Rd; s/d £35/65), which offers free pick-up from and return to the Ridgeway and three-course dinners for £14 including a glass of wine.

Day 3: Court Hill to Goring

5–6 hours, 14 miles (22.5km)

This day is one of transition, with your final miles on high, open downland before a descent to the wooded Thames Valley.

If you stayed in Letcombe Regis or Wantage, retrace to the Ridgeway and continue along the northern edge of the downs, now also following the route of an ancient defensive dyke called **Grim's Ditch**. About 2 miles from Court Hill – as the route follows a wide, grassy track – look to the right for the **Lord Wantage Monument**. The noble lord commemorated here was a philanthropic landowner and commander of a battle in the 19th-century Crimean War; it's said he planted clumps of trees on his estate in the same formation as troops on a battlefield.

Along this stretch you'll see signs of the racehorse training activity for which the area is famous, as well as the cooling towers of Didcot power station and the former Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell – but none of this affects the calmness of the surrounding downland.

About 6.5 miles from Court Hill, the Ridgeway goes under the busy A34 by way of a pedestrian tunnel (with some murals added for your enjoyment). A mile beyond here, the track is paved with concrete and there is a broad grass verge. Look for the sharp left turn off the paved section and

keep your eye open for signs as the route weaves round fields, with several other paths leading off to the left and right.

After Warren Farm you're faced with 3 miles of almost continuous descent through an area called **Streatley Warren**, where rabbits were farmed in medieval times. Initially the track is stony but, on reaching another Warren Farm (you know what they say about rabbits), it turns into a lane running past a few houses. After the remoteness of the last few hours, these signs of civilisation may be a shock, but you'll soon be passing more houses and a golf course, before reaching a junction with the busy A417. Turn right to reach a junction with the even busier A329 and then go straight into the village of Streatley, where a left turn at the traffic lights leads onto a bridge crossing a very scenic stretch of the River Thames and marking the end of this route. On the east bank is Goring, with several fine old pubs and cafés where you can celebrate finishing your walk through 5000 years of history.

THE THAMES PATH (WEST)

Duration	6 days
Distance	83 miles (133.5km)
Difficulty	easy
Start	Thames Head
Finish	Pangbourne (p91)
Nearest Town	Kemble (p90)
Transport	train, bus

Summary A classic and pleasurable river-side walk passing beautiful English countryside and fascinating historical sites.

The River Thames marks the northern limits of the legendary land of Wessex and is followed from its source to London by

the Thames Path National Trail. The total length of this route is 173 miles and it usually takes around 12 to 14 days to walk, but it's divided very neatly at the town of Reading into two sections that can each be traversed in a week. Reading is also a transition point, where the Thames changes from a rural river to a major waterway with urban overtones.

Here we describe the western section of the Thames Path National Trail and also include most of the introductory information. For a description of the eastern section, see p64.

The Thames is a lowland river and its source is a mere 107m above sea level. Geological barriers are few so the river has an easy time of it, ambling towards the sea, losing height slowly with no tumbling falls or rapids to ripple its surface. The walking is correspondingly straightforward and leisurely, and the Thames Path takes the walker through a rich vein of English countryside, history and culture, past unspoilt pastures and old market towns, across broad floodplains and slicing through large settlements.

While the scenery around the river can be beautiful, the history is fascinating. Some of the most historically significant towns and villages of southern England grew up on the Thames and it's often worth a brief diversion from the side of the river to look at old town halls and coaching inns, market squares and grand houses.

The Thames is also a working river, and in its upper reaches you'll see where the immature river has been diverted to provide water for millponds. As you progress downstream you'll see locks, weirs and cuts (canals), all customising the Thames for human use. But nature can never be completely controlled, and you'll also see evidence of occasional rebellion where the river has escaped its artificial boundaries and flooded the surrounding lands. Regular commemorative stones mark high floods, particularly those of 1897 and 1947, which caused enormous devastation. In our own time, and as global warming and its effects becomes an increasingly topical issue, there were also major floods in the autumn of 2000, when the owners of many river-side houses found their ground floors swamped with water.

PLANNING

Combining the western and eastern sections of the Thames Path, as described in this book, creates a 12-day walk that takes you from the source of the river to the Thames Barrier. The route can be walked in either direction, but going downstream is more satisfying, following the rural stream as it develops into a magnificent river. The Thames Barrier (a series of massive flood-prevention gates, raised in high-water conditions to prevent London from being flooded) is a fitting end to the walk, whereas arriving at the source, an indistinct depression in a field, can be a bit of an anticlimax.

The total length of the Thames Path is between 170 and 180 miles. You will see some references to distances nearer 200 miles, but this includes the trail in London where it runs along both sides of the river simultaneously. Our western section measures 83 miles, and we suggest the following stages:

Day	From	To	Miles/km
1	Thames Head	Cricklade	10/16
2	Cricklade	Lechlade	11/17.5
3	Lechlade	Newbridge	16/25.5
4	Newbridge	Oxford	14/22.5
5	Oxford	Dorchester	16/25.5
6	Dorchester	Pangbourne	16/25.5

Hours given for each day's distance are walking times only. You will need to add extra for lunch, sightseeing etc.

The Thames Path is a trail undergoing continuous improvement; the aim is for the route to be next to the river as much as possible. Waymarking is mostly good, but be prepared for detours away from the river, or brand-new sections where maps have not kept up with recent developments and you can now walk beside the Thames.

Maps

Even though you're following a river, a map is essential to put the trail in a wider context and to help guide you through the diversions or away from the trail to your accommodation. The western section is covered by the OS Landranger 1:50,000 maps No 163 *Cheltenham & Cirencester*, No 164 *Oxford* and No 175 *Reading & Windsor*.

A very useful single map showing the whole route is *Thames – the River & Path*, published by GeoProjects, available in local tourist offices and online bookstores. It is not quite detailed enough to be relied upon totally for walking, but used in conjunction with the maps in *The Thames Path National Trail Guide* (see below) it will be fine. It also includes a wealth of background information and many useful phone numbers.

Books

The Thames Path National Trail Guide by David Sharp is the official guide and the most comprehensive book available, describing the route from the source to the Thames Barrier; it also features the relevant sections of OS maps. *The Thames Path* by Leigh Hatts describes the route going upstream from the Thames Barrier to the source.

Also very useful is *The Thames Path National Trail Companion*, a compendium of practical information, including details of camping, B&B and hotel accommodation along the river. It's available from local tourist offices or from the Thames Path National Trail Office (see right), which can also supply you with useful leaflets on public transport to points along the trail.

For background, get a copy of *River Thames in the Footsteps of the Famous* by Paul Goldsack, a fascinating introduction to nobles and notables with Thames connections, from Shakespeare and Dickens to Henry VIII and Toad of Toad Hall.

MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS

Two classics of English literature are *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K Jerome, a whimsical tale of a trip up the Thames, and *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, an animal story for kids and a morality tale for all. Both are worth putting in your backpack for evening reading.

Information Sources

For general advice on accommodation and transport, tourist offices along this section of the Thames Path can be found at **Cirencester** (☎ 01285-654180; www.cotswold.gov.uk/tourism), **Oxford** (☎ 01865-726871; www.oxford.gov.uk) and **Abingdon** (☎ 01235-522711; www.visitvale.co.uk).

For route specifics, your first contact should be the **Thames Path National Trail Office** (☎ 01865-810224; www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thamespath). The excellent website is a wealth of information, and you can order maps and guides online.

The comprehensive website of the **Environment Agency** (www.visitthames.co.uk) has sections on walking, eating and drinking, as well as fishing, boating and other watery pursuits.

Although aimed mainly at boaters, www.the-river-thames.co.uk is a good source of background information on wildlife, history and traditions. For more history, see www.thames.me.uk.

Guided Walks

The National Trail Office organises a series of guided walks along the Thames Path ranging from a few hours to all day long. Various commercial organisations offer guided walks in Oxford, Windsor and London; local tourist offices have details.

A WELCOME LEGACY

The Thames, having being a major trading route, retains a legacy of inns, hotels, guest-houses and B&Bs. These are less common in the early sections (the unnavigable part of the river), but once you pass Lechlade the options increase. If you're intending to camp, get information and a copy of the *River Thames Camping* leaflet from www.visitthames.co.uk/ecamping.html.

NEAREST TOWNS Kemble

The nearest town to the start of the walk is Kemble, a small place of fewer than 100 houses but enjoying a direct rail link to London (thanks to once having been the home of a senior railways figure). This facility is now enjoyed by the stockbrokers who combine rural living with work in the capital. Note the copies of *Horse & Hound* magazine neatly stacked on the polished table in the station waiting room.

SLEEPING & EATING

B&Bs include **The Willows** (☎ 01285-770667; 2 Glebe Lane; s/d £30/50), conveniently near the train station. Just about a mile from the source, in the village of Coates, is **Southfield**

NOT IN MY BACK YARD

The national trail downstream from Lechlade is loosely based on the towpath that used to run beside the navigable river. The towpath was developed by the Thames Commissioners in the 17th century to improve the river as a business route. However, construction was sometimes hindered by powerful river-side landowners, forcing the towpath to frequently cross from one side of the river to the other. Once, ferries operated at these points, to carry across the horses that pulled the barges, but these have now disappeared, obliging modern walkers to divert away from the river in some sections. The long-gone facilities are still remembered in some Thames-side villages by names such as Horseferry Rd and Horseferry Lane.

House (☎ 01285-770220; www.bandbinthecotswolds.com; s/d £40/70), which has lovely, country-style rooms. The **Thames Head Inn** (☎ 01285-770259; www.thamesheadinn.co.uk; camp sites for 2 £5 s/d £40/60) is 1 mile north of Kemble and (as the name suggests) very near the source; accommodation is in simple rooms with exposed beams.

In Ewen (1 mile east of Kemble and on the route), **Brooklands Farm** (☎ 01285-770487; s/d £30/40) is a real working farm, while the **Wild Duck Inn** (☎ 01285-770310; www.thewildduckinn.co.uk; s £70-100, d £95-150) has romantic, high-quality rooms and a seriously good reputation for food. There are more sleeping and eating options in the larger town of Cirencester, about 4 miles to the northeast of Kemble.

If you're arriving in Kemble in the morning, and need sustenance before walking straight to Cricklade, there's a **café** at the train station.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

By far the easiest way to reach Kemble by public transport is to use the regular train services between London and Cheltenham.

Pangbourne

The comfortable town of Pangbourne is little more than a smart commuter enclave of Reading (and London) but it makes the perfect place to end this route, before the Thames Path becomes more urban in feel.

SLEEPING & EATING

The homely **Weir View House** (☎ 0118-984 2120; www.weirview.co.uk; 9 Shooters Hill; d £75) is a good B&B with uncluttered but classically styled rooms. Up the price-band a little, the half-timbered **George Hotel** (☎ 0118-984 2237; www.georgehotelpangbourne.co.uk; s £69-85, d £75-90) – once home to *Wind in the Willows* author Kenneth Grahame, now part of Best Western –

has comfortable if predictable rooms. For food, **The Swan** (☎ 0118-984 4494; www.swanpangbourne.com; Shooters Hill; mains £6-11), a 17th-century inn opposite, is recommended.

On the opposite side of the Thames, in Whitchurch, the **Ferry Boat Inn** (☎ 0118-984 2161; d £50) is a good budget choice with no-frills rooms.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Pangbourne is on the railway between London and Oxford, with regular trains to/from Reading and London. Reading is also linked to London and other parts of the country by National Express coach and local bus.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

To reach Thames Head from Kemble, leave the village on the minor road past the station car park on your left, heading northwest towards Tarlton. On reaching a busy main road (the A433) turn right and walk along the road (take care – there's no footpath), past the Thames Head Inn, then a little further towards the railway bridge. Just before the bridge, go through a broken gateway and an abandoned goods yard, parallel to the railway line, to reach a stile, and cross the tracks (beware of trains). On the other side, you're finally free of danger from fast-moving transport. Follow paths roughly north across a couple of fields towards a copse of trees. Under one of these trees, in an inauspicious field corner, you will find the official source of the Thames marked by an engraved stone.

For a much more pleasant route to the start (if you don't mind a bit of backtracking), leave the village on the minor road towards Tarlton, as described above. You pass the station car park on your left, and about 20m later there's a footpath on your right, signposted 'Wysis Way' (a route through

Gloucestershire, linking the Wye and the Thames). Follow this path for 500m to meet the Thames Path near a bridge carrying the main road over the fledgling river. Turn left and follow the Thames Path 'upstream' for 1.5 miles to reach the source.

Whichever way you reach the source, don't expect a gushing fountain! Most of the year this 'source' is dry, although the surrounding field can be boggy from underground water. But this is the official source, so this is where our walk begins.

For transport from the end of the walk, see p91.

THE WALK

Day 1: Thames Head to Cricklade

4 hours, 10 miles (16km)

This is a day of anticipation as the minor dip in a field develops into a real river, which flows past cultivated fields, fallow meadows and picturesque villages.

From the river's source, follow the trail southwards through quiet fields, over the main roads to the east of Kemble and then through the edge of the village of Ewen (from the Saxon word *aewylme*, meaning 'river source'). By this time you should indeed be beside the infant Thames (also called the Isis as far as Abingdon), even if the first few miles were dry. Walk beside the river to Neigh Bridge (there are public toilets at the county park car park) and then enjoy more aquatic flavours as the route winds between the ponds and lakes of the Cotswold Water Park – once extensive gravel pits, some now providing leisure amenities such as sailing, others converted to wildlife reserves.

The old and pretty village of **Ashton Keynes** has a couple of pubs and makes a suitable lunch stop. The route carries on – effortless walking – through the water park, briefly touching the Thames' banks as the last couple of miles take you into Cricklade.

CRICKLADE

The sleepy old Roman town of Cricklade has churches and buildings with fine examples of architecture from Norman times to the present. Accommodation is available in two old coaching inns, both in the main street – the **White Hart Hotel** (☎ 01793-750206; whitehart-cricklade@arkells.com; s/d £45/65) and the **Old Bear Inn** (☎ 01793-750005; s/d £30/60); both also serve meals.

Another good option is in Latton, about 1 mile from the path (come off at Weaver's Bridge) before you reach Cricklade; it's the **Dolls House** (☎ 01793-750384; s/d £32/55).

Day 2: Cricklade to Lechlade

4½ hours, 11 miles (17.5km)

The river is now well established, but not yet navigable. Accordingly, there is no continuous river-side path and the trail also meanders through fields and farmland.

From Cricklade, the trail follows the river to Castle Eaton, the largest settlement you will pass today, where the **Red Lion** has a garden overlooking the river and serves filling pub food. A good lunch will set you up for the second half of today's stage, a mix of quiet lanes, paths, a rather unpleasant road and (with relief) a final stretch of river into Lechlade. About a mile before reaching the town, look out for the **Roundhouse**, marking the point where the Thames & Severn Canal once met the river, allowing barges and other watercraft to cross the Cotswolds and reach the River Severn. Downstream of here, the river is navigable, as illustrated by the boats in the marina.

LECHLADE

This is a quintessential Cotswold town that owes its wealth to trade on the Thames, although it's slightly back from the river. The church spire is visible from afar. At St Johns Lock, look out for the reclining figure of **Old Father Thames**, a concrete statue with a colourful history. Originally placed at the river source, it was relocated in 1974 because of problems with vandals.

There is a wide choice of accommodation. Campers can head for **Bridge House Campsite** (☎ 01367-252348; sites for 2 £8), just a short distance off the river. B&Bs include the **Apple Tree Guesthouse** (☎ 01367-252592; emreay@aol.com; High St; s/d £35/55), almost on the river, and **Cambrai Lodge** (☎ 01367-253173; www.cambraillodgeguesthouse.co.uk; Oak St; s £30-45, d £50-65) with bright, homely rooms. Other good options include the **Swan Inn** (☎ 01367-253571; 7 Burford St; s/d with bathroom £38/55, s/d with shared bathroom £25/45, mains £7-14), with simple rooms upstairs and good pub food downstairs; the **New Inn Hotel** (☎ 01367-252296; www.newinnhotel.com; Market Sq; s/d £45/55), with comfy, old-style rooms and good food; and the **Crown Inn** (☎ 01367-252198; www.crownlechlade.co.uk; High St;

s/d £45/55), with cosy new-built rooms, pine furniture and patchwork quilts.

In the market square the **Red Lion** (☎ 01367-252373; High St; d £70, mains £7-9) has predictable rooms, and no meals on Sunday nights. The 13th-century **Trout Inn** (☎ 01367-252313; mains £10-14) right on the river serves a good selection of meals.

Day 3: Lechlade to Newbridge

6½ hours, 16 miles (25.5km)

The remote and rural feel of the Thames is retained, although the river is now a substantial waterway, crossed by historic bridges and locks.

From Lechlade it's 5 miles of lovely river-side to Radcot, scene of Civil War clashes and the site of the oldest existing bridge on the Thames, where **The Swan** (☎ 01367-810220; www.swanhotelradcot.co.uk; r £45-55) has cosy, traditional rooms. Along the way you'll also see reminders of a later conflict: pillboxes (small fortified emplacements) built in WWII as a defence against invasion.

Another 3 miles and you reach **Rushey Lock** (☎ 01367-870218), where camping is allowed, then Tadpole Bridge, where the 17th-century **Trout Inn** (☎ 01367-870382; www.troutinn.co.uk; s/d £55/80; mains £12-15) provides real ales, an excellent wide-ranging menu, mismatched furniture, old flagstones, log fires, cosy atmosphere and tastefully decked-out bedrooms.

Beyond here, riverside paths lead past Chimney Nature Reserve to Shifford Lock, from where you continue for 2 miles into Newbridge.

NEWBRIDGE

This old river crossing has a pub on each side: the **Maybush Inn** on the south bank and the **Rose Revived** (☎ 01865-300221; www.roserevived.com; s £43-48, d £53-58, mains £7-10) on the north bank, with accommodation that blends contemporary style and period character, and good meals. There are more options in the village of Kingston Bagpuize, about 2 miles south, or you could push on to Bablock Hythe.

Day 4: Newbridge to Oxford

5½ hours, 14 miles (22.5km)

Today's walk is another scenic section, but as you approach Oxford the river banks get perceptibly busier.

From Newbridge, it's 3.5 miles to Bablock Hythe, where the **Ferryman Inn** (☎ 01865-880028; s/d £35/60) provides functional rooms. Beyond here you leave the river for 2.5 miles. As an alternative, ask the landlord of the Ferryman Inn about his irregular ferry service – in more or less continuous operation for the last 1000 years – across the river. This will allow you to follow the path that runs along the east bank and rejoin the official trail at Pinkhill Lock.

It's another mile to Swinford Bridge, one of the last two remaining toll bridges over the river, where the **Talbot Inn** (☎ 01865-881348) on the north bank serves good pub food and makes an ideal lunch stop.

For the next few miles the trail is better defined and the distant hum of traffic comes as quite a shock after four days of quiet. More leisure craft are moving on the river and, before you realise it, the Thames has brought you into the heart of Oxford.

OXFORD

Much of Oxford's fascinating history and architecture is based around the university, but the city has also been a regional trade centre since medieval times. In later years, heavy industry (notably car manufacturing) was established here. Being a working city, rather than just a university town, means that Oxford isn't 'quaint', but 650 buildings officially designated with historical or architectural merit mean it's certainly worth discovering. If you were planning a rest day from the National Trail, this would be a good place.

Accommodation is plentiful. Budget possibilities include student-oriented **Oxford Backpackers** (☎ 01865-721761; www.hostels.co.uk; 9 Hythe Bridge St; dm £14-18; ☑), with big dorms and lots of partying at weekends. More restful are **Central Backpackers** (☎ 01865-242288; www.centralbackpackers.co.uk; 13 Park End St; dm £14-18; ☑), with small dorms and a nice roof terrace, and **Oxford YHA Hostel** (☎ 01865-727275; oxford@yha.org.uk; 2a Botley Rd; dm/d £21/55; ☑).

B&Bs include **Beaumont** (☎ 01865-241767; www.oxfordcity.co.uk/accom/beaumont; 234 Abingdon Rd; s £50-72, d £ 58-72) a good, bright place close to the river, and **Cornerways** (☎ 01865-240135; jeakings@btopenworld.com; 282 Abingdon Rd; s/d £45/64) with simple modern rooms. If you don't want to forget the Thames for a moment, the **Head of the River** (☎ 01865-721600;

headoftheriver@fullers.co.uk; Folly Bridge; s/d £75/95) is a popular river-side pub and hotel right in the centre of town with comfortable rooms.

As a university town and tourist honey-pot, Oxford's eating options are virtually endless. Most of the pubs do evening bar meals, and there's a range of cheap take-aways, mid-priced eateries and very fine restaurants. With a short stroll around the centre you'll soon find something to suit your taste.

Day 5: Oxford to Dorchester

6½ hours, 16 miles (25.5km)

This stage could be described as the heart of the walk, with a fascinating mix of river-side views and historical buildings, especially ecclesiastical remains. The river is active and you'll likely see punts, rowing eights and hired cruisers out and about.

From Oxford the trail runs along the west bank, past Iffley Lock and Sandford Lock (4 miles from today's start), where the **Kings Arms** makes a pleasant refreshment spot. Then it's another 4 miles of tranquil river-side walking to Abingdon – an attractive and well-established market town with plenty of lunch opportunities. Look out for the fine range of former **monastic buildings** near the river, and a very handsome 17th-century **County Hall** in the marketplace. Don't linger too long, though – it's still another long 8 miles of classic Thames scenery, past locks and weirs, and over bridges, to reach Dorchester. At Clifton Hampden, about 2 miles before you reach Dorchester, the traditional thatched **Plough Inn** (☎ 01865-407811; www.ploughinns.co.uk; s/d £75/90) has good-quality, period-style rooms. Across the river the **Barley Mow Inn** (☎ 01865-407847) draws the crowds for its food and its Jerome K Jerome links: the author wrote most of his timeless classic *Three Men in a Boat* here and described the pub as '...without exception the quaintest most old-world inn up the river'.

DORCHESTER

Sometimes called Dorchester-on-Thames to distinguish it from its namesake in Dorset, this was a Roman garrison town and a Saxon bishopric. It still has a historical atmosphere, sustained in part by the large number of antique shops. B&B options include **Buena Vista** (☎ 01865-340903; www.buenavistabnb.co.uk; 34 Watling Lane; s/d £40/60)

with cosy, modern rooms, while on the high street there's the **George Hotel** (☎ 01865-340404; www.thegeorgedorchester.co.uk; s/d £70/95) and the **White Hart** (☎ 01865-340074; www.white-hart-hotel-dorchester.co.uk; s/d £95/105), both good options for food.

Day 6: Dorchester to Pangbourne

6½ hours, 16 miles (26km)

Today the Thames wanders through the serene Chiltern Hills and the trail occasionally strays onto higher ground away from the river.

From Dorchester, the trail continues to meander alongside the river, and passes through the historic town of Wallingford (with the remains of a castle, a market square and more accommodation options). The Chiltern Hills, marking the end of today's stage, are visible in the distance.

About 9 miles from today's start, at the village of Moulsoford, you'll pass a hotel-restaurant called the **Beetle & Wedge** (www.beetleandwedge.co.uk), yet another literary location, as characterised in *The History of Mr Polly* by HG Wells. Next comes Goring (p86), another lunch or overnight possibility. The Ridgeway National Trail crosses the river and the Thames Path here.

Beyond Goring, the nature of the path changes. The valley sides are steeper, and the route passes through woods and copses. You're now skirting the southern edge of the Chiltern Hills, and it's a few easy miles to Pangbourne.

If this is the end of your walk, Pangbourne has some fine pubs and restaurants for a celebratory drink or meal. If you're continuing downstream, the rest of the Thames Path route is described in the London & the Southeast chapter (see p64).

MORE WALKS

THE WILTSHIRE DOWNS

The Wiltshire Downs is an area of chalky grassland and sparsely wooded hills, forming a broad west-east band between the towns of Devizes, Marlborough, Swindon, Wantage and Newbury. Also known as the **North Wessex Downs**, this area is combined with the Chiltern Hills, north of the Thames Valley, to form an important Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The Wiltshire Downs area is traversed by the Ridgeway National Trail (see p83) but there are many more good walking opportunities in this area. From Avebury, a walk with major historic interest takes in the mysterious Neolithic earth pyramid of **Silbury Hill** and the nearby West Kennet Long Barrow – an ancient burial mound.

To the west of Avebury, **Cherhill Down** (pronounced cheh-ril) is high, easily accessible, and topped by a monument and a giant white horse carved in the chalk (see boxed text, below).

South of Avebury is the quiet, rural **Vale of Pewsey**, between the Wiltshire Downs and Salisbury Plain. The small town of Pewsey makes a good walking base; destinations include two white horse figures carved on the hillsides, several tumuli and other prehistoric remains. The **Kennet & Avon Canal Path** (p80) runs through the Vale of Pewsey and is a good focus for day walks. Pewsey train station is on a main line between London and the West Country, so access is easy.

To the west of Salisbury Plain lie the **West Wiltshire Downs**, an area of grassy hills and escarpments near the town of Westbury, southeast of Bath. Nearby is yet another famous white horse figure carved on the hillside. Together with the farmland and heath of **Cranborne Chase**, this forms another important AONB, with more good walking opportunities.

A great way to explore the West Wiltshire and North Wessex Downs is on **Wiltshire's**

White Horse Trail, a 90-mile route linking eight white horses and many other historical sites, passing through tranquil farmland, meadows, hills and quiet villages. The route can be done in one week, but it's ideal for following shorter sections for just a day or two, either on a circular walk or returning to the start by public transport. Good bases are Devizes, Avebury, Marlborough, Westbury or Pewsey. Route cards are available from local tourist offices. For general tourist information, see www.visitwiltshire.co.uk.

SALISBURY PLAIN

Salisbury Plain is a wide, empty area of rolling grassland surrounded on the north by a steep escarpment and on the south by the rivers Wylie and Test. Much of the area is an army training ground, usually (and understandably) closed to the public, so most options for walkers keep pretty much to the edge of the plain rather than crossing it.

On the southern edge of the plain, the quiet villages and classic English farmland of the **Hampshire Avon Valley** are a good easy-walking area. The tourist office in Salisbury (see p75) has books and maps. If you like a challenge, ask about the **Saracen Way**, a 26-mile route across the rarely visited heart of the plain, linking the stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury. Unfortunately, some sections open only on certain days of the year but, if you coincide with these, it is well worth doing.

WESSEX CHALK FIGURES

Much of the rolling downland of Wessex covers a large area of chalk. The vegetation is only a thin, green cloak of grass, and gives rise to the practice of cutting pictures into hillsides. The technique is simple: mark out your picture and cut away the grass and topsoil to reveal the white chalk below. The picture needs periodic maintenance, but not much. Some of the chalk figures may date back to Bronze Age times, although the histories of the oldest figures are uncertain.

Wessex has many chalk figures and Wiltshire has more than any other county. Most are horses, and these include one at Cherhill and one at Uffington (near the Ridgeway), which lends its name to the nearby Vale of White Horse), plus several more near Pewsey and Westbury. There's another good one at Osmington near Weymouth.

The tradition has continued into the 20th century. During WWI, soldiers based at Fovant, west of Salisbury, cut a series of army badges into a nearby hillside, and a New Zealand regiment left a gigantic kiwi on a hillside at Bulford, a few miles east of Stonehenge.

Although Wiltshire goes for sheer quantity, in other parts of Wessex the locals go for sheer style. Probably the most impressive chalk figure is Dorset's 180ft-tall Cerne Giant (on a hillside near the village of Cerne Abbas), with his even more notable 30ft penis.

THE WESSEX RIDGEWAY

If you want a long-distance walk through the heart of the region, the Wessex Ridgeway (not to be confused with the Ridgeway National Trail) is an excellent 140-mile route. From Marlborough in Wiltshire it heads south and includes Avebury Stone Circle, the northern and western edge of Salisbury Plain, a section of the picturesque Wylie Valley, Cranborne Chase and the huge chalk giant of Cerne Abbas, then runs through the heart of Thomas Hardy country to finish on the South Devon coast at Lyme Regis – famous for its fossils. The best guidebook is *The Wessex Ridgeway* by Anthony Burton.

THE SOUTH WEST COAST PATH IN WESSEX

A highlight of the southern part of Wessex is the English Channel coast of Dorset and southeast Devon – sometimes billed as the ‘English Riviera’ thanks to the mild climate (although don’t expect Cannes). Walkers can follow this coast from Exmouth to Poole Harbour on a section of the South West Coast Path (SWCP; see p133).

From Exmouth the SWCP rambles pleasantly along red sandstone cliffs and through the resorts of Budleigh Salterton, Sidmouth and Seaton before passing through the deeply wooded ‘Undercliffs’ to reach Dorset at Lyme Regis.

East again is pretty, thatched Abbotsbury with its unique swannery. The next feature is Chesil Beach, a huge curving bank of stones, which eventually leads you to Portland Bill and the large town of Weymouth.

East of Weymouth there’s more stunning coastal scenery at Lulworth Cove, Kimmeridge Bay and Durlston Head until resort Swanage is reached. A short hop north from here is Studland Point – official end of the SWCP – from where a ferry ride brings you to Poole and a well-deserved journey’s end.

SOLENT WAY & BOURNEMOUTH COAST PATH

East along the coast from the Dorset section of the South West Coast Path is the **Solent Way** (www.hants.gov.uk/walking/solentway), a

60-mile walking route from Milford-on-Sea to Emsworth, and linking these two routes is the **Bournemouth Coast Path** (www.bournemouthcoastpath.org.uk). This 23-mile route embracing Poole Harbour, the wooded Bournemouth chines, Christchurch Harbour and Bay, two castles and great views across the water to the Isle of Wight. The route is described in *The Bournemouth Coast Path* by Leigh Hatts.

ISLE OF WIGHT

Just a few miles off the south coast of Wessex lies the Isle of Wight, 23 miles (37km) long by 13 miles (21km) wide. Its name is thought to come from ‘wiht’, an ancient word meaning ‘lifted’ – ie from the sea. During their occupation of Britain, the Romans named the island Vectis and built several villas here; perhaps the mild climate and sea views were reminders of their Mediterranean home.

Today, the pleasant weather still attracts visitors and holiday-makers, particularly to the busier eastern side of the island. Conditions are good for walking and, particularly on the quieter western side, there’s a marvellous network of footpaths through the fields and villages, over the downs (rolling hills) and along the coast, so you could easily stay a week or longer here. For all tourism details, see www.islandbreaks.co.uk.

Popular routes include the Coastal Path and the Tennyson Trail (named for the famous poet, who lived on the island). For details of these and other routes, see www.wightstay.co.uk/walking.

Tourist offices are well stocked with maps and guidebooks, and the local authorities have put a lot of work into maintaining and signposting their paths. The island also has a very good bus service for getting to the start or back from the end of walks. If you’re new to walking in Britain, or you’re not looking for high peaks and wilderness, the Isle of Wight is an excellent place to start. If you’re just looking for a place to relax, maybe after doing some longer walks through Wessex, the island is a very good place to end your trip.

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