



The Swyncombe Parish Boundary Walk

(with some historical notes)

This walk (the black line) follows the boundaries of the civil parish as closely as possible – with a couple of compromises where there are no rights of way, or to minimise walking along roads (with the exception of Britwell Hill, sorry). These exceptions are marked with the parish boundary in red.

The walk is just over 13 miles. I have suggested starting at the car park by the Warburg Nature reserve visitor's centre, but of course it's up to you!

- A Warburg Nature reserve was established in 1968 with funds donated by Mrs Vera Paul. It is on the site of an old shooting range, and is mainly woodland with a few open meadows.
- B This section deviates slightly from the parish boundary which is to the north, through Stockings Plantation. The word comes from the Old English *stocc* 'tree trunk' and indicates, marginal cleared land. To the south is Soundness House, once the home of Nell Gwyn. It is all that remains of the old village of 14 houses which disappeared in the 17th century as the Tavener family built a mansion and enclosed the land.
- C Nettlebed Common and Crocker End were noted for pottery, brick and tile making, based around the high quality clay deposits and availability of sand and wood for charcoal burners. Bricks were supplied to Wallingford Castle as early as 1365, and by the 19th there were multiple kilns and a tramway leading back to the village. The last kiln closed in 1938, leaving a landscape of clay pits and pools.
- D After crossing the main road you will come to a junction on Huntercombe lane. The lovely 19th century farmhouse of Digberry Farm was first recorded in 1839, but the freehold was probably of long standing well before. The name Digberry reflects the Old English for '*burgh*' or fort, and 'dig' may suggest 'ditch'. It therefore probably refers to the earthwork in nearby Springall's Plantation (named after a 17th century Henley family), part of a large, square fort, referred to as 'Aldebire' in 1235 – meaning 'old fort'. It's shape almost certainly means it is of Roman construction. In addition, it lies on an old Roman road, which follows the line of Digberry Lane, originating at Henley and heading for Dorchester.
- E Near Hogpen Shaw ('shaw' means a small tree plantation) you turn on to the Ridgeway Path. This is an ancient pathway, claiming to be Europe's oldest continuously used route, possibly 5,000 years old or more. It now runs by or on the chalk ridge from Avebury to Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire. It is a beautiful 87 mile National Trail with forts and other ancient sites along the way.
- On the way to Ewleme Park, you pass a pool where the parish boundary descends the scarp (and runs out of a public rights of way!). Swyncombe has no running water, and no mains water until the 20th century. So the parish was dotted with wells and pools.
- F In the 15th century the Chaucer family (Geoffrey Chaucer's descendants) acquired part of Swyncombe Parish, the Ewleme Park Estate. They built a deer park and probably a hunting lodge. In the 17th century the Earl of Berkshire built an enormous house, but by 18th century it had fallen into decay, been demolished and the park palings torn up. The current house was built in 1913.
- G At this point you join the Icknield Way, an ancient pathway either Neolithic or Iron Age, which runs from Dorset to Norfolk, often overlapping with the Ridgeway. It is first referred to in Old English as the *Icenhilde weg*, suggesting it might be named after Boudicca's tribe the Iceni. You may be standing on the path that William the Conqueror took after Hastings, since he crossed the Thames at Wallingford and circled northwards before heading to London.
- H Here the route diverts again from the boundary to avoid a busy road, Red Lane (so called because of the colour of the clay soil) at Howe Hill. The track leads past Coates farm (probably named after Ralph de Cote; there were freeholds recorded there in the 13th Century). The area was once very marshy, before 19th century field drainage; the area was called 'latchmere', from Old English *laecc* meaning bog, and *mor*, meaning waste upland.
- In Coates Copse, there are gravel pits and the previous name of part of the wood, Kiln Copse, suggests pottery or brick works. The track leads to Cookey Green, a typical Chiltern upland settlement with dispersed buildings around a large green. Cookley derives from Old English for 'Cuca's wood pasture'.
- I A path leads to Redpits Manor, the name recalling clay extraction. The manor is first mentioned in the 16th century when Henry VIII gave it to his sister, Mary Tudor, Queen of the French, and her consort, Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. The fields towards Russell's Water were called the Breaches, a from Old English *braec*, 'land lately taken into cultivation'. If you walked up Law Lane, the holloway to Russell's Water, you will pass an old Wesleyan Methodist chapel (now a house) and find the duck pond that featured in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.
- J Up the hill, back to the parish boundary which runs along Russell's Water (from Old English *riscen waeter*, 'water with rushes growing in it') and Maidensgrove Common. Common land was owned by a landowner (in this case the Stonor Estate) but villagers had rights over it – usually to take a certain amount of wood, or graze livestock. Common land was an important resource for wage labourers, now very rare in England after the parliamentary Enclosures of the 18th and 19th centuries when the rights of ordinary people were removed or bought out, but there was little parliamentary enclosure in the Chiltern Uplands. There were brick and pottery works here too in the 18th century, and the imprints of the workings are still to be seen.