

Ashridge Estate: Focal Point of Walks in the Chilterns Countryside

By: Karen Dabrowska



The Chiltern Hills, a chalk escarpment in south-east England, beginning in Oxfordshire in the Thames Valley and stretching north-east through Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire to Hitchin in Hertfordshire, provide endless opportunities for walks in the English countryside.

Being within easy reach of London and other urban areas, this is an ideal part of the world to explore on a day trip or, preferably, over a weekend or longer. One interesting walk begins just opposite the railway station in the village of Tring.

There is a well-marked Ridgeway walkway from Tring through Aldbury Nowers nature reserve. The lengthy path winds its way through the woods to Pipstone Hill following the the course of the

ancient earthwork of Grims Ditch. From the top of the hill are grand views over the Vale of Aylesbury. The energetic can climb to Ivinghoe Beacon standing 233 m (757 ft) above sea level. It is also a popular spot for model aircraft enthusiasts who use lift generated by the wind blowing up the hill - a technique known as slope soaring. Ivinghoe Beacon's appearance of remoteness, yet relative proximity to the film studios at Elstree meant that it was a favoured location for

Beaconsfield

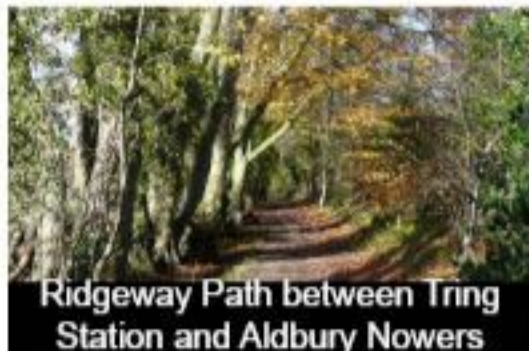




Bluebells



Pitstone Hill



Ridgeway Path between Tring Station and Aldbury Nowers

many dramas.

The walk continues through farmland and then into a charming woodland with a carpet of bluebells on the way to Ashridge Estate. The flowers do not last long and have to be seen as spring turns to summer. The first shoots appear in January, giving the bluebells a head start over other woodland plants. Long tapering leaves rise from the bulb and are topped with clusters of delicate bell-shaped flowers, which provide an early source of food for insects.

"Every year we look forward to welcoming thousands of people

who come to enjoy our bluebells," said National Trust property manager Graeme Cannon. "The UK has between 25 and 50% of the world's population of bluebells. Bob Davis, Head Forester remembers walking through the woodlands in springtime 30 years ago "In the 70's and 80's there were only narrow deer tracks through the bluebell carpets, but now the tracks are eight feet wide in places, due to people straying from the main path and this damage will grow, year on year unless we all make an effort to watch where we step".

Ashridge estate comprises 20 square kilometres (5,000 acres) of woodlands (known as Ashridge Forest), commons and chalk downland which supports a rich variety of wildlife.

The visitors' centre has an impressive collection of books about the area, souvenirs and study rooms. It organises walks and talks including a night time wildlife walk to see nocturnal bats, a downland wildlife walk and an early morning deer rut walk to see

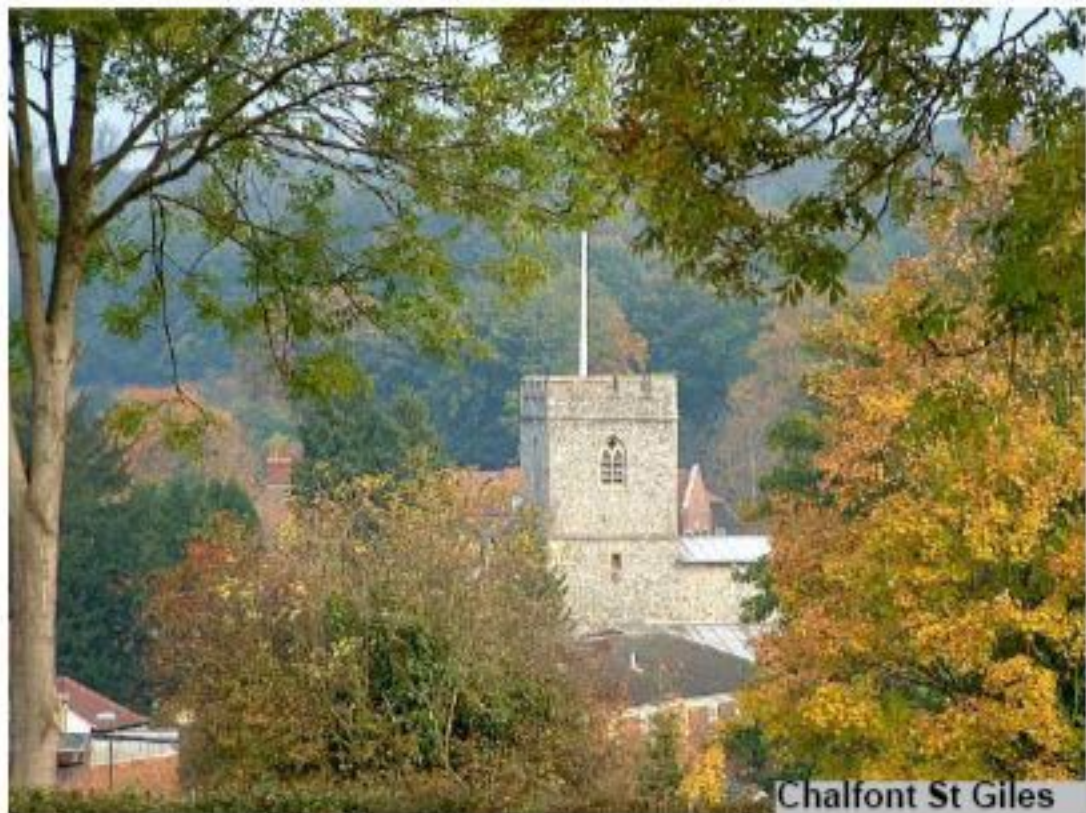
fallow deer in the mating season. Some talks are held over a pot of country tea.

Delicious home made food, including irresistible scones and cream and mouth watering cakes are served by the Brownlow Cafe.

The monument which towers over the cafe and visitors' centre was built in 1832 to commemorate the third Duke of Bridgewater, a pioneer of 19th century canal-building. For a small charge visitors can climb the steps to the top for a



Bridgewater monument



Chalfont St Giles

brehtaking view of the surrounding countryside.

The circular walk continues through farmland back to the Ridgeway walkway and Tring a village which straddles the Roman road called Akeman Street.

The small village has a long history: The Manor of Treunga is described in the Domesday survey of 1086. In 1682 the mansion of Tring Park designed by Sir Christopher Wren was built for the owner Colonel Guy, Gentleman of

the Privy Chamber to Charles II. A later tenant was Lawrence Washington, great-grandfather of George Washington, first President of the USA.

In the late 19th century the estate became the home of the Rothschild family, whose influence on the town was considerable. Nathan Mayer Rothschild's son Lionel Walter Rothschild (2nd Lord Rothschild) built a private zoological museum in Tring which, as The Walter Rothschild

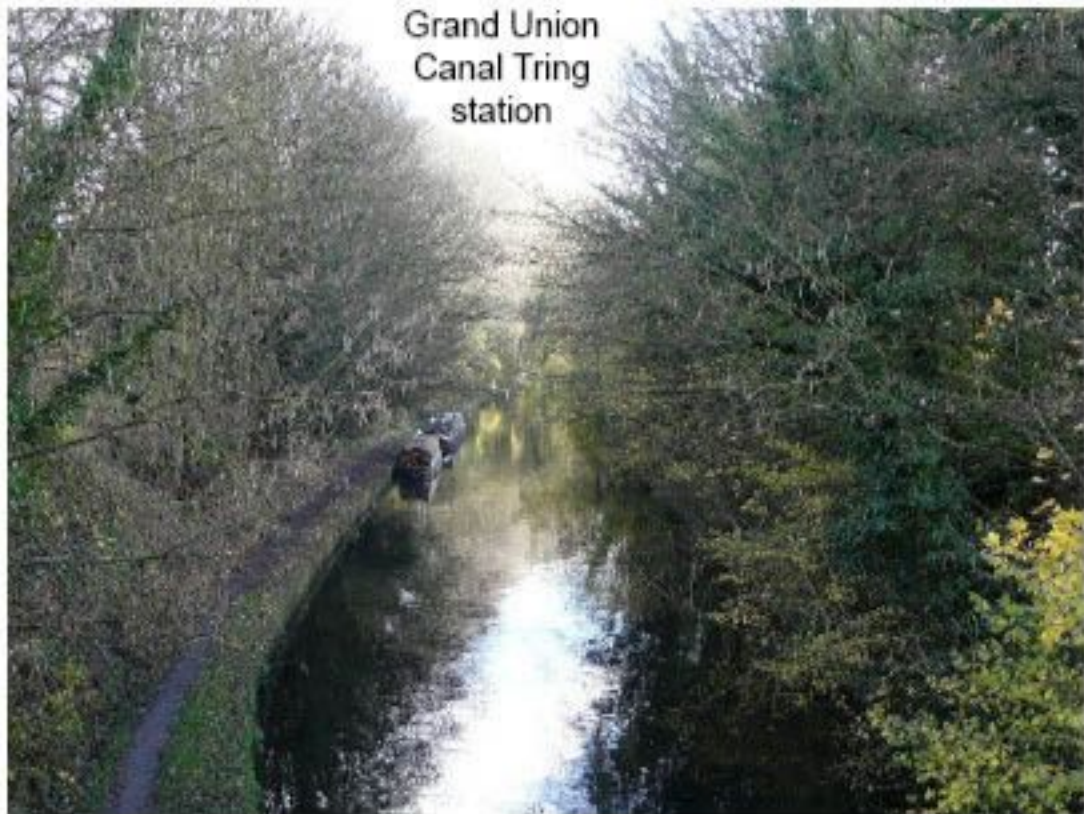
Zoological Museum, has been part of the Natural History Museum since 1937

The High Street is a hive of activity with shops and many small businesses tucked away off the alleys along it. There are banks and insurance brokers, opticians

and chemists and also some specialist shops such as unusual gifts and specialist food shops. The Charter Market is held on Fridays in Tring Market Place, on Brook Street and there is also a Farmers' Market on alternate Saturdays. Also in the town centre



Grand Union
Canal Tring
station



well-known auctions are held by Tring Market Auctions on the same alternate Saturdays throughout the year. There is an industrial estate along Icknield Way to the north west of the town and small business units in the Old Silk Mill in Brook Street and at Harrow Yard off Akeman Street.

Tring is one of many charming villages in the Chilterns. There is also Aldbury - a typical old English village clustered around a pond. There's a green with some ancient

stocks, pretty houses, old inns and a teashop.

Chalfont St.Giles is one of the prettiest villages in Buckinghamshire. You can visit Milton's cottage - the «pretty box» to which the poet retreated during the Great Plague of London while here he finished «Paradise Lost» and wrote «Paradise Regained». Just up the road is the Mayflower Barn said to be constructed from the timbers of «The Mayflower» which carried the Pilgrim Fathers

Tring



to their new land. While in this area do not miss the Chilterns Open Air Museum with its wonderful collection of old buildings.

Beaconsfield provides a special treat for children in the form of a model village called «Bekonscot». It reflects the peaceful life of the

nineteen thirties when it was built. No detail is missing. There are houses, shops, a working railway, a fairground, castle, harbour with boats and much more.

High Wycombe is famous for its windsor chairs. In the local

High Wycombe



Ivinghoe Beacon



museum (which is free of charge) you can see many different types of chairs and other interesting exhibits. The market town itself is a good shopping centre. Every May they hold an extraordinary ceremony, unique to this called «the weighing in of the mayor». It requires the mayor and all the charter trustees to be weighed publicly in front of the Guild Hall. This is to ascertain whether or not they have grown fat at public expense!

Near to High Wycombe is the village of West Wycombe where you can explore the «Hell Fire Caves». Excavated by the eccentric lord of the Manor, Sir Francis Dashwood, it was rumoured that met here with members of his notorious «Hell Fire Club». What they got up to here is a matter of conjecture! There's a pleasant café outside the caves where you can refresh yourself when you emerge from the murky depths.