

Huntingdon Circular

An easy walk beside the River Great Ouse to the attractive village of Houghton and its restored water mill, returning through water meadows and a nature reserve.

Start & Finish: Huntingdon Station

Length: 18½ km (11½ miles)

Toughness: 3 out of 10†

Transport: There are two trains an hour from King's Cross to Huntingdon (one on Sundays), with the quickest journey taking just under an hour. If driving, the station car park only costs £1 after 10am and at weekends.

OS Explorer Map: 225. Huntingdon, map reference TL234716, is in Cambridgeshire.

Published on: 25 August 2007

Last updated on: 26 March 2008

Walk Notes

Cambridgeshire is perhaps not the most appealing county for London-based walkers, but Huntingdon has a fast rail service and this walk has some attractive features. The walk is almost completely flat, with much of it being through water meadows alongside the River Great Ouse.

The village of Houghton has some fine old buildings, as well as a working water mill restored by the National Trust¹. Huntingdon itself was the home of Oliver Cromwell and this small market town has a museum² about him.

It has to be admitted that traffic noise from the elevated A14 casts a small blight over the start and end of the walk. You also need to bear in mind that water meadows are always prone to flooding, and so this walk is unlikely to be feasible in the winter months, or after very heavy rain.

Walk Options

- M Main Walk.....18½ km
(A) Short Walk, omitting Houghton water meadows15 km

† 2 out of 10 for the Short Walk.

¹ Houghton Mill is open on weekends from April to October, and also Mon–Wed from May to September. River levels permitting, milling demonstrations take place on Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays, with the flour for sale.

² The Cromwell Museum (free entry) is open 10.30-12.30 and 1.30-4.00 (closed Mondays) from April to October. In winter it is only open in the afternoons, plus Saturday morning. If you want to visit the museum, you could head directly for the town centre and do this before the walk. Then go along High Street to Old Bridge and pick up the directions at [2].

Shortening the Walk

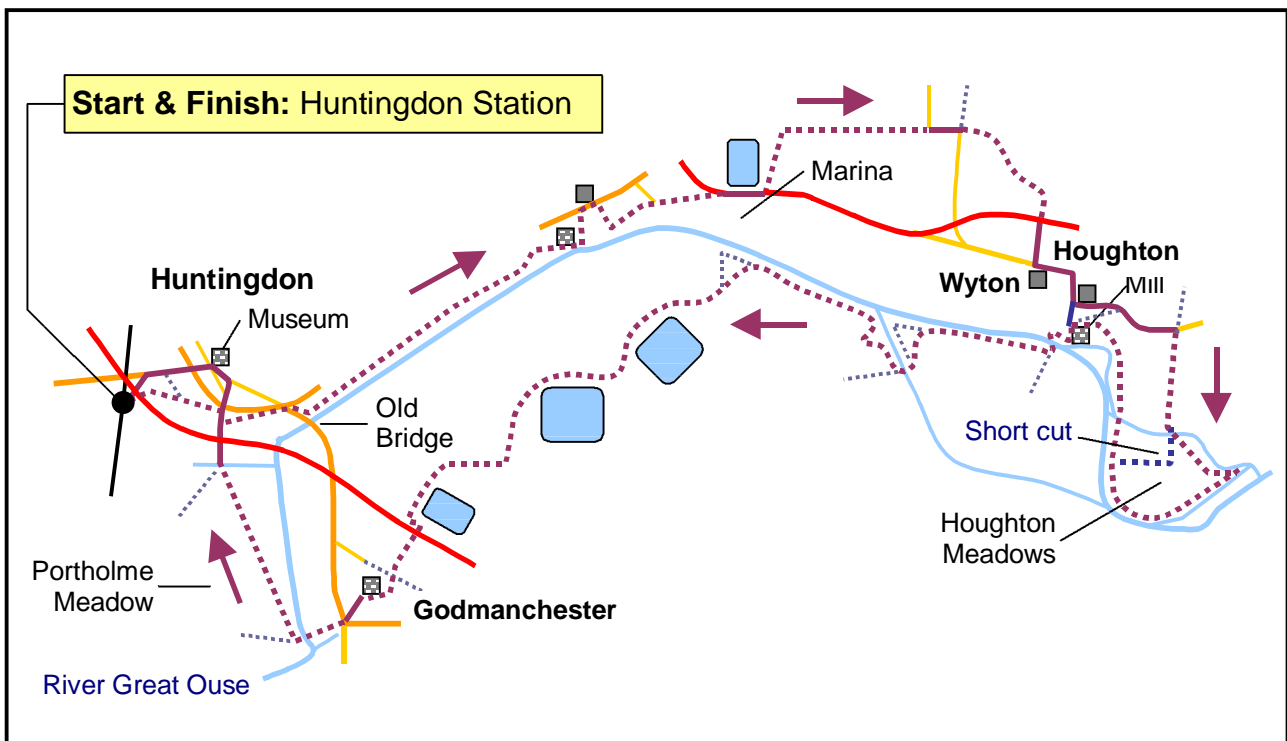
After lunch, you can omit the loop through Houghton water meadows entirely (the Short Walk), or alternatively take a short cut through them which saves about 1¼ km. You can also save a similar distance near the end of the walk by taking a short cut along roads into Huntingdon town centre, although this misses out an attractive part of the walk.

If you want to finish the walk in Houghton, there are buses from the village back to Huntingdon (eg. Huntingdon & District 555).

Saturday Walkers' Club

Take the train nearest to 10.15 from King's Cross to Huntingdon. If you plan to visit the Cromwell Museum and/or Houghton Mill, leave an hour earlier. To do the Short Walk as an afternoon walk (just stopping for tea at Houghton Mill), you could leave up to two hours later.

Walk Map



Walk Directions

[1] Huntingdon Station to Old Bridge (1 km)

Cross the footbridge to leave the station by the ticket office on the far side. Do not turn left up the station approach road, but instead **bear half-left to go up a tarmac path to the right of an exit road from the car park** (past No

Entry signs). Go under the elevated A14 and out through a kissing gate onto an open area, Mill Common, heading E .

Follow a tarmac path across the common, with the A14 on your right. Just before a metal kissing gate, **veer right onto a gravel path**. This soon becomes a grassy path across another part of the common, still heading E .

Leave the common through a wooden kissing gate and turn right onto a minor road. At the end of Mill Common car park on the other side of the road, cross over and go up a lane, heading E again. At the top of the car park, **veer left onto a passageway** between a fence and a hedge.

Follow this tarmac path into and through another open area, Castle Hills¹, until it comes out on the town's ring road. Turn right onto this road and follow it round to a junction by the Old Bridge hotel.

[2] Old Bridge to Hartford Marina (3¼ km)

Cross the junction at the traffic lights into Riverside Park and take the tarmac path down to the water's edge in front of Bridgefoot House, with a fine view of the old bridge² and Riverside Mill (now converted into apartments) opposite. Turn left to head NE along the riverside path; you will be following this all the way through the park.

In 400m you have to skirt around a children's playground and a large car park; the path continues to the right of Huntingdon Boat Club. After another 1 km the path goes into trees by a Nature Trail sign and emerges on a lane between houses. Continue in the same direction, passing a small riverside car park on your right. Later, ignore a footpath off to the left and continue ahead into the churchyard of All Saints church, Hartford.

Go through the churchyard and out onto a lane which leads away from the river. Continue up to the B1514 and turn right, with the Barley Mow pub opposite. After 100m **turn right** into The Grove and follow this gravel road past houses. In 150m bend left with the road in front of the entrance to Greyfriars and continue for another 200m up to a T-junction.

Turn right here and go through a gap in the fence where the road ends, to continue along a wide path. This eventually comes out onto the A1123. Cross this busy road carefully and continue E along the pavement, soon passing the entrance to Hartford Marina on your right.

[3] Hartford Marina to Houghton (2½ km)

50m after the Marina, **turn left** off the main road onto a car-wide gravel track, signposted as a public bridleway. There is a large flooded gravel pit behind trees on your left, and the track passes some large houses. After the

last of these it narrows to a grassy path for a while, then bends right in front of overhead power lines and becomes wider again.

Continue **£** along this track, later with large fields appearing on both sides (it can be muddy where it has been used by farm vehicles). Where the track meets a lane after 750m, continue ahead. In another 150m, the lane curves away to the right but you continue ahead on a wide grassy path, with a water tower visible on the horizon on your left.

The path gradually curves to the right, getting closer to the main road you left earlier. Eventually it bends right to meet it. Cross over carefully and take the tarmac path on the other side (slightly to your left) which comes out onto a minor road leading through a modern housing estate. Continue **£** on this road for 300m and turn left at the T-junction with Huntingdon Road. The recommended lunchtime pub, the Three Jolly Butchers, is directly opposite.

On leaving the pub, turn right to continue along the road. This later bends to the right and comes to an attractive village square, known as The Green³. An alternative lunchtime pub, the Three Horseshoes Inn, is on the left-hand side of the square.

For the Short Walk, omitting the loop around Houghton water meadows, go to [5].

[4] Houghton to Houghton Mill *via water meadows* (3¾ km)

From The Green, head **£** down Thicket Road, to the right of the Three Horseshoes Inn. In 150m you pass the old Manor House on your right (ignore footpaths to both sides) and then the Miller's House on your left. 200m later, where the road curves left, ignore another footpath off to the right. In another 300m, as the road bends left, **turn right** onto a wide track (Sandy Lane).

Follow this unmade-up lane **£** past the entrance to some old waterworks and then over a low embankment, the trackbed of an old railway line⁴. The lane curves left and crosses a wide bridge over a branch of the main river. Go through a wooden kissing gate into Houghton Meadows.

*If you want to take a short cut through the meadows, head **£** with the hedge on your right. In 200m, just after a wide gap in the hedge, turn right to go across a footbridge. Head **↻**, keeping another hedge on your right, with the spire of Hemingford Abbots church ahead on your left. In 300m you reach the main river and turn right. Continue the directions at [•] below.*

For the main route, head **SE** across the meadow, initially towards the tower of Hemingford Grey church⁵ about ¾ km away. When the branch of the river on your left meanders away, you can either continue in the same direction across the meadow, or stay close to the river bank if you prefer. If you maintain direction, you meet the river bank again in 350m and now continue alongside it. In 200m you meet another branch of the River Great Ouse on your right.

If you wish you can turn sharp right here to start your return journey, but having got this far you might as well continue forward for another 100m up to the confluence of the two rivers (then loop back to this point).

With the river on your left, head **sw** along the grassy path. In 500m the riverside path curves to the right and in another 150m you cross a stile at Six Gates Weir. Soon after, the main branch of the River Great Ouse joins, at the site of an old ford. The riverside path continues to curve right and by the time you reach a hedge after another 600m you are heading **N**.

[•] Go over a footbridge here and continue alongside the river. In 250m cross a bridge at Trout Stream Weir and go past some timber supports, all that remains of an old railway bridge across the river. Go across another footbridge at Stone Gull Weir and bear left (there is an information panel about the restoration work here on your right).

After crossing a green-painted bridge over another backwater **turn left**, staying close to the stream. After one more footbridge you go through a wooden kissing gate by a NT sign for Houghton Mill, to find a caravan park on your right. The attractive millpond soon appears on your left and you continue alongside it to reach the NT tea room.

To continue the Main Walk, go to [6].

[5] Houghton to Houghton Mill *direct* (¼ km)

From The Green, head **s** down Mill Street, passing the statue of Potto Brown on your left. After passing St Mary's church on your right, follow the road as it bends sharply left. This leads to the National Trust car park for Houghton Mill. Its tea room is up ahead, just past a path on the right which leads to the mill.

[6] Houghton Mill to Godmanchester (5 km)

Turn left out of the NT tea room and take the path on the left to the mill, signposted as the Ouse Valley Way; you will be following this waymarked route all the way to Godmanchester. The path goes past the mill entrance in a covered passageway, then over Houghton Mill Sluice.

Turn right onto a tarmac path, passing an information panel for the Ouse Valley Way. Follow the path round to Houghton Lock and cross the footbridge here. On the other side, do not take the obvious path straight ahead, but instead **turn right** to walk alongside the river.

In 600m, after crossing Houghton Four Gate Sluice, **bear half-left** across the meadow on a grassy path towards a car-wide bridge across a tributary. Cross this and **turn right** on the other side. Continue alongside the river and then head for a narrow footbridge flanked by two metal kissing gates in the

hedge ahead. **Turn right** on the other side and follow the edge of the meadow round to the left, finally returning to the main river at Rhymers Weir.

After this little diversion to get to the other side of the weir, continue **w** alongside the River Great Ouse for another 750m. Shortly after passing the entrance to Hartford Marina on the opposite bank, look for a faint grassy path in the meadow which veers off to the left towards a metal gate on the far side (if you miss this convenient short cut, the riverside path bends inland anyway at a tributary and curves back to this gate).

Cross the footbridge here and turn right after the kissing gate to go through a rather overgrown area. Cross a footbridge to enter Godmanchester Nature Reserve⁶. At a memorial stone for the Nature Reserve leading to a bridge on the right, continue ahead through a kissing gate. This leads to a potentially muddy area of churned-up ground to the left of an avenue of poplars and a backwater.

Soon after negotiating this tricky stretch, a flooded gravel pit comes into view on the left. Look for a metal kissing gate up ahead on your right and go through this. Head across the field towards a similar gate 100m away, with the spire of Godmanchester church visible in the distance. Turn right after the gate to walk around the edge of another large flooded pit.

In 500m the path crosses a bridge over a ditch and goes through a metal kissing gate. Turn half-left to head **s** across the field. On the other side go up an embankment (the old railway line again) and turn right onto an earth path.

In 300m **turn left at a signpost** and cross a bridge flanked by two kissing gates to go along the left-hand edge of a field, directly towards the elevated A14. After another gate and bridge you go onto a gravel path which bends round another flooded pit and then goes underneath the main road. On the other side continue along a grassy path with a cricket pitch on your left and then houses on your right, until you reach a tarmac path in front of a wall.

[7] Godmanchester to Huntingdon (2¼ km)

If you want to take a short cut along roads into Huntingdon, turn right along this cycleway and continue ahead when you reach a minor road. At a T-junction with the B1043, turn right and follow this road back under the A14 and round to the left. Cross the River Great Ouse on a footbridge alongside the road and go straight ahead at the busy junction with the town's ring road (crossing the route you took on the way out). This quiet road leads directly to the town centre, eventually becoming the pedestrianised High Street.

For the recommended route (which is much more interesting), turn left on the cycleway and almost immediately fork right on a tarmac path leading to St Mary's church. Enter the churchyard and walk along the tarmac path⁷ on

its left-hand side. After passing the church, leave the churchyard by its main gate and go down Chadley Lane to a road junction.

Turn right and carefully cross the main road at the mini-roundabout. Go into the small courtyard opposite (with its historic Town Council buildings) and cross the white-painted Chinese Bridge on the far side.

On the other side of this attractive bridge, turn left and follow the path alongside a wide stretch of water. The path crosses Godmanchester Main Sluice and then two weirs. At Godmanchester Lock, go over a footbridge and through a gate to enter Portholme meadow⁸.

Do not follow a path straight across the meadow towards the railway embankment 1¼ km away, but *turn half-right to head diagonally across the meadow*. If there is no obvious path in this direction, aim for the left-hand end of a row of new houses 1 km away (even if there is a path, you might need to detour around some boggy areas).

On the other side of the meadow, go across Alconbury Brook on a car-wide concrete bridge and up a road past a depot and the new housing development. After passing under the elevated A14, Mill Common appears on your left and a car park on your right.

Unless you want to head directly to the station by retracing the route you took earlier, go up to the junction with the ring road. Cross this busy road carefully and continue up Princes Street, passing the bus station on your left and the town sign (of Cromwell) on your right.

After passing Waitrose, bear right into St Benedict's Court and go through this shopping precinct to reach the pedestrianised High Street.

Bakers Oven directly opposite is a possible tea place. There is a Costa Coffee 50m along High Street to the right. A small restaurant called Café du Gallery serves afternoon teas and can be found down the passageway to Newtons Court opposite Costa Coffee.

If you are not stopping for tea, turn left towards Market Hill, where you can find a couple of pubs.

[8] Huntingdon to Huntingdon Station (¾ km)

From any of the tea places, return to High Street and head **NW** to reach Market Hill. The Town Hall is behind you, All Saints' church is on the far side of the square and the Cromwell Museum (in the building of an old school once attended by the diarist Samuel Pepys) is ahead on your right.

Go through the small churchyard (or past the Cromwell Museum) and turn left into George Street. Continue past the George Hotel on your right to reach a busy junction with the ring road. Cross over at the traffic lights and continue ahead along the B1514. The approach road to Huntingdon Station is 300m along this road on the left, just before the A14 (which you pass under for the last time). Trains for London leave from this side of the station.

Lunch and tea places

The recommended lunchtime pub is the Three Jolly Butchers in Houghton /Wyton, about a third of the way round the Main Walk. It has a large garden and serves excellent home-cooked food. A little further along, the Three Horseshoes Inn is a nice village pub; without a garden but with some outdoor benches looking onto the attractive village square.

Alternatively, you could have a light meal at Houghton Mill. Its tea room serves teas and light refreshments between 11am and 5pm on days when the mill is open. You do not need to pay the NT entry fee for the mill to use the tea room.

There are plenty of nice picnic spots alongside the river, with Houghton Meadows halfway round the Main Walk being the obvious choice.

There is a fair choice of pubs and cafés in Huntingdon at the end of the walk (allow at least 10 minutes to reach the station from the town centre). The recommended pub here is the Falcon, on the west side of Market Hill. The railway station has a small buffet which is usually open until 6pm.

Houghton & Wyton

Three Jolly Butchers Huntingdon Road, 01480-463228

Three Horseshoes Inn The Green, 01480-462410

Houghton Mill (NT tea room), 01480-301494

¹ It is worth making the small detour up to the beacon when it comes into view on your right. There is an information panel there about the area's history.

² The original stone bridge on this site was built in 1332. It is said that the two sets of builders, working from each bank, did not get their directions quite right and as a result the bridge has a kink in the middle, but (if true) this is not immediately obvious.

³ Old photographs on display in Houghton Mill show that this square with its unusual thatched clocktower and Victorian Gothic water pump was indeed a village green in the past. The statue of Potto Brown (1797-1871) in the far corner bears tribute to the regard in which this philanthropic owner of Houghton Mill was held by the villagers.

⁴ The railway line ran from Cambridge to Huntingdon. It closed in 1959.

⁵ The steeple on the church tower blew down in the hurricane of 1741 and is supposedly somewhere at the bottom of the river!

⁶ The Nature Reserve was created by flooding all the worked-out gravel pits in the area.

⁷ 20m along this path, note the inscription on the other side of Mary Ann Weems' gravestone: "As a Warning to the Young of both Sexes". It recounts the tale of her murder in 1819, and its aftermath.

⁸ An information panel here claims that this is the largest water meadow in England.