

Morning last checked	Afternoon last checked		
22 November 2017	16 February 2019		
	Document last updated: 18 February 2019		
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Chilham Circular

A climb into the Kentish Downs and a descent to two historic houses

Length: 15.4 km (9.6 miles)

Toughness: 3 out of 10: gentle climbing, all in the morning

Maps: OS Landranger 179; Explorer 137.

Features

Starting from Chilham station and crossing the **River Stour**, this walk climbs in stages up through a pleasant area of downland and upland fields and woods to a remote country pub. Sadly this now insists on advance booking, having won awards for the best pub food in the country and gaining entry into the Michelin Guide. But if you can get a reservation there, it is a charming place to eat.

The finest section of the walk follows, taking you along a downland escarpment with panoramic views. You then descend to pass through the attractive estate of **Godmersham Park**, a house that was owned by the brother of writer Jane Austen, and where she stayed several times. The walk finishes along a quiet back lane which takes you to the picture postcard hilltop village of Chilham, dominated by the stately home of **Chilham Castle**.

All the climbing is in the morning half of the walk, with the afternoon largely downhill or flat. There are a few small bluebell woods in the central section of the walk, flowering in late April and early May, and some good displays of snowdrops towards the end of the walk in February.

Walk options

Since this walk shares the same lunch pub as the Wye Circular walk, also on this website, it is possible to combine the morning of one and the afternoon of the other to do a **Wye to Chilham** walk of **17.7km (11 miles)** or a **Chilham to Wye** walk of **16km (9.9 miles)**. Of the two, the Wye to Chilham walk is the most scenic. To do this, follow the Wye Circular to the Compasses Inn and then switch to the directions in paragraph 39 on page 4 of this document.

Transport

Chilham is a stop just before Canterbury West on the line out of Ashford. It is served by one direct train an hour out of **Charing Cross** and **London Bridge**, with a journey time of **1 hour 50 mins**.

However, you can reduce that to **1 hour 5 mins** by taking a high speed train from **St Pancras International** (supplement payable) to connect with the direct train at Ashford.

If doing the **Wye to Chilham** option or vice versa, Chilham is one stop beyond Wye, so all you need is a day return to Chilham.

To get to lunch in Sole Street comfortably by 1pm, take a train that arrives at Chilham **no later than 11am**.

Lunch

The Compasses Inn, Sole Street (01227 700300 www.thecompassescrundale.co.uk), 6.5km (4 miles) into the walk, is the only possible lunch option on this walk, but having won several gastro pub of the year awards and gained a place in the Michelin guide **now insists on booking in advance**. It is also rather sniffy about parties of walkers, though happy enough if its customers turn up in walking boots. It does also serve drinks to non-dining customers. If you are admitted to the elect, food is served 12pm to 2.30pm Wednesday to Friday, 12-3pm on Saturday and 12-4pm Sunday. It is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays.

The best **picnic** spot is the escarpment in paragraph 45 of the walk directions, but there is also a nice bench nearer to the pub indicated in paragraph 40.

Tea

If you can get there in time, **Shelly's Tea Room** (01227 730 303) in Chilham, open 10.30-6pm in summer or to 5pm in winter, is the best option for tea and cakes. Though it looks small from the outside, it has an upstairs room and, according to its proprietor, "regularly holds groups as large as 45 people".

Of the two pubs in Chilham, the **White Horse** (01227 730 355) does tea and sells chocolate bars, as well as serving hot deserts, and has an attractive location in the main square. An alternative is the **Woolpack Inn** (01227 730 351), 200 metres down the hill on the walk route.

Note that it is 1.1km (0.7 miles) from the centre of the village and 800 metres from the Woolpack Inn to Chilham station, so leave 15 (or ideally 20) minutes to do this. *There is nowhere pleasant near the station to spend an hour if you miscalculate.*

WALK DIRECTIONS

Chilham station to Sole Street (6.5km/4 miles)

1. Coming off platform two (the platform from Ashford) at Chilham, walk down the station approach to the main road and turn left.
2. In 150 metres, at a major road junction, turn left following the A28 to Ashford, Godmersham and Wye.
3. In 60 metres ignore Bagham Place to your left.
4. In 70 metres more, opposite Bagham Lane on your right, turn left up a side road.
5. In 70 metres cross the railway on a level crossing and carry on up the road.
6. In 100 metres curve right with the road across a bridge over a small stream.
7. Ignore ways off to the left. But in 100 metres more, just after a larger bridge over the **River Stour**, follow the track around to the left. In 20 metres keep to the left of a house along the river bank on a path that soon begins to climb.
8. In 100 metres keep straight on at a crosspath, now on a wooded strip between fields.
9. In 70 metres emerge into the field to your right and keep on along its lower left-hand edge.
10. In 100 metres curve right, slightly uphill with the field boundary, on a hedge-free strip between two fields.
11. In another 100 metres, at the end of the field, enter a wood. Turn right immediately beyond this on a track, ignoring another track uphill to the left in 10 metres.

12. In 250 metres you pass over the top of a hill and the track starts to descend. In another 150 metres there is a view to the right of **Chilham Castle** (a red brick mansion with castle ruins behind).
13. Carry on downhill on the track. In another 220 metres you come to a junction, with one track carrying on ahead, the other turning right, and a footpath post on the left. **Turn left just beyond this post** to find a stile at the top of the bank in another 20 metres, (**possibly not very visible in summer** due to vegetation).
14. Beyond the stile go half right across a field, aiming for a metal fieldgate two thirds of the way up its right-hand edge.
15. In 200 metres cross a stile to the left of the fieldgate and carry on down a track across a wooded strip.
16. In 70 metres cross a stile to the right of a metal fieldgate and turn left, directly uphill, along the edge of a large field.
17. In 100 metres cross a stile to the left of a fieldgate (*noting the fine view behind you*) and carry on through a wooded strip.
18. In 20 metres emerge into the corner of another large field and turn right along its bottom edge
19. In 120 metres there is a footpath post to the right with a yellow Stour Valley Walk arrow on it. **Here turn about 70 degrees left** (where 90 degrees equals full left), **heading out across the field** and gently uphill.
20. In 150 metres pass through a kissing gate and keep straight on downhill, with an area of scrub to your right.
21. In 120 metres pass through a kissing gate, and turn left at a T-junction, on a path lined with scrub and with intermittent views to the right.
22. In 400 metres, at the end of the field to your right, and as the path climbs into increasingly large trees, you come to a footpath post, with a metal gate into a field downhill to the right. Here **fork right** on a level path, keeping just inside the wood. (*This section is rather gloomy, but is a relatively rare wild **yew** wood, proving that these trees don't just grow in churchyards.*)
23. In 350 metres you climb a small rise to emerge (*gratefully!*) into the open. Carry on along the right-hand edge of the field beyond (*again with nice views backwards*).
24. In 200 metres cross a track and a stile and follow the path round to the right through a part-wooded area.
25. In 100 metres at a footpath post, keep straight on, on a path that soon has a field visible through the trees to the left.
26. In 150 metres the path more or less merges with the field edge. It is not clear if the right of way is just inside the wood or on the field edge, but in the end you emerge into the field.
27. Eventually, 50 metres after the field edge turns left, **turn right through a metal gate** (concealed until you are nearly level with it) and veer half left across a field, passing to the left of an mini-pylon.
28. In 150 metres enter a wood through a metal gate and keep on along a path with a fence to the left initially.
29. Where the fence ends, the path is indistinct, but keep straight on through the wood.
30. In 200 metres you come to a road, where you turn right (ie more or less the same direction as before).
31. Stay on this road, passing a quasi-industrial complex and a house on the right, the latter after 300 metres. You then have woods to the right and a field just visible to the left for 300 metres or so, then woodland both sides.
32. 200 metres after the full woodland starts, and just after a small gravel parking area on the left, turn right up a track signposted as a byway (ie vehicles or motorbikes may come down this track).
33. In 120 metres ignore a car-blocking barrier to the right and instead keep straight on down the track into the woods.
34. In 150 metres the track curves distinctly left and there is then a long straight stretch. (*The trees on either side here are coppiced sweet chestnut.*)
35. In 400 metres, with the wood edge visible ahead, a field can be seen through the trees to your right. In another 50 metres, and **20 metres before the path emerges from the wood**, go left up an unmarked footpath that keeps **just inside the wood**, with a field 20 metres to the right. (Note, this is

NOT the unmarked path 70 metres earlier to the left.)

*It is also possible to **remain on the track** until you emerge into an open field and then **turn left along a path along the edge of the field**, with the wood edge to your left. This is not a right of way, but seems to be a path regularly used by dog walkers. If you do this, follow the field edge for 450 metres until you pass through a gap in the hedgerow into the next field, and then turn right on a path, with the hedgerow to your right. You are now in paragraph 38 below.*

36. In another 70 metres, at a triangular junction, turn right into the field and follow a path along its edge that re-enters the wood in 20 metres. Follow this path as it skirts along just inside the wood edge.
37. In 400 metres the wood ends and you emerge into a field. Here ignore the path slanting left across the field (if any is apparent), and instead keep straight on, following the hedge to your right, on what soon becomes a part grassy track. *(This track is not marked as a right of way, but seems in general use by locals: if this has changed, use the path slanting left to get to a road and then turn right for the pub.)*
38. In 300 metres you pass a house and come to a road, with the **Compasses Inn**, the lunchtime stop on your right.

Sole Street to Godmersham **(4.6km/2.9 miles)**

39. Coming out of the pub after lunch, turn right on the road.
40. In 300 metres ignore a road downhill to the left *(there is a bench at this junction with a fine view - a possible **picnic spot**, but a nicer one, if the ground is dry, is in paragraph 45 opposite).*
41. In 150 metres more fork right up a track into the woods.
42. In 200 metres, where another track crosses the one you are on diagonally, keep straight on, as indicated by a yellow arrow, on a path under trees between two fields.
43. In 150 metres go through a kissing gate to the left, and go half left from your former direction, heading through the trees towards an open field 70 metres ahead.
44. Once in the field, keep to its left-hand edge, ignoring any apparent path that contours the slope to the right.
45. You soon start descending and in 150 metres you come to a kissing gate on the left-hand edge of the field. Go through this and beyond carry on slanting down the slope towards a clump of blackthorn bushes, ie roughly the same direction as before, with a fine view to your left. Anywhere on this next section is a fine **picnic spot**.
46. In 30 metres follow the path through the blackthorn clump (on the far side **watch out for a large badger - or rabbit? - hole**) and take the upper of two paths that contour the slope.
47. In 120 metres the path goes back into the woods, but in 50 metres more you emerge again and continue to contour the slope
48. In 170 metres more pass through a kissing gate into the woods again. **In winter at least, the path is initially indistinct**, but keep straight ahead, still contouring the slope. *(More **yew trees** here.)*
49. In 200 metres the path starts to descend. 80 metres after this, and just before the slope suddenly gets very steep, the path makes a turn to the left, along the line of the escarpment. **In winter this turn in the path is not at all obvious**, but as long as you turn left before the slope gets sharply steeper, and keep the steep slope to your right, a more distinct path appears.
50. In 120 metres the path goes into a more overgrown area and in 50 metres more emerges at the top of a large field. Your onward route here is half right, diagonally across the field to a stile which you may just be able to see to the right of a house 400 metres away.
51. When you get to this stile, cross it and keep on the right-hand edge of the field beyond.
52. In 180 metres cross a stile and 5 metres later a track to keep on along the left-hand edge of a field, with a tree boundary to your left.
53. In 250 metres pass into the next field and keep on gently uphill.
54. In another 100 metres, at the crest of the hill, turn left downhill through the field boundary, following a footpath sign.

55. Follow the path straight downhill across the next field(s), a distance of 400 metres.
56. At the bottom of the hill turn right on a road.
57. In 450 metres the road turns decisively left alongside the railway line (up the embankment to the right).
58. In another 250 metres, at a road T-junction, turn right, signposted to Chilham and Canterbury. **Take care on this road** which has some fast traffic. After the bridge there is a verge and then a pavement to the left.

Godmersham Park was one of three country estates owned by Edward, the brother of the writer Jane Austen. We know from her letters that she made several visits to it, and she describes having dinner with the owners of Chilham Castle, so she would certainly have travelled the route between the two houses taken by this walk. The house is now a college and its interior is changed from Jane's day, but the exterior is substantially as it was.

One assumes that Jane also walked around the estate and enjoyed its tranquil countryside (then undisturbed by the A28), but in fact her letters – written to her sister Cassandra – never discuss such matters, instead focusing on people and gossip.

Edward owned Godmersham because he had been adopted by the rich Knight family, distant relatives of the Austen's, even though his natural parents were still living. This arrangement – rather odd to us – meant he got the education of a gentleman, went on a Grand Tour, and – crucially – was able to help the rest of his family financially. Edward's eldest daughter, Fanny, was a favourite of Jane's, and in her letters to her the author made several famous remarks about her work which are now much quoted.

However, Fanny secretly found her aunt a bit common. Later in life she described Jane as "not as refined as she ought to have been" and said that had her father not invited her aunts to Godmersham "they would have been very much below par as to Society and its ways". Jane also seems to have been a less popular guest at Godmersham than her sister – at any rate, she does not seem to have been invited so often.

59. 150 metres after the bridge cross the busy A28 with great care and keep straight up a minor road, signposted Godmersham Church and Godmersham Park.
60. In 350 metres you cross the River Stour on an elegant brick bridge. Beyond, go straight ahead through the right-hand of the two formal gates (the pedestrian gate is to the right of the main gate) into **Godmersham Park** (now Abdo College, which trains opticians).
61. **Immediately beyond the gate, go right** through a wooden gate onto a signposted footpath. Keep straight ahead into the park, initially with a metal fence to your left.

Godmersham to Chilham village (3.2km/2 miles)

62. In 170 metres, at a 'Private No Public Right of Way' sign, turn left through a wooden fieldgate onto a grassy track between hedges. (*To the left just before this gate you have a view of Godmersham Park house.*)
63. In 300 metres, at a track crossroads (*another view of Godmersham Park house here*), with a brick house visible ahead, go right, still on a track between hedges.
64. Ignore ways off. In 250 metres you have trees to your right.
65. In another 300 metres, 30 metres beyond the end of the field, pass through a high metal gate (the pedestrian gate is at the left-hand end) and keep straight ahead at a track junction, now on the North Downs Way. (To the right is a view of the hills traversed earlier in the walk)
66. In 300 metres you emerge onto a road. Go straight ahead along this.
67. You now follow this quiet pleasant lane for 1.8 kilometres until it brings you to the centre of Chilham. In 700 metres you start to pass houses on the right, and in another 300 metres or so the high brick wall of the **Chilham Castle** estate (*see panel on page 6*) starts to your left.
68. In 250 metres more there is a section of wall topped by a metal fence and towards the end of this you get a good view of the castle (a stately home with a castle ruin next to it) on the hill across the lake.

69. Shortly after the view of the castle, the road bends left and in 300 metres more you come to a three way road junction.
- **To go direct to the station** go right at this junction. In 200 metres you come to a T-junction with the Woolpack Inn on your left. Go right here and pick up the directions in paragraph 74.

In the 1980s **Chilham Castle**, which has the delightful postal address of "Chilham Castle, Canterbury, Kent", used to stage medieval banquets and jousting. The current owner (Stuart Wheeler, the founder of spreadbetting firm IG Index) prefers a quieter life, with the gardens open on Tuesdays in summer but the house only by arrangement for groups.

The castle has a history going back to William the Conqueror which you can read on www.chilham-castle.co.uk, but it has basically always been a family home. The current house dates to 1616, but the keep of the old medieval fortress also survives.

70. Otherwise, to continue into **Chilham village** for tea (or just to see its very pretty main square), go straight ahead at the three way junction, up School Hill.
71. In 150 metres you emerge into the central square of Chilham, with the castle gates to your left. Diagonally across the square is **Shelly's Tea Room**, and between that and the church is the **White Horse**.

Allow 15-20 minutes after tea to walk to the station.

Chilham village to Chilham station (1.1km/0.7 miles)

72. To continue the walk, come out of Shelly's or the White Horse and turn left (or if coming down the square from Chilham Castle, go to its end and turn right) to exit the square down an unnamed road at the opposite end of the square to the one you used to enter it. (Chantry House is on the corner of this road, and in 20 metres it is named as "The Street".)
73. In 200 metres you pass the **Woolpack Inn** on your right: beyond it keep straight on, ignoring ways off.
74. In 400 metres the main road is just to the left of the road you are on. Turn left

up a 10 metre side turning to join this, and turn right (that is, more or less resuming your former direction).

75. In 150 metres cross a side road – the A28 to Ashford – **taking care**, as cars turn at some speed onto this road.
76. In 150 metres, opposite a white house on the left-hand side of the road (the former station inn), turn right up a side road, signposted to Hope View School, which leads in 70 metres to the station.

Cross the bridge for trains to London. Note that **trains to Canterbury sometimes leave at the same time as the London trains**, so do not get confused and take the wrong one.