

Hitchin Circular			Hitchin Circular (Short Walk)		
1 <sup>st</sup> walk check	2 <sup>nd</sup> walk check	3 <sup>rd</sup> walk check	1 <sup>st</sup> walk check	2 <sup>nd</sup> walk check	3 <sup>rd</sup> walk check
25 <sup>th</sup> Oct. 2014	11 <sup>th</sup> July 2020	11 <sup>th</sup> January 2025	05 <sup>th</sup> April 2021		
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This walk has been checked as noted above, however the publisher cannot accept responsibility for any problems encountered by readers.					

## Hitchin Circular

**Start:** Hitchin Station

**Finish:** Hitchin station

Hitchin station, map reference TL 194 297, is 13 km north east of Luton and 7 km north west of Stevenage, 73m above sea level and in **North Hertfordshire**.

**Length:** 25.6 km (15.9 mi), of which 6.0 km (3.7 mi) on tarmac or concrete ( $\frac{3}{4}$  of that in Hitchin).

**Cumulative ascent/descent:** 355m.

For a shorter walk or an alternative finish, *see below* **Walk Options**.

**Toughness:** 6 out of 10

**Time:** 6 hours walking time.

For the whole outing, including trains, sights and meals, allow at least 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  hours.

**Transport:** Hitchin station is on the East Coast Main Line and served by Thameslink services from London Bridge through St. Pancras (journey time from 33 minutes from STP) and from King's Cross (mostly slower unless going fast to Stevenage and changing there).

**Saturday Walkers' Club:** Take the train closest to 9.30 hours (assuming travel from St. Pancras).

**OS Landranger Map:** 166 (Luton & Hertford)

**OS Explorer Map:** 193 (Luton & Stevenage)

### Walk Notes:

This Hertfordshire walk covers the hilly area west of Hitchin. The morning route leads along farm tracks, field boundaries, shaded grassy lanes and through a few woods across the most north easterly ridge of The Chilterns, in Great Offley, to the steep chalk downlands of Pegsdon Hills and Knocking Hoe, dissected by quiet flat bottomed valleys, which form the scenery around the lunch stop in Pegsdon, where the terraced pub garden provides stunning views overlooking the hills.

From Knocking Hoe National Nature Reserve, the ancient Icknield Way leads to the pretty village of Pirton, with its impressive remains of a motte-and-double bailey and traces of an abandoned medieval village. On the outskirts of Hitchin, Oughtonhead Common is a mature alder and willow fen woodland, whose diversity of habitats is surprisingly large. From there the route follows the high quality chalk river Oughton all the way to its wellhead. The final stretch leads past a very charming farm gate café to Hitchin's old town, which has kept its medieval market town feel and has many fine Tudor and Georgian buildings.

Pass St. Mary's Church, the largest parish church in Hertfordshire and evidence of how Hitchin prospered from the wool trade, and brave a final steep ascent through a park to then re-trace part of the morning route back to the train station at the easterly end of town.

This is a stile-free walk.

### Walk Options:

A **Shortcut** around lunch reduces the length of the walk by 2.2 km and the ascent/descent by 56m.

A **Shortcut** just before the end reduces the length of the walk by 2.5 km and the ascent/descent by 53m.

Taking any shortcut reduces the effort to 5/10, taking both makes it a 4/10.

**A Short Extension** (400m) near the end in Hitchin's Town Centre leads past plentiful more tea options and also several additional interesting old buildings.

An infrequent **bus service** gets you from **Pirton** (17.2 km into the main walk, and also the lunch stop if taking Shortcut I) straight to **Hitchin**, or to **Henlow Camp**, where you can connect to the more frequent service to Hitchin (Mon-Sat only).

A short connection from the lunch stop in Pegsdon to Hexton means **you can pick up SWC 229** (Leagrave to Harlington) there, and include the stunning Barton Hills in this walk. Harlington is on a different train line.

### Lunch (details last updated 13/01/2025)

**The Red Lion** Kings Walden Road, *Great Offley, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 3DZ (01462 768 281, <https://redliongreatoffley.co.uk/>)*. The Red Lion is located 6.9 km (4.2 mi) into the walk. Open all day every day. Food served 12.00-14.30 and 17.00-21.00 Mon-Sat and 12.00-17.00 Sun.

**The Green Man** 5 High Street, *Great Offley, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 3AR (01462 768 256, <http://www.chefandbrewer.com/pub/green-man-great-offley-hitchin/s3444/>)*. The Green Man is located 9.0 km (5.6 mi) into the walk. Open all day every day. Food all day every day. A Chef & Brewer pub.

**The View** Pegsdon Way, *Pegsdon, Bedfordshire, SG5 3JX (01582 882 555, <https://theviewrestaurant.co.uk/>)*. The View is located 13.7 km (8.5 mi) into the walk. With stunning views overlooking Pegsdon Hills, especially from the terrace. Open all day Tue-Sat and 11.00-18.00 Sun. Food served 12.00-15.00 and 17.00-21.00 Tue-Fri, 12.00-20.30 Sat and 12.00-18.00 Sun.

**The Motte & Bailey** 1 Great Green, *Pirton, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 3QD (01462 711 117, <http://www.themotteandbaileypirton.com/>)*. The Motte & Bailey is located 17.0 km (10.6 mi) into the main walk, 14.4 km if taking Shortcut I, and 8.7 km (5.4 mi) from the end of the main walk. Open 15.00-20.00 Mon-Tue and all day Wed-Sun. Food served Wed-Sat 12.00-14.30 and 18.00-20.30 and Sun 12.00-15.00.

**The Fox** High Street, *Pirton, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 3PS (01462 504 898, <https://www.foxpirton.co.uk/>)*. The Fox is located 17.4 km (10.9 mi) into the main walk, 14.8 km if taking Shortcut I and 8.4 km (5.2 mi) from the end of the main walk. Open from 15.00 Tue-Fri and from noon weekends. No food offer.

### Tea (details last updated 13/01/2025)

**Oughtonhead Farm Garden Gate Tea Room** Oughtonhead, *Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 3RP (07969 621 223)*. Open Easter onwards through the summer, plus selected other days. Opening times vary during the year, but in summer they generally seem to be: Fri-Sun 11.00-16.00.

Oughtonhead Farm is located 3.8 km (2.4 mi) from the end of the main walk.

**Loads of options in Hitchin's Town Centre**, on route, just off route and on the busy main road to the station, parallel to the walk route. Check the pdf for details.

## Notes:

### Hitchin

Hitchin is a charming medieval market town with a population of about 30,000 in the north of Hertfordshire, first noted as the central place of the Hicce people mentioned in a 7<sup>th</sup> century document, and located close to the ancient Icknield Way. The tribal name giving the town its name is Brittonic rather than Old English. It has been suggested that Hitchin was the location of 'Clafeshoh', the place chosen in 673 by Theodore of Tarsus the Archbishop of Canterbury during the synod of Hertford, the first meeting of representatives of the fledgling Christian churches of Anglo-Saxon England, to hold annual synods of the churches.

King Offa of Mercia, founded a religious house in AD792 on land occupied by the Hicce tribe. This was the beginning of Hitchin's parish church, second only in size to St Albans Abbey in the county.

By 1086 Hitchin is described as a Royal Manor in the Domesday Book and the modern spelling first appears in 1618.

In 1697, Hitchin (and the nearby village of Offley) were subject to what is thought to have been the most severe hailstorm in recorded British history. Hailstones over 4 inches in diameter were reported.

The town flourished on the wool trade and by the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Hitchin was a staging post for coaches coming from London. Later, after the arrival of the railway, a corn exchange was built in the market place and within a short time Hitchin established itself as a major centre for grain trading.

Now best known for its market (held Tue, Fri, Sat), a notable museum also exists in town in the British Schools Museum.

Hitchin has retained its market town feel and has many fine Tudor and Georgian buildings, particularly around the market square. Nikolaus Pevsner described it as being, after St Albans, the most visually satisfying town in the county.

In March 2013 a poll in The Times voted Hitchin the 9<sup>th</sup> best town in the UK in which to live.

### Hicca Way

A linear waymarked path of 13 km (8 mi) length, opened in 2012. The name for this path which meanders along the River Hiz is based on history going back to the days of King Offa of Mercia who founded a religious settlement in Hitchin. The path follows the route the Hicca tribe (*'the people of the horse'*) might have followed from Hitchin to the Danish Fort near Henlow, where the Saxons would have been required to pay their regular 'Danegeld' tax.

### Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP)

A 19 km (12 mi) circular walk around Hitchin following public rights of way around the town centre and through surrounding countryside.

### Hiz River

The Hiz is a high quality chalk bed stream and a tributary river that feeds the Ivel that, in turn, feeds the Great Ouse. Starting at its source just south of the village of Charlton, the river winds its way into and through Hitchin, where it meets the River Oughton and River Purwell. The Hiz finally meets the River Ivel near the village of Henlow.

The Hiz is properly pronounced "Hitch" as it takes its name from the Hicca tribe who inhabited the area and gave their name to Hitchin. This fact seems to be little known these days and it is now normally said as it is spelled.

### The Chiltern Way

A circular waymarked Long Distance Path of around 214 km (134 mi), taking in some of the finest scenery in the country. There are now two optional extensions and an additional Berkshire loop taking the total to 352 km (220 mi).

The Chiltern Way passes through some of the most attractive parts of the Chilterns, including the Bovingdon Plateau, the Chess valley, the Misbourne valley, Penn Country, the Hambleton valley, Stonor Park, Bix Bottom, Ewelme, the Ridgeway, Swyncombe Down, Bledlow Ridge, Hampden Country, Bulbourne valley, the Dunstable Downs and Sharpenhoe Clappers.

### Great Offley

Great Offley lies on a chalk escarpment ridge (at 159m height the most north easterly ridge of the Chiltern Hills). Offa, King of Mercia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, is said to have built a palace here and thus gave his name to the village. There is an interesting group of buildings, including Offley Place. From the 1960s this had been used as a teacher training college but it is now a Country House Hotel.

### The Icknield Way

Said to be one of the oldest roads in Britain, the Icknield Way is one of the few long distance track-ways to have existed before the Romans occupied the country. The name is Celto-British in derivation, and may be named after the Iceni tribe, who may have established this route to permit trade with other parts of the country from their base in East Anglia. It has also been suggested that the road has even older prehistoric origins. It stretched from the Dorset Coast to the Wash, crossing the River Thames near Wallingford. It was later one of the "Four Highways" of medieval England (the others being Ermine Street, Fosse Way and Watling Street). Today the Ridgeway National Trail follows parts of the ancient Icknield Way for 139 km (87

mi) from Overton Hill to Ivinghoe Beacon in the Chilterns. The modern day Icknield Way long-distance path then runs for 274 km from Ivinghoe Beacon to Knettishall Heath in Norfolk.

### **Pegsdon Hills & Hoo Bit Nature Reserve**

Pegsdon Hills are part of the north-eastern end of the Chiltern Hills and offer some of the best views in the county. Most of the area is managed as a nature reserve by the Wildlife Trust, purchased in 1992 following a public appeal. The most prominent hill is Deacon Hill, although its top is not included in the Reserve. Part of the area around Deacon Hill is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), as an example of steep chalk downland, accompanied by quiet valleys. The Wildlife Trust is managing the scrub and has re-instated sheep grazing to maintain and improve the grassland, remnants of the pastures which once covered much of the downland.

Also included in the Nature Reserve is Hoo Bit across the county boundary in Hertfordshire. Once a larch plantation, it is now a flower-rich, grazed meadow, surrounded by woodland.

The whole site has an interesting social as well as natural history. The deep earthwork on the Bedfordshire/Hertfordshire county boundary was once a barrier to free passage, situated as it is near to the ancient route of the Icknield Way. Large, multi-stemmed beech trees now mark its presence. Strip lynchets, or cultivation terraces, are evidence of an ancient settlement and there is a series of small quarries indicating former small-scale mineral extraction.

### **Hexton Manor**

Hexton Manor was built around 1750. The lake and parkland which surround it were laid out very soon after. The main features have remained largely unchanged since that time. The house itself was restored at the end of the Victorian period, and the impressive main hall and reception rooms have retained the feeling of that period. It has always been a family house, and the present owners have lived there for three generations. Hexton Manor is licensed for civil ceremonies in the grand hall within the manor house. Receptions are then held in the Walled Garden Marquee Venue.

### **Knocking Hoe National Nature Reserve**

Knocking Hoe NNR is an area of species rich chalk grassland, dissected by a flat bottomed valley, at the north eastern end of the Chilterns. It is only eight hectares in size, but has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its five rare plants, namely moon carrot, spotted catsear, field fleawort, burnt tip orchid and pasque flower.

The site is also of archaeological interest with a prominent strip lynchet field system (cultivation terraces).

### **Pirton**

Pirton lies at the eastern end of the Chiltern Hills and is on the Icknield Way. Several important prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon sites have been identified, but it is for the medieval monuments that the village is especially noted. The most famous is the Motte and Bailey castle, known as 'Toot Hill' (meaning 'look out'). This comprises a large earth mound (the motte) with a water-filled ditch and two outer, defence areas (the baileys). The Grade I-listed parish church of St. Mary, which dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, also lies within one of the castle baileys.

To the south east of the castle and church is a large grassed area known as 'The Bury' which contains the earthwork remains of the now deserted part of the ancient village. Long depressions are clearly visible which were once the streets of the old village and the areas of raised ground indicate the position of the houses. Both the Castle and the Bury are nationally important and are designated as Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

### **Oughtonhead Common Local Nature Reserve**

Oughtonhead is a mature alder and willow woodland running adjacent to the River Oughton. It is one of the larger fen woodlands in Hertfordshire and is the "jewel in the crown" of the region's nature reserves. For a small reserve the diversity of habitats is surprisingly large, comprising wet and dry woodland, fen, aquatic and water margin areas. In addition there are several ditches which are important for certain fen species. The reserve is an important habitat for birds such as kingfishers, water rail and woodcock, reed and sedge warblers, as well as mammals such as the water shrew.

### **St. Mary's Church, Hitchin**

St. Mary's Church is remarkably large for a town of its size, which is evidence of how Hitchin prospered from the wool trade. It is the largest parish church in Hertfordshire. Most of it dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with its tower dating from around 1190. During the laying of a new floor in the church in 1911, foundations of a more ancient church building were found. In form, they appear to be a basilican church of a 7<sup>th</sup> century type. This makes the church older than the story (not recorded before the 15<sup>th</sup> century) that the church was founded by Offa, King of Mercia 757-796.

In the east window above the chapel you will see the only surviving fragments of medieval glass left in the church. The original glass was smashed by Oliver Cromwell's soldiers who took over the church in the 1640s. They also damaged the font, defacing the carvings of the apostles made around 1470. This damage can still be seen today.

## WALK DIRECTIONS

Alight from the train in **Hitchin Station** on platform 2 and leave through the station building into a car park. *Turn right* along **Station Approach** past bus stops and cycle racks. In 115m, **[!]** *just before* reaching a main road, cross the road to the left and *turn left* up **Burton's Path**, a tarmac path with a hedge on the left and a red brick wall on the right (i.e. just before a small supermarket). In 15m the path *turns right* through bike barriers (210°). In 300m emerge from the path on a road, which you cross and *turn right* along it, but in 20m *turn left* again through bike barriers along **Benslow Path**, another shaded tarmac path. In 140m cross a road and continue in the same direction along **Avenue Path**, a narrower tarmac path, gently rising. In 150m *turn right* in a tarmac lane cul-de-sac towards a main road 20m away. The afternoon return route joins opposite down a few steps.

*Turn left* up along **Highbury Road** past **Hitchin Girls' School** and in 160m *turn right* at a roundabout along **Hollow Lane**. In 100m cross a triangular reservation at a three-way road junction, cross **Whitehill Road** and **[!]** *continue through* bike barriers along a raised tarmac path (signed **Highbury Infant School & Nursery** and **Bluebell Family Centre**). In 10m *turn left* with the path and in 35m continue in the same direction crossing **Kershaws Hill Path**. In 170m emerge in a cul-de-sac (**Standhill Road**) with **Cemetery Lodge** on the left, and continue in the same direction. In 150m continue in the same direction at a crossroads, slowly descending either along the shaded road, or on a narrow path through **Standhill Spinney** on the left, which re-joins the road in 100m (*this can be overgrown in summer*).

In 200m *turn left* at a road T-junction along the pavement of **Hitchin Hill**. In 60m *turn right* to cross the road and continue up along **Priory End**. In 25m walk up some steps on the right-hand side of the road and *bear left* along a raised tarmac path parallel to the road, soon with a metal fence on your left (ignoring an earthen footpath turning right up more steps). In 75m the path rises from street level and in 25m you cross a two-railed footbridge over the **A602-bypass road**. **[!]** *Turn hard right* through some trees on the other side of the bridge with a footpath signpost at a three-way footpath junction along an earthen track parallel to the A-road below. In 35m you emerge in a field corner by a footpath and **Hicca-Way** marker post and with sudden open views over the rolling countryside and continue along the right hand boundary down **Hitchin Hill**. In 160m *turn left* with a marker post on the right across the field on a usually well-cleared path (220°), towards the right of a solitary tree 320m away.

In 430m on the opposite side of the field leave it through a hedge gap into a holloway and *turn down right* along a tarmac path between hedges with a **HOOP (Hitchin Outer Orbital Path)**-marker and a Public Byway 96 (Charlton ¼)-signpost. Ignore all ways off, continue along a lane and in 230m cross a bridge over the **Hiz River**. In 20m pass an information board about the **Hicca Way** on the right by **The Windmill, Charlton** pub on the left and *turn left* at a T-junction with a road. In 20m pass Charlton House, birthplace of **Sir Henry Bessemer**, famous for inventing a cheaper method of steel manufacture. In 170m, by **Spring Cottage** on the left, *turn right* with a bridleway signpost along a car wide gravel lane (**Windmill Lane**) between hedges (290°). In 300m continue through a gap left of a metal field gate along a grassy path between hedges, where the car wide lane turns right towards Windmill Cottage.

In 240m ignore an unmarked footpath joining from the right through the hedge and in 300m the hedge on the left discontinues, providing you with views of the most easterly ridge of **The Chilterns**. In 200m continue in the same direction across an arable field along a usually well-cleared path. In 180m continue in the same direction at a crosspaths with a byway open to all traffic and with a **Chiltern Way Bridleway** marker on a white-topped pole on the right, now along a fenced left-hand grassy field

boundary, with a hedge on the left. In 480m there are parts of an old boundary hedge on the right in the field. In 180m **[!]** *turn left* at the corner of the field on the left at a three-way junction with a **Chiltern Way Bridleway** marker post on the right, now along a car wide grassy path (210°). In 100m you walk under an HV pylon line. In 240m *turn right* at a T-junction with a grassy footpath and in 100m *turn left* with the fenced path and in 280m *turn right* through a wooden gate into a large field. *Veer left* uphill (260°), aiming just to the right of **Aldwicks Plantation** (on the OS map), ignoring the furthest left route along the fence line towards a metal field gate. Head for the upper left-hand corner of the sloping field and in 470m leave it through a wooden kissing gate with a footpath marker.

Walk through a small wood and in 90m emerge in a field where you continue along the right-hand boundary with a fence on the left and with **Botanybay Plantation** on the right (**recommended:** you can also follow a parallel path through the wood). In 340m in the far-right field corner continue in the same direction along a narrow grassy path, soon with the churchyard of **St. Mary Magdalene, Great Offley** on the right behind a wall. In 120m emerge on the main road through **Great Offley** and *turn left* along it. In 50m you pass **The Red Lion** on the left and *turn right* with a **Chiltern Way Extension** signpost through a wooden kissing gate to the right of a metal field gate into a pasture. Continue along the left-hand boundary fence and in 70m continue in the same direction at a fence corner towards the far-left field corner. In 200m *turn left* through a wooden kissing gate 20m left of a metal field gate into the pasture to the left and *turn right* along its right-hand boundary.

In 380m you walk through another wooden kissing gate amongst some trees in the far-right corner and in 15m *turn right* along a gravel-and-earth farm track at a three-way footpath junction. In 150m *turn right* with the track at another three-way junction (340°). Views to the left are to **Lilley** village at the bottom of the valley and **Warden** and **Galley Hills** behind (SWC Walk Legrave to Harlington). In 560m in the far-right field corner walk through a gap to the right of a metal field gate and past **Keeper's Cottage** on the left and cross a tarmac lane (**Luton White Hill**, **The Green Man** pub is about 700m along this road to the right). Continue in the same direction along a grassy bridleway with trees on the right and in 310m reach **Luton Road** at a T-junction. The onwards route **involves a level crossing of the dual-carriageway A505**.

**To avoid this**, follow this alternative **A-road avoidance-route** (adds 590m):  
*Cross the road and turn left along its opposite pavement. In 160m the pavement finishes and you continue along the grassy verge. In 200m pass a concealed entrance-sign on the left. In 100m ignore a bridleway joining from the left (the Chiltern Way). In 85m turn right into Lilley Hoo Lane cul-de-sac and in 70m walk under a road bridge carrying the A505 to then follow the road first right, then left. 110m from the bridge turn right through a gap to the left of an overgrown rusted metal field gate with a 'Lilley Public Bridleway 011'-signpost along a right-hand grassy field boundary with a hedge on the right. In 350m ignore a car wide farm track turning left. In 510m you reach a four-way bridleway junction. The main walk joins from the right. Pick up the directions one paragraph down.*

**To follow the main route**, cross the road and *turn right* along it and in 20m *turn left* with an 'Offley Public Bridleway 041'-sign along a grassy path with a garden fence on the left. In 300m you are walking parallel to the **A505**, in another 40m *turn left* with a sign through a boundary gap to cross the road carefully, using the central reservation wisely. Continue along a wide grassy path between hedges with a bridleway signpost. In 240m *turn left* in a field corner at a bridleway T-junction and along a wide grassy field boundary, which curves right in 25m. In 400m you reach a four-way bridleway junction. The A road avoidance-route joins from the left.

## Here you have a choice:

**For a Shortcut**, *turn right* (i.e.: continue in the same direction if you were taking the A road-avoidance route) along a wide raised grassy path between fields (20°) and pick up the directions at the end of this text under **Shortcut I**.

**For the Main Walk**, continue in the same direction (i.e.: *turn left*, if you were taking the A road-avoidance route) along a right hand grassy field boundary. In 290m continue through a hedge gap with wooden bollards and on a usually well-cleared path across an arable field. In 130m continue with a wood on the left along a grassy field boundary and in 40m *turn left* with the wood. In 140m continue in the same direction into the wood with a bridleway marker post and an **Access Land** marker. You will stay in Access Land until you cross Hitchin Road just before the lunch pub in Pegsdon. In 110m *turn right* at a forest path T-junction with a bridleway marker post. In 230m emerge from the wood on a gravel farm track and *turn right* along it. In 310m a marked bridleway joins from the left behind out of a field and in 70m you continue in the same direction with a hedge on the left, ignoring a signed Permissive Path turning left.

In 130m follow the farm track first right then left. In 65m ignore another marked bridleway joining from the right along a farm track. In another 65m **[!]** continue along a raised grassy path straight ahead between fields with a marker post on the left (350°), ignoring the farm track bearing half left (300°) up towards **Telegraph Hill** (on the OS map). In 500m you enter trees and follow a meandering path through a wood. In 120m emerge in a field corner and follow its right-hand grassy boundary. In 50m enter trees in **Telegraph Hill Nature Reserve** (this area can be waterlogged, there is a path through the trees on the right a little bit back) and *turn right* between trees along the ancient **Icknield Way** at a T-junction with Byway signs pointing both left and right. In 60m *turn left* into a large meadow through a wooden kissing gate with various markers. There is an information board for **Pegsdon Hills & Hoo Bit Nature Reserve**.

There are now two recommended routes to descend to Pegsdon hamlet for lunch.

- The **public footpath-route**: head for a wire fence corner 30m away (295°) and walk along it, with trees on the right initially preventing views into the nearest of three steep downland valleys. In 40m a metal kissing gate on the right leads to a bench with superb views (a fine **picnic spot**). In 150m at a fence corner continue in the same direction through a wooden kissing gate with a **Chiltern Way** marker post, now with fine vistas not just to the right down into the adjacent valley, but also to the rounded ridges of the next valleys further along, as well as ahead to **Pegsdon** (the lunch pub is the left of two large white buildings). The **Bedfordshire plain** dominates the view ahead and in 80m you pass a bench on the right (another **picnic spot**), now also with views to the left along the **Chilterns Chain** towards **Ravensburgh Castle** and the **Barton Hills** (SWC Walk Leagrave to Harlington). In 110m walk through a wooden kissing gate into a large meadow and follow the right-hand fence line curving right along the escarpment. In 150m pass an info panel on the left. On the right you can see **Deacon Hill** (not part of the Nature Reserve). In 200m walk through a wooden kissing gate to the right of a wooden field gate and continue in the same direction on the level. In 100m at the fence corner on the right you pass an information board about the **Pegsdon Arable Weed Reserve**. Continue in the same direction, ignoring the grassy path turning right with the fence, and in 310m leave the Nature Reserve and the Access Land through a wooden kissing gate, cross **Hitchin Road** and continue along a tarmac lane, soon passing the gatehouse and iron gate of **Hexton Manor** on the left. In 100m continue in the same direction where a road joins from the right and in 120m *turn right* along **Pegsdon Way** to in 200m reach **The View** on the right (entrance at the back).

- The '**reserve path**'-route (the best of three such routes) is of similar merit, a bit more remote and about equidistance. *Veer right* through the grassy area and in 50m walk through a wooden kissing gate. Continue in the same direction along the rim of a steep sided valley dropping off to the left. In 100m continue in the same direction where the fence turns right and in 40m *bear left* along a whaleback shaped rounded ridge (325°). In 110m *fork left* to stay with the left hand ridgeline. In 150m follow the ridge line around to the right and in 130m *turn left* with the grassy path towards the bottom of the valley on the left. In 70m *turn right* at a T-junction with a path from the left out of the valley. In 40m a path joins from the valley on the right, *veer left* (30°). In 150m you walk through a wooden kissing gate to the left of a metal field gate into a large meadow and follow its right-hand boundary fence (later with trees behind). **Deacon Hill** looms above on the right (not part of the Nature Reserve). In 430m *turn left* in the far-right field corner, with **Hitchin Road** behind a fence. In 170m *turn right* through a wooden kissing gate to leave the Nature Reserve, cross the road and *turn right* along the opposite pavement. In 100m *turn left* into the car park of **The View** (entrance by the garden terrace).

After lunch leave the pub to the minor road at the front, **Pegsdon Way** (i.e.: *not through the car park at the back towards the busy Hitchin Road*), and *turn right* along it. In 90m *turn left* along a gravel-on-tarmac farm lane with a footpath signpost. In 480m *turn right* with a footpath signpost on the left along a grassy path between fields and in 100m ascend steps up a steep valley side to the right of a small wood. In 110m continue in the same direction at the upper corner of the wood, still uphill along a wide grassy field margin. In 120m *turn left* with a marker post and enjoy views along this stretch back on the left towards the water tower in **Pulloxhill** and the **Flit Valley** (SWC Walk Harlington to Flitwick) and ahead to the water tower in **Meppershall** (SWC Walk Arlesey to Letchworth Garden City).

In 360m *turn right* with a footpath signpost along a wide grassy track with a barbed wire fence on the left and a steep-sided valley dropping off behind it. This is **Knocking Hoe National Nature Reserve**. In 300m at the top of the rise pass an information board for the NNR on the other side of a wooden kissing gate on the left, and walk through a gap to the left of a metal field gate. *Turn left* at a T-junction with a bridleway along a grassy path between hedges. In 110m the **Icknield Way Trail** bridleway joins from the right along a field boundary. *Veer left* with a marker post on the left along a car wide grassy track (**Wood Lane** on the OS map). In 700m you pass a bench on the right, 20m later a footpath – the **Chiltern Way** – joins from the right through a gap along a field boundary. This is **Shortcut I**. Continue in the same direction, slowly descending.

\*) In 240m a footpath joins from the right along a raised grassy boundary between fields. In 460m you walk through a gap to the left of a metal field gate and in 70m, with **Pirton Court** on the left, cross a road (**Priors Hill/Hitchin Road**) into **Pirton** village along the pavement of **Great Green**. In 60m *fork left* with the road, ignoring the right hand fork **Bury End**. Pass the village green on the left and a **bus stop for services to Hitchin or Henlow Camp** at the end of it, opposite the entrance to **The Motte & Bailey**. Past the pub, the road (now called **Crabtree Lane**) *turns right* and in 90m you *turn right* with an Icknield Way signpost along a narrow tarmac path between hedges towards the village church and the motte-and-double bailey. In 40m ignore '**Jack's Path**' turning right and leading all the way around the motte, in 40m you *veer right* at the entrance to the churchyard of **St. Mary's, Pirton**, and in 10m *turn left* through a wooden kissing gate into a large grassy area, just 10m before an excellent information board about the motte-and-double bailey structure.



*Turn right* across the grassy area with the motte and the water-filled ditch around it on the right and in 60m continue in the same direction across the grassy area at a corner of the fence on the right. The uneven ground in the field indicates the site of a deserted medieval settlement. In 70m *turn left* towards a wooden kissing gate 110m away (100°). Once through the gate, cross a road and continue along a tarmac lane to some sports fields. In 100m ignore a footpath joining from the left and continue along the left-hand side of the sports fields, with a hedge on the left. In 220m you walk through a bike barrier into fields and continue along a raised grassy path between them (115°). In 400m continue to the right of a hedge. In 560m cross a gravel farm track and continue in the same direction along a car wide grassy field boundary with a hedge on the left.

In 680m in the far field corner, walk through a hedge gap and *turn half right* (140°) along a gravel lane (**Mill Lane** on the OS map). In 330m you walk through a gap to the right of a field gate and in 30m *fork right* at a small triangular green, *turn right* along the **Icknield Way** (Westmill Lane) and in 15m *turn left* through the second of two double wooden field gates, to continue along a gravel lane between trees. In 120m you go along tarmac past the buildings of **Westmill Farm**. In 45m the path continues along gravel again and you cross the audible (and on the left-hand side visible) millstream, an arm of the **Oughton River**. In 40m walk past a wooden field gate and enter **Oughtonhead Common Local Nature Reserve**. In 15m you reach an information board at a four-way gravel path junction.

### Here you have a choice:

**For a shortcut to Hitchin Station**, as well as a **bus stop** 230m away, continue in the same direction and pick up the directions at the end of this text under **Shortcut II**.

**For the main walk** *turn right* along a gravel-and-earth path into the Nature Reserve, soon with another arm of the **Oughton** on the right. In 60m spot the '**Hitchin Waterfall**' on the right by a footpost 2 (in fact the millstream overflow). In 240m ignore a path turning off to the left (under a horse barrier and into trees). In 170m ignore a stepped path down to the left towards a plank bridge and in 180m and in another 20m ignore boardwalks off to the left through a marshy area and to a viewing platform in a pond. In 150m ignore a grassy path turning left. In 90m pass a bathing place in the crystal clear water on the right (**The Chalky**). Finally, in 40m walk through a wooden gate to leave the Nature Reserve at a three-way Byway/Footpath junction.

**[!]** *Turn right* into trees and follow an unmarked narrow and bumpy, but clear, path through the trees, along the river to your right below, all the way to **Oughtonhead (spring)** (alternatively walk parallel to the left along a field boundary left of the wood). In 500m, at a three-way Public Restricted Byway-junction by the wellhead *turn left* through trees with a **HOOP**-marker on a white-topped wooden pole. In 30m you are out of the trees with a field on the left, and in 100m **[!]** *turn right* at a four-way track junction (initial bearing: 170°). In 260m you reach the **Oughtonhead Farm Garden Gate Tea Room**. In 100m the path joins a gravel lane. Ignore all ways off and ascend towards the houses of **Hitchin**. In 1.0 km at the top of the rise turn around to enjoy **last views** of the latter parts of the afternoon route and continue along a tarmac lane between hedges. In 130m this continues as a road (**Grays Lane**).

In 380m, where the road bends right and **Westfield Lane** joins from the left, you **[!]** *continue in the same direction* along a narrow tarmac track (**Braunds Alley**) with a low HOOP-marker post, between a red brick wall on the right and a wooden fence on the left (80°). In 70m continue along a road joining from the right. In 70m continue in the same direction with a playground on the right and in 80m cross the busy **A505 Old Park Road** at a T-junction (traffic just from the right), then continue in the same direction along **Nun's Close**. In 100m cross another busy road (**Paynes Park**, traffic just from

the left) and continue in the same direction along **West Alley**, with **West Alley Shop Arcade** on the right. In 120m you emerge onto **High Street** in the centre of **Hitchin**. *Turn right* and in 10m at the corner of **Market Place** (with a wooden cabmen's shelter) and with **Rose Buds Café & Tearoom** in a passage on the right, you have a choice:

- For the **direct route to the station** *turn left*. In 50m *turn left* along **Churchyard**, a tarmac lane with shops on the left.
- For a **short excursion through the Old Town past many other tea places (adds 400m)** continue along the right-hand side of the market past **The Glasshouse** and in 50m continue in the same direction along **Bucklersbury** (with many interesting back yards of former coaching inns) past **Azita**, **The George** pub, **Chili B's**, **Kite at The Red Hart** and **Los Reyes**. In 150m *turn left* along **Tilehouse Street**. In 55m *turn left* along **Sun Street**, where you have a pond and the entrance to **Hitchin Priory** on the right. Pass **Mevan Ocakbasi & Bar**, **The Snug**, **Lusmann's**, the **Angel Vaults Inn** (Wetherspoon), a couple of chain pizzeria and the **Sun Hotel and Restaurant** (entrance through the court yard) and on the left the **Hitchin Coffee Lab** and **The Shack**. In 200m you reach **Market Place** and continue along its right-hand side. In 50m (with **The Rose & Crown** on the right) continue in the same direction along **Churchyard**, a tarmac lane with shops on the left.

Pass **Halsey's Deli & Eatery**, **Esquires** and **The Groundworks** and then **St. Mary's Church, Hitchin** on the right and in 120m – by **Simmons Bakery** – *turn right* with the churchyard fence along another narrow tarmac lane with shops on the left. In 120m you cross **The Hiz River** and walk up some steps and through a car park to a main road. On the right you find **the recommended pub stops The Bricklayers Arms** in 110m (12 hand pumps, Banks & Taylors and Sheffords Ales) and a bit further along **The Half Moon** (repeatedly North Herts CAMRA-Pub of the Year), and in 20m **a bus stop** for infrequent buses to the station (which is still 1.3 km away).

*Turn left* along **Queen Street**. In 120m you reach a three-way road junction.

- The **shortest route** to the station follows the busy road (forking right in about 100m), passing **The Radcliffe Arms** and **The Albert Inn** en route.
- The **walk route** *turns right* across the road, up some steps and up along any one of two steep paths through a grassy park. Aim for the top left corner of the grassy area and continue along a tarmac path with trees on the left and a red brick wall on the right. In 80m the path levels out at a **water tower** on the right.

In 150m walk down some steps and cross a road to then re-trace the morning route from here: *turn left* in 20m along a narrow tarmac lane between garden fences (30°). In 150m cross a road and continue in the same direction along a wider tarmac path (**Benslow Path**). In 150m walk through bike barriers and *turn right* along a road. In 20m *turn left* along another tarmac lane between fences (**Burtons Path**). In 300m walk through more bike barriers and *turn left* and down with the path. In 15m emerge on **Station Approach**. **Hitchin Station** is 100m to the right.

London bound trains depart from the far platform 1.

## **Shortcut I (cut 2.2 km, 56m ascent/descent and 400m of tarmac around lunch) Cut the scenic downlands of Pegsdon Hills and Knocking Hoe. Lunch is in Pirton**

In 300m continue in the same direction along a wide grassy field boundary with some trees on the left towards a yellow brick house in the distance. In 450m you reach a tarmac lane at a four-way bridleway junction.

### **Here you can go either of two ways:**

- **The more interesting route** (this involves 370m of arable field crossings) *turns left* with a **Chiltern Way** marker along the tarmac lane between mature trees towards **Little Offley** (on the OS map). In 185m, where the lane veers left ('Private' sign), you *veer right* with a marker post through the trees on the right and continue along a wide grassy field boundary in the previous direction (315°). In 340m *turn right* at a three-way bridleway junction along a gravel-and-earth farm lane between fields, with very fine views into the Plain ahead towards Hitchin and Letchworth. In 90m, where the lane turns right, *continue in the same direction* across an arable field with a marker post, soon descending sharply, and with splendid views down a U-shaped valley. In 170m continue with **Saddle Plantation** on the right and in 100m, at a corner of the wood, continue across an arable field. In 200m *turn left* along a gravel farm track at a T-junction.
- **The other route** (entirely along gravel farm lanes): cross the tarmac lane and continue in the previous direction. In 120m pass the entrance to the brick house on the right. In 40m walk through a gap to the left of a wooden field gate. In 20m you have a wood on the right and in 30m pass a car-blocking retractable bollard. Follow the gravel lane through a wood, after which you have a sloping field on the left. In 250m a car wide grassy farm track joins from the left through a green metal field gate. In 65m a bridleway joins from the left across an arable field.

Continue along the gravel lane, soon curving right through a wood, with houses either side. In 75m you have a field on the left and in 260m reach a tarmac lane at a bend and *turn left* along it, ignoring the right turn towards **New Wellbury Business Park**. In 20m **[!]** *turn right* with a Chiltern Way Footpath marker post through a narrow hedge gap and follow a meandering earthen path through trees. In 40m emerge through a wooden kissing gate from the trees into a farm yard and *veer left* around a house. In 50m continue along a tarmac stretch with a row of stables on the right, and in 35m this continues as a gravel lane past a horse exerciser on the left. Walk past a few paddocks on the left and in 60m continue along a car wide grassy path between trees, which soon ascends up a rise. In 230m the path levels out and in 35m it *turns left* around a low-lying pond. In 40m the path *turns right* and in 30m you *turn left* through a wooden kissing gate, ignoring a path a little to the right into trees. In the corner of a sloping field with a car wide farm track around the edge, you *turn half right* across the field along a grassy path to a point halfway up the slope to the left of a clump of trees (30°).

In 150m continue in the same direction at a cross paths by a tree stump and in 50m continue to the left of the clump of trees (concealing a pond), to then descend towards a line of trees, hiding **Hitchin Road**. In 140m leave the field through a hedge gap, cross the road and continue with a footpath and a Chiltern Way Extension-signpost into trees, immediately *turning left*. In 50m walk between wooden railings and *turn right* into a field at a corner. Follow the left-hand boundary through a dip and then up a steep incline to the far-left corner 160m away. Leave the field through a boundary gap and in 10m go through a wooden kissing gate into a large pasture. Head towards the far-left field corner, with **Tingley Wood** on the left, and in 190m leave the field through a wooden kissing gate to the right of wooden field gate and continue along a car wide farm track. Now in view is the lunch destination of **Pirton**, with its notable water tank on the left-hand fringes of the village. In 150m at the far end of the wood on the left you continue with a hedge on the right. Leave the field in 310m in the far-right corner

through a boundary gap and *turn right* along the ancient **Icknield Way** at a T-junction. Pick up the directions in the main walk text at the asterisk \*).

### **Shortcut II (cut 2.5 km and 53m ascent/descent, add 500m tarmac at the end) Cut Oughtonhead Common NR, the Oughton River and Hitchin's Old Town**

In 140m you reach the outskirts of **Hitchin** and continue through a metal kissing gate to the left of a field gate and along **Westmill Lane**. In 50m cross **Swinburne Avenue** (a **bus stop** is on the right for Mon-Sat services to **Hitchin Station**) and continue in the same direction along **Westmill Road**. In 250m *turn left* along **Milestone Road**, along its right-hand side pavement. In 230m pass a **bus stop** (Beechwood Close) and in 30m **[!]** – just after passing the corner of a three-storey house on the right (numbers 93-103) – *turn right* along a tarmac cul-de-sac. In 20m *turn left* with the close and continue along a tarmac track between low wooden railings. In 35m continue between wooden garden fences and in 60m at the busy **A600 Bedford Road** *turn right* along its pavement. In 10m *cross the road* at a traffic light and *turn right* along the opposite pavement. In 50m *turn left* along the pavement of **St. Georges Close**. In 120m continue in the same direction along a narrow tarmac track with sports fields on the left and a hedge on the right. In 300m *turn right* along a road leading to Rugby and Running Clubs on the left (“Hitchin Rugby Club – **Real Ales served here**”).

In 50m *turn left* along **Old Hale Way**. In 60m *turn right* to cross the road at traffic lights and continue a little to the left along **Strathmore Avenue**. In 50m *turn left* along the quieter **Heathfield Road** and in 130m *turn right* with it. In 300m *turn left* at a T-junction with **Stormont Road** and in 150m *turn right* along the busy **Grove Road**. In 40m *turn left* across the road at a set of lights and *bear right* along a tarmac path towards a metal-railed footbridge over the **Hiz River** 40m away and enter **Ransom's Recreation Ground**. You follow a tarmac shared cycle-/footpath through the park (ignoring a right turn in 15m) and in 340m leave it onto **Nightingale Road**, with the **Molly Malone** freehouse 80m away on the right. *Turn left* along the road, in 100m passing the former **Nightingale** pub on the right and in 100m *turn right* to cross two arms of the road at a pedestrian crossing and *turn right* at a large roundabout. In 30m *turn left* to cross the road at a set of lights and continue along **Station Approach** to **Hitchin Station** in 100m. London bound trains depart from the far platform 1.

### **Connection from Pegsdon to Hexton to pick up SWC 229 there (add 3.3 km)**

*Turn left* from the pub along Pegsdon Way, re-tracing your pre-lunch route and in 200m *turn right* at a T-junction. In 250m *turn left* along a tarmac drive by a small triangular green with a Circular Walk signpost. You pass several houses after about 100m and continue in the same direction along a narrow gravel track by the last house on the left in about another 150m. You have an arable field on the right and in 250m *curve right* with the path and the field boundary. In 120m *turn left* with the path into the adjacent field and follow its left-hand boundary (the **Bunyan Trail** joins from the right along a field boundary). In 150m leave the field in its far corner and *veer right* along a car wide farm track, soon passing **Mill House**. The track continues as tarmac and you follow it for 750m all the way into **Hexton**. 250m after the first houses, *turn right* along a tarmac lane, signposted **Higham Gobion** (the late lunch stop, **The Raven of Hexton** and the **Lavender Tea Rooms** are 50m ahead along the road).

Pick up the directions in the Legrave to Harlington walk: page 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> para, 2<sup>nd</sup> sentence (“In 150m *fork left*...”).