

History and Literary Connections around Aldworth on the East Berkshire Downs

A figure-of-eight walk of c.8km (5 miles) with an optional detour of c1.5km (1 mile) on well-made tracks without stiles. There are short sections on country lanes. Parking on the trackside beyond Starveall at SU544810. There are two pubs in Aldworth for local refreshments. OS Land Ranger Map 174 might be useful.

1. Starveall is one of several farms in the area named, in the past, for its poor potential for agriculture. As you descend the track, note the exposed chalk bedrock under your feet showing the thinness of the easily impoverished soils.

At the bottom of the hill, turn sharp right to follow the Ridgeway National Trail eastward towards Streatley.

(A detour to the top of Lowbury Hill can be made by following the Ridgeway west (left onto the Ridgeway) and taking the first right-hand track. The return path crosses by field edges to regain the Ridgeway near Warren Farm.)

2. Lowbury Hill is visible to the left as the Ridgeway gains height. There are fine views of the Thames Vale from its summit. A high point on the eastern Downs, its name means 'burial mound enclosure'. On the hilltop, earthworks show the remains of an Iron Age/Roman enclosure (possibly a cattle pen and/or a Roman temple courtyard) and an Anglo-Saxon burial mound.

3. The ancient Ridgeway track runs the length of the Downland escarpment from Avebury in the west to Streatley in the east. Used since prehistoric times, it is often described as Britain's oldest road. **Warren Farm** is one of two so named locally where rabbits were farmed in the past. Here, also, is the site of the Battle of Ashdown

871CE where Alfred the Great defeated the Viking army.

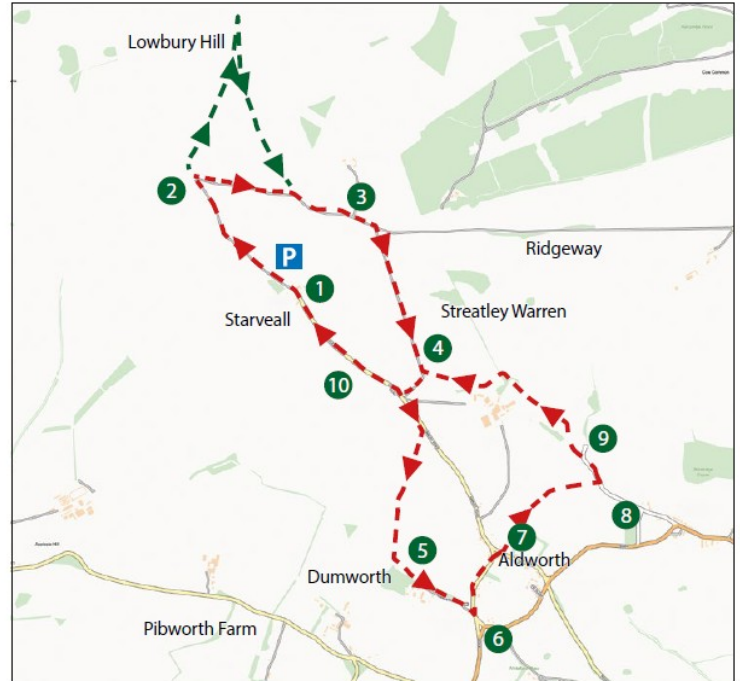
On reaching the first right-hand turn, take this byway towards the village of Aldworth.

4. In the pasture field at Streatley Warren (yet more evidence of rabbit farming) can be seen the low banks of the remains of an Iron Age field system. The fields and slopes of the dry valley have SSSI designation, important for rare chalk grassland flora and fauna. A beautiful view opens across the Goring Gap towards the Chiltern Hills.

Follow the track to the metalled lane and turn left. Take the next right-hand track to descend gently through farmland.

5. Pibworth Farm, where the poet Tennyson's parents-in-law lived, is ahead in the trees on the ridge. The track curves round to **Dumworth Farm** dating from the 15th century. It was here that the mid-18th century poet and novelist Richard Graves lodged when he was curate of the parish. He is said to have eloped with the farmer's daughter.

6. St Mary's Church dates from the 1200's. Inside are the effigies of the 'Aldworth Giants' – all members of the same 14th century de la Beche family and so tall that some hardly fit into their stone embrasures. Elizabeth I rode



from Ewelme especially to view them. Outside is an ancient yew tree, and the grave of Lawrence Binyon, author of the lines read at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day 'They shall not grow old...' He was friends with the poets John Masefield and Robert Bridges who also lived nearby.

7. Aldworth was owned by Theodore the Goldsmith at the time of Domesday. The well, under its substantial cover, dates from 1895 and is one of the deepest in England.

The route leaves the village by the path between the pub garden and the recreation ground.

8. Westridge Farmhouse, one-time home of Lawrence Binyon, can be seen amongst trees across the fields to the right.

Turn right along the farm track.

9. Another far-reaching view opens to the right before the track climbs steadily through open grassland where butterflies abound in spring and summer. Marbled White, Small Heath and Common Blue are amongst the more unusual.

Pass through the gates at the farm to walk along the edge of Streatley Warren and regain the stony track. Turn left, and then right on the metalled lane to return to the parking area at Starveall.

10. The metalled lane is an ancient drove way – wide and grassy to accommodate herds and flocks being driven to and from grazing on the downland pastures, before the downland was ploughed up to make way for arable crops during and following WW2.

Margery Slatter