

# West into Old Berkshire near Ashbury

*Approximately 6 miles (9.5k). Tracks, field paths and minor lanes. Some paths can be muddy and slippery after rain. Park on The Ridgeway a mile southeast of Ashbury on the B4000 at SU273 843 [///lure.beanbag.formation](http://lure.beanbag.formation). Refreshments in Ashbury and nearby villages. OS Explorer Map 170*

Walk northeast along The Ridgeway, over the first crossing of tracks, passing the long barrow on your left.

1. The Ridgeway ancient track is usually dry in summer, but it is said that travellers of old took a great risk when they set out in winter along the route. After prolonged rain the mud could lie deep enough to trap or even drown the unwary!



© Geograph – Des Blenkinsopp

2. Wayland's Smithy is a fine long barrow built over 5,000 years ago as a burial chamber. The entrance to the grave is flanked by 3m high sarsen stones probably dragged here from the Marlborough Downs. Wayland was a mythical Saxon blacksmith. Local legend states that if a horse and a coin are left here overnight, the horse will be re-shod by morning.

Ignore any joining paths (R and L), turning right at the next crossing of tracks. Follow the track past woodland strips on the right and then more woodland on the left.

3. Look out for downland wildlife! Larger animals seen all year round are hares and deer. Of the birds, skylarks and meadow pipits singing overhead and corn buntings singing from fence posts are common summer sounds.

At the break between the woodland to your left bear right across arable fields heading to the left of the woods on the far horizon. After the first field, cross a

bridleway (about 100m left of a solitary hawthorn bush). After a second large field cross a track with an ageing signpost. After yet another field you come to a fence. Go through the gate in the corner of the field. Bear left keeping the first coombe (dry valley) to your right, shortly bearing half right to follow the ridge downhill to the gate by the road.

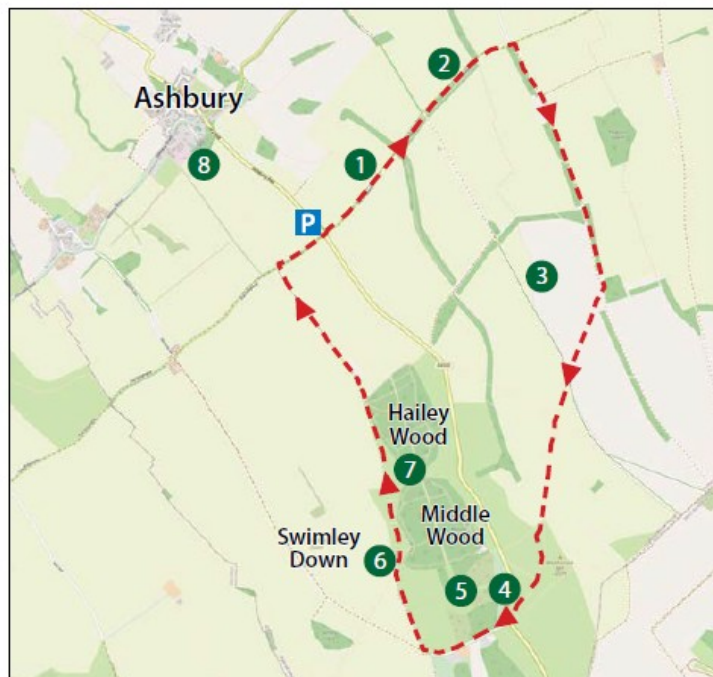
4. In the fields nearby are numerous examples of 'grey wethers' – sarsen stones thought to resemble sheep lying in pasture. These are very hard and heavy remnants of a layer of sandstone that once covered the chalk. They are locally abundant and have often been used as building material.

Cross the road to walk down the minor road opposite keeping Ashdown House to your right.



5. Ashdown House, now owned by the National Trust, was built of chalk blocks in the 17th century by the 1st Earl Craven. He is said to have chosen this isolated site so that Elizabeth of Bohemia, sister to Charles 1, could escape from plague-ridden London. Elizabeth unfortunately died without ever seeing the house finished.

As the track turns left, carry straight on through the



gateway and then round to the right. Walk up the field edge track through two gates keeping Alfred's Castle to your left.



© Geograph – Brian Robert Marshall

6. The Iron Age hillfort of Alfred's Castle, built about 2,500 years ago, is possibly close to the site of the battle of Ashdown in 871 AD. This battle fought and won by the Saxons led by King Ethelred and his brother, later to be King Alfred, was against the Danes. These invaders had a stronghold at Reading and used The Ridgeway as a route to raid the surrounding countryside.

7. The path passes through flower rich meadows typical of chalk downland with many flowers and insects in the summer.



© Geograph – Steve Daniels

After the 2nd gate, the path takes the middle of two fields and then follows the fence line on the left. At the end of this field go through the gate and continue in the same direction, ignoring any paths or tracks, to The Ridgeway.

8. A pleasant visit could be made to the village of Ashbury. The spring line village has a church built primarily of local chalk blocks, like many of the cottages, and a lovely Norman south door. Ashbury used to have watercress beds fed by the pure water from the chalk springs.

Turn right along The Ridgeway and return to the start after 400m.

Margery Slatter