

Ashridge bluebell walk

With **Andrew Clark**

The National Trust Estate at Ashridge is one of the best places in the country to see bluebells. Not only does this gentle walk take the visitor through carpets of this beautiful plant, it also looks at the history of the estate. If that isn't enough, there are wonderful views over the valley from Duncombe Terrace. (Also included are alternative routes for when the bluebells are not in season).

START: National Trust Ashridge Estate Visitor Centre car park. Grid ref: SP 971 130. Nearest postcode: HP4 1LT

DISTANCE: 4.6 miles, with 110m of ascent over the length of the walk

TERRAIN: An easy walk that can be muddy after rain

MAPS: OS Explorer 181 and Chiltern Society 19

REFRESHMENTS: Brownlow Café at the Ashridge Visitor Centre

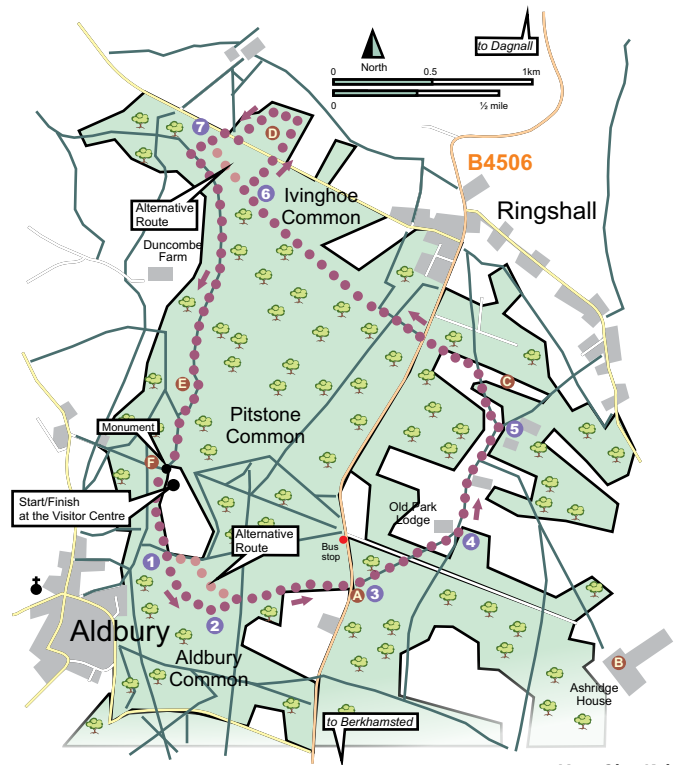
PUBLIC TRANSPORT: On Monday to Saturday, buses 30, 31 & 32 stop at the end of Monument Drive.

NOTE: This walk has been produced with the assistance of the National Trust. To ensure that the bluebells are not damaged, please follow NT signage at all times. Many of the habitats are sensitive, so please stick to the paths. Dogs should be kept under close control at all times. For further information see www.nationaltrust.org.uk and search for Ashridge.

Route

From the Brownlow Café turn left past Monument Cottage and take the bridleyway ahead. At the top of the hill bear left on the Meadow Trail and follow the fence until it bends to the left. (Alternative route detailed below *1).

1. Continue ahead for c30m to a fork. Bear left along a level path through the woods. Follow this path as it twists and turns through the woods to a wide track.
2. Turn left along the track and stay on it for c500m, ignoring all tracks on either side. Continue past the estate cottages on the right and to the main road ahead. Cross the road with great care and continue straight ahead on the tarmac driveway, signposted to the Bridgewater Arms.
3. After c50m, take the path diagonally left through the woods and follow the markers to the edge of the golf fairway. Once on the other side, turn right along the edge of the fairway and then past a bunker to an access road.
4. Turn left along it past Old Park Lodge. Note the part sundials on its walls. Where the road bends to the left, keep straight ahead to the right of a barn and through a wood. Stay in the same direction across the golf course and up the hill to the left of the clubhouse. At the top turn left along an access road to a junction.
5. Turn left and after c50m bear diagonally right. Follow the marker posts



Map: Glyn Kuhn

across the fairway and into a wood. The path then meets a crossing path that runs along the side of garden fences. Do not go straight ahead on the narrow path, but turn left and follow the fencing all the way to the main road. Cross with great care to the wide track ahead. Stay on this for c1km ignoring all tracks left and right.

6. Shortly after a wide clearing the track narrows slightly and then divides. (Alternative route detailed below *6). Take the track that swings round to the right and follow it through a car park to a road. Cross into Dockey Wood. Walk round the Wood as directed, taking great care not to trample any of the bluebells. Return to the road at the top end of the Wood and turn right along it to some small wooden posts on the verge on the left.
7. Take the grassy woodland track directly behind the posts. Go over a crossing track and follow the path as it winds through the woods down to a major track. Turn left and follow it for just over 1.5km back to the café.

Alternative routes, out of the bluebell season

- *1. Follow the fence round to the left for c100m. Where the fence begins to bend again, turn right on a wide, often muddy track to rejoin the main route at a five-way path junction. Take the second path on left and head for the estate cottages as described in point 2 above.
- *6 Do not take the path that swings to the right, but continue straight ahead for c300m. Near the road, look for the crossing path that joins from wooden posts at Point 7 above. Turn left to rejoin the main route.

Points of Interest

The Ashridge Estate dates back over 700 years to when a monastery was founded by Edmund, Earl of Cornwall. The monastic order was known as the College of Bonhommes because of the colour of their robes. It continued to flourish until Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1539. He bequeathed the estate to the future Queen Elizabeth I. She lived there for eight years before being arrested by her half-sister Mary and taken to the Tower of London. After Elizabeth's death the estate was bought by Thomas Egerton, whose son bought the title the Earl of Bridgewater. In 1720 the fourth Earl became the first Duke of Bridgewater. The most famous member of the family was the 'Canal Duke', who commissioned the building of The Bridgewater Canal which opened in 1761, and is regarded as the first true canal in Britain. In 1853 the estate passed to Lord Brownlow, whose family held on to it until 1925 when it was split up, with much of the parkland and surrounding area passing to The National Trust. The parkland is a haven for wildlife and is famous for its herds of fallow deer.

A Thunderdell Lodge: A grade II listed building which used to be the gate lodge to the house. There are a total of three lodges on each corner of the deer park.

B Ashridge House: Grade I listed. The building of the current house was started by the 'Canal Duke', but he did not live to see its completion in 1814.

It was designed by the architect James Wyatt, while the parkland was the responsibility of Capability Brown and later Humphrey Repton. The house was used as a hospital during both World Wars. After WWII it became a teacher training college and then a finishing school. It was also used to store public records. In 1959 the Ashridge Management College was established at the house, specialising in personal and organisational development. Guided tours are available.

C Golden Valley: The valley is little changed since its design by Capability Brown. It got its name while under wheat crop and is often used as a film location.

D Dockey Wood: The Wood is one of the best places in the UK to see bluebells. It's a working oak plantation, with a remnant of semi-natural ancient woodland along the roadside.

E Duncombe Terrace: First on the right is a replica of a Victorian shooting lodge that was destroyed by fire in the 1980s. It has been used as a scout hut in the past, but is now used for filming. Next on the right, behind a fence, is a Bronze Age barrow. Shortly after that a bridge passes over a hollow-way. Historically, it was used by farmers to bring livestock onto the ridge.

F Bridgewater Monument: The monument was erected in 1832 in memory of the Duke of Bridgewater. It is 33m high, with 170 steps to the top. It is open to the public - check opening times.