

Charlton walk

With **John Pearce**

The walk starts in the small hamlet of Charlton, gateway to the North Chiltern Hills, before heading across open farmland and up to the village of Offley. It then makes its way to the very outskirts of the market town of Hitchin, before returning to Charlton. You should see red kites and buzzards, and perhaps a sparrow hawk or a hobby, or even a rare bee orchid. Please note that sheep and cattle will be encountered and dogs should be kept under control at all times.

START: The Windmill pub, Charlton SG2 5AE. Grid ref TL 178 281.

Parking is available at the pub for customers only, otherwise please park by the roadside

DISTANCE: 6.7 miles with 505ft of ascent

TERRAIN: A moderate stile-free walk over rolling countryside.

Gaining access through some kissing gates along the route will test your ingenuity!

MAPS: OS Explorer 193, Chiltern Society 26, 29 & 30

REFRESHMENTS: The Windmill, and The Red Lion at Offley

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: None at the start, but plenty of buses serve Hitchin

Route

From The Windmill car park turn left along the road past the pub and Charlton House on the right, with its blue plaque recording the birthplace of Sir Henry Bessemer in 1813.

1. After 200m take the bridleway to the right opposite the house 'Gracelands'. This is Windmill Lane. Follow it for c1.3km, cross the unsurfaced byway, Hoars Lane, and continue straight ahead signposted 'Chiltern Way'. In summer the path is often lined with poppies, the grass can be quite long and the path uneven.
2. After c650m, at a field boundary, turn left past an electricity pole. After passing the electricity pylons, at the T-junction follow the footpath to the right and after a couple more bends reach the first of many kissing gates. Continue on The Chiltern Way up a steep hill, keeping the trees to your left. At the top of the hill you come to a kissing gate, a good place to pause and look back across the open countryside to the northeast. Bear left through the gate to pass through a belt of trees and continue along the left edge of a wood. The path becomes quite narrow, with a large house to the left. Go through a gate before reaching a main road and arriving at Offley village.
3. Turn left along the grass verge and, after a few metres, take the turning on the left just in front of The Red Lion pub. Follow the lane for c320m, and where it turns left continue straight ahead on the bridleway along the right-hand field edge. At the end of the field the bridleway is joined by a wide track from the left, which then turns right. Do not follow it when it turns right, but stay in the same direction between two fields, taking in the views to the left. At the end of the field go through a metal gate and take a diagonal path right across the field to the gate opposite. Go through it and turn left to take the broad track with woods on the left. Take care here as furrows from tractors can be severe. Follow the path for c650m and, before the track turns right to pass through a hedge line, turn left through a wooden kissing gate.
4. Continue straight ahead on the marked public footpath to the left of a

hedge. It's not unusual to see green woodpeckers along this path. After 200m go through the kissing gate, bear right and immediately left along the edge of the field. The path runs alongside West Wood then drops to the left, signposted 'Chiltern Way'. Continue downhill with a fence on your right. At the bottom go through the large gate. Offley Holes Farm can clearly be seen to the east. The original manor house sat on top of the hill behind the current house, but was destroyed by fire during WWII. Rare breed sheep and cattle are often in the fields around here. The path continues through a small wooded area and another gate, before dropping down past the next gate to a road. Stay in the same direction along the road for c340m to a wide track to the right, signposted 'Tatmorehills Lane $\frac{3}{4}$ mile'.

5. Turn right up the track and continue with woods to the right and pylons to the left. Hill climbing is facilitated here by tree roots standing proud of the path, but be careful not to trip. Follow the path round as it sweeps to the left under the cabling, then follow the hedge on the right for c730m to join an unsurfaced lane from the right. Stay in the same direction to meet Maydencroft Lane. Continue straight over the lane on Byway 41 signposted 'Charlton $\frac{1}{2}$ mile', with the grounds of Maydencroft Manor to the right. After 200m cross Brick Kiln Lane and follow the path straight ahead but slightly to the right. This is also part of the Hicca Way, which follows the river Hiz from its source in Charlton to the confluence with the Ivel in Henlow, Beds. Crops may be quite high here through the summer months.
6. At the far end of the field you reach a fence above the A602 bypass. Here turn sharp left to cut across the corner of the field to a gap in the fence line. Go through it and follow the path across the river Hiz, then go through the final kissing gate to Charlton Road. Opposite is Dog Kennel Farm, where Henry VIII kept his hunting dogs. Turn left along the pavement and in 300m arrive back at The Windmill for well-earned refreshments.

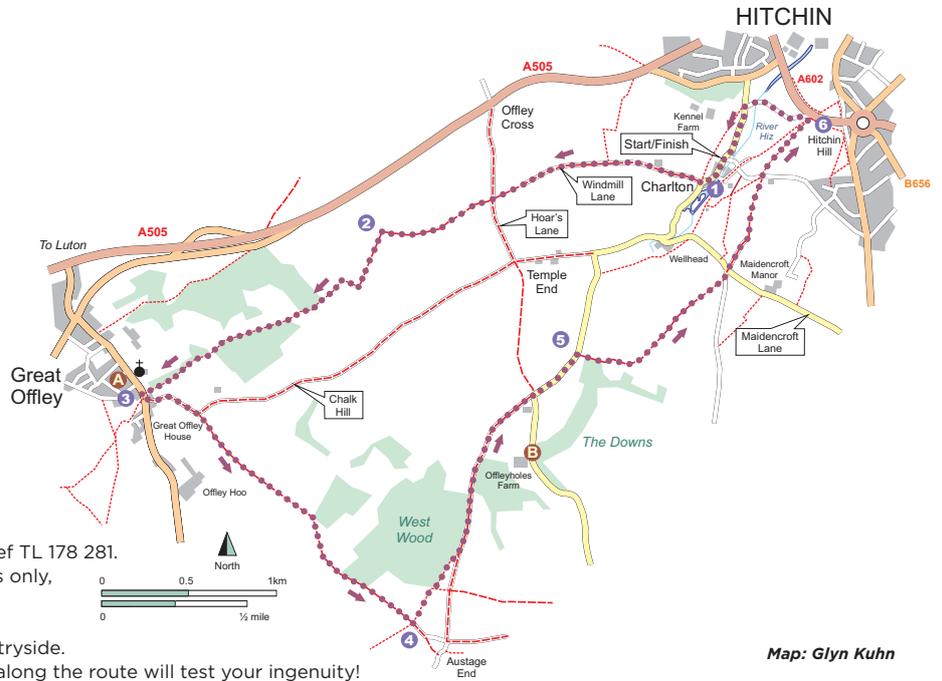
Points of Interest

The Windmill pub proudly stands at the centre of the village and serves as a reminder of the original windmill which was sited on the hill to the west. Originally a single cottage, it was already a public house by the time Samuel Lucas, the Hitchin brewer, bought it in 1860.

Charlton most likely derives its name from the Saxon, 'Cerleton', or 'settlement of the free peasants'. The river Hiz has its source just south of the village and runs to the confluence with the river Ivel some 10 miles to the north. The area round the source was once occupied by the Hicca tribe. They paid 'Danegeld' to the Vikings who had an encampment near the confluence. Payment probably took the form of bread rather than gold or silver. The practice is now commemorated by the Hicca Way walk, for which maps are available. At the time of Domesday, Charlton was held by King William himself, with a watermill recorded as the only dwelling. It was

given to the Knights Templar by King Stephen in 1140 and became part of Dinsley Manor. Charlton is noted as the birthplace of Sir Henry Bessemer, the Victorian engineer and entrepreneur, best known for inventing a process for the cheap and large-scale production of steel. By diligently obtaining key patents he became a very wealthy man.

- A Great Offley:** Offa, King of Mercia, is believed to have established a palace here in the 8th century, but it's no longer evident. The largest house is now Offley Place, built in the 17th century and substantially rebuilt in the 18th century. It remained in the same ownership for 350 years, and has now become a hotel and wedding venue.
- B Offley Holes Farm** is an ancient farm that sits at the base of the escarpment near the Charlton to Preston road. The name was first documented in 1650, the farm being part of the former Knights Templar estate of Temple Dinsley. From the walk you can see the grand farmhouse, often with attractive brindled longhorn cattle in the field at the front.



Map: Glyn Kuhn