

Visitor information

Take a picnic to eat on Watlington Hill and enjoy the views. You will pass, or be close to, the Fox and Hounds pub in Christmas Common (01491 612599). There are also pubs, shops and a café in Watlington.

For details of places to stay, visitor attractions and other walks, contact the Visitor Information Centre in the Town Hall in Henley-on-Thames (tel 01491 578034) or see www.visitchilterns.co.uk

How to get to the start

All three circular walks start and finish at the National Trust car park at the top of Watlington Hill, a short distance from the crossroads at Christmas Common.

To plan a journey by public transport from anywhere in the country to the starting point, call 0871 200 2233 or visit www.traveline.info





Watlington Hill is 1½ miles from the centre of Watlington via Hill Road. If you are walking, take the footpath on the right just after The Ridgeway path crosses Hill Road. Follow the path up the hill by the 'white mark' to the car park.

By bus: The T1 service by Thames Travel runs from Oxford to Watlington and places in between. The 124 service by Arriva runs from Thame to Watlington and places in between. Check with Traveline.



Watlington Hill

This is one of a series of walks through the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It mainly follows rights of way most of which are waymarked as follows:

-  'yellow arrow' Footpaths (walkers only)
-  'blue arrow' Bridleways (horseriders, cyclists and walkers)
-  'red arrow' Byways (open to all traffic)
-  'purple arrow' Restricted Byway (horseriders, cyclists, walkers and non-mechanically propelled vehicles).

Please be considerate in the countryside

- Keep to public rights of way, and leave farm gates as you find them
- Keep dogs on leads near livestock



Coppiced oak

There are many other wonderful walks in the Chilterns:

- Visit www.chilternsaonb.org or call 01844 355500 for other Chilterns Country walks.
- Visit www.chilternsociety.org.uk or call 01494 771250 for information on the Chiltern Society's walk programme, to obtain Chiltern Society footpath maps or to join the Society.

Learn more about Chilterns commons at www.chilternsaonb.org/commons

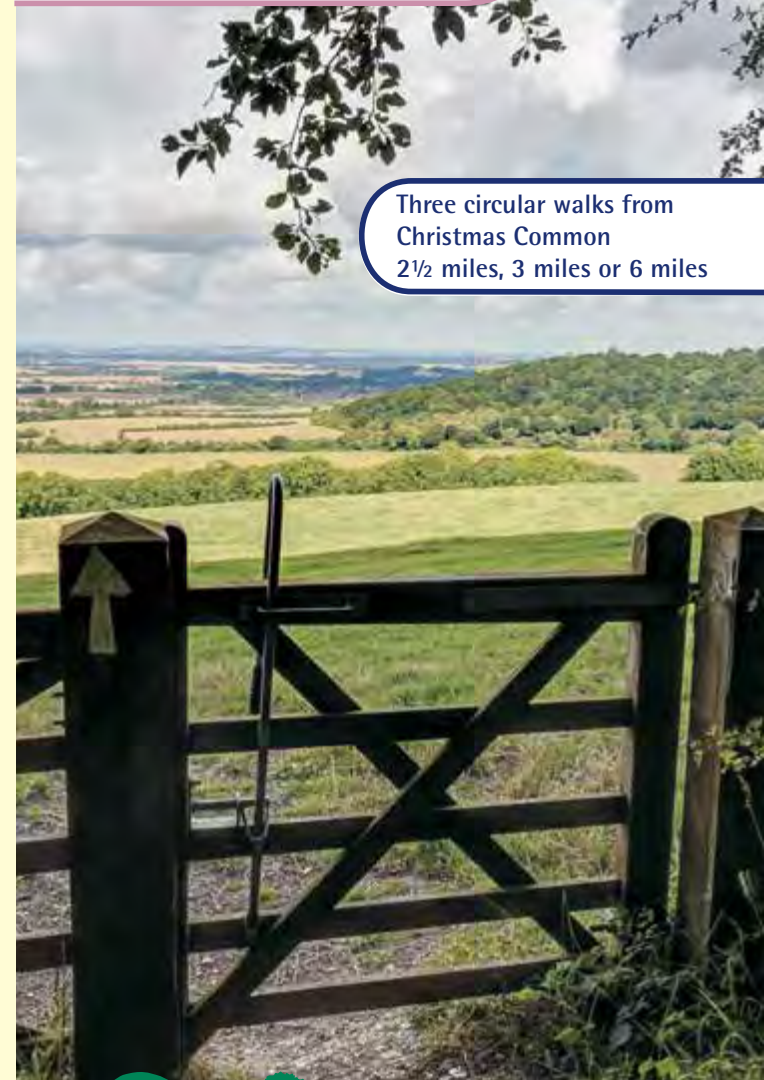
This leaflet has been produced by the Chilterns Conservation Board as part of the Chilterns Commons Project. The Project benefits from funding by the Heritage Lottery Fund and help from volunteers.



Chilterns Country

Circular walks near Christmas Common
Discover local history while enjoying extensive and varied views.

Three circular walks from Christmas Common
2½ miles, 3 miles or 6 miles



Walk 3 Watlington Park and Greenfield, a 6 mile circular walk

1 From the car park, turn right along the road until you come to a large metal gate on the right. Go through the gate, bear right to the arrow and go through a small wooden gate. Follow the path downhill between hedges and a wire fence.

The path leads downhill through old scrub with many hawthorn trees. This area was originally grassland and the trees have grown as grazing has ceased. Further along on the right you will see a large grassy field stretching down the valley; a map of Watlington parish made in 1800 shows this area was divided into seven fields.

2 The path continues along the edge of mature woodland, with a hedge on the right; it gradually levels out.

This wood is Lower Dean Wood and here the path has a large obvious bank on the left which marks the old woodland edge. It probably also marks the edge of Watlington Park which was created by Richard, Earl of Cornwall in 1276. Prior to the formation of the park, the land was used for common grazing and for hunting by freemen. There are old yew trees here, as well as plants such as dog's mercury which indicate ancient woodland, so it is possible that this woodland was in existence when the park was created.

After you leave the woodland, you will reach the hamlet of Lower Dean. In 1883 a well was recorded here but there were no houses. The name Dean comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *denu* which means valley, so very apt for this area!

3 Continue along the track until you reach a junction. Turn right here to continue to Greenfield.

For a shorter walk of 2½ miles, turn left to walk up to the metal gate. Follow the route description in Walk 2 from **5** to **7** (NOTE the track in front of you is not a public path.)

The area past Lower Dean is shown on a pre-inclosure map dated around 1800. It was a large open field called Howe Field which stretched down to the Ridgeway and up to the hamlet of Howe. You will see it again as you walk up the track to the woods (pt. **4**)

4 When you reach the road, turn left and walk with care, along the verge if possible. Opposite a house and black barn called Dumble Dore on the right, take the footpath on your left, over a stile. Turn right and follow the track parallel to the hedge towards woodland.

At the woodland edge near a stile, look out for a view of Howe Farm on the right. This hamlet has ancient roots – it was mentioned in 12th century documents.

5 At a gate in the woods, cross a track and bear left (W15) at the footpath junction. Follow the white arrows on the trees up the hill.

This is Greenfield Copse, a typical Chiltern beech wood now owned by the National Trust. It is ancient woodland which means that it has been continuously wooded since 1600. It has been managed for different uses over the centuries but has never been cleared. In 1616 the woodland here was surveyed. It had pollarded beech (ie cut above the height of grazing animals and allowed to grow from this cut), saleable oak and young hazel. Look out for these trees as you walk.

At the top of the hill where the path is level, you are likely to see bluebells flowering in the spring; later in the year you will see the silvery remains of the flower stalks.

6 The path leads to a solid wooden gate which opens onto the road, opposite Greenfield. For a shorter walk of 4 miles, you can turn left here along the road to return to Christmas Common. To continue the longer walk, cross the road from the wooden gate to the farm. Look for the brideway sign on a post under the big tree. Walk to the left of the large barns and along a track passing cottages and a large garden. Continue between hedges downhill.

People have been living in the hamlet of Greenfield since the early Middle Ages. In 1764 Edward Horne, who lived here, created the "white mark" in the shape of an obelisk on Watlington Hill. In 1830, Greenfield was the site of rioting and burning during the time of the Swing Riots in protest against rural poverty and the loss of common pasture here, which was enclosed in 1815. Greenfield Farm is now famous for its Christmas trees.



Greenfield Farm

7 Continue into the woodland, walking downhill with the field just visible on your left. At the bottom of the slope, turn left following the W19 white arrows.

These woods (like many others in this area) were managed for centuries producing firewood, materials for building and farming and later, in the 19th century, wood for chair making too.

8 At the next junction turn left, then almost immediately just opposite the field, take a narrow flinty path on the right, marked with white arrows. Follow the path uphill through woodland, finally leading down to a wide open area of tracks.

The wide track along the valley bottom follows the line of the ancient parish boundary between Watlington and Pyrton. In AD 744 it was mentioned in a boundary charter for King Offa (of Offa's Dyke fame).

9 Cross to the path (PS8 CW) almost opposite. (NOTE this path is slightly hidden so you may have to look for it!) The narrow path climbs uphill and eventually reaches a stile crossing from the woodland into a grassy field. Walk straight on to the gateway to reach another ancient track, Hollandridge Lane.



Hollandridge Lane

(If you turn right on the track for a few metres you can see Hollandridge Farm. The farm here dates back to at least 1282 when it was owned by Emma Herlingerrugge. The family name still remains for the house and the lane. The farm buildings date back to the early 18th century and are shown on a Stonor Estate map of 1725. The ancient oak tree nearby is probably older than the buildings.)

10 From the gateway, turn left to walk along Hollandridge Lane until you reach the road on the edge of Christmas Common. Walk with care and follow the road straight on to the junction signed left to Watlington. From here, follow the road back to the National Trust car park.

As you walk uphill along Hollandridge Lane you may notice banks on each side. The depth of this holloway shows the antiquity of this route. Some banks are further from the present track which must have been wider in the past. As the path levels out, the woodland on each side is managed by the Forestry Commission. It is ancient woodland, meaning it has been wooded since at least the 1600s. During the 20th century this woodland was planted with conifers, but they have recently been removed to return the woodland to its original state.

Description of route:

Three separate walks are described, but they can be combined if you would like a longer walk. All three circular walks start and finish at the National Trust car park at the top of Watlington Hill, a short distance from the crossroads at Christmas Common.

The routes follow paths across fields and through woods and some paths can be muddy in places. There are some stiles on Walks 2 and 3 and some paths on these walks are steep. Take care when walking short stretches on, or crossing, country lanes. Wear suitable footwear and allow time to rest and enjoy the views. Map: OS Explorer 171

Walk 1 Common Boundary Banks, a 2½ mile circular walk

There are no stiles on this fairly level route.

- 1 From the car park, go back to the road, turn right and walk to the junction. Bear right towards Christmas Common.
- 2 Just before the next junction, look for the path on the left next to the 30mph sign. Follow the grassy path, bearing right, then left, following the white arrows, passing a house on the right. Here the path becomes a track which leads straight on. Continue until you reach a junction with painted arrows on the trees. Turn right (PY3).

This area was part of the old common land belonging to Pyrton which was sold when the open commons were enclosed. Look out for a mixture of trees, including yew and oak. Some have been coppiced, ie cut at ground level. The size of the multiple trunks that have re-grown shows that this took place many years ago.

After a short distance in this open woodland you will reach a large bank. Pause here to notice the different vegetation on either side of the bank. The beech trees are tall and straight and there is little ground vegetation. In contrast to the variety of vegetation you have just walked through, this area has been wooded and managed for either fuel or for chair making for hundreds of years.

- 3 Bear right and follow the path alongside the bank passing large pits which are probably old quarries. Continue straight on,



Boundary bank

ignoring the path going off to the left. You follow the bank for a good distance until the path turns right, leaving the bank.

The bank marks the ancient boundary of the edge of common land which stretched from the top of Watlington Hill to Northend and also the boundary between

Watlington and Shirburn parishes. The bank varies in size now but you can see it on your right as you walk, still clearly marking these ancient boundaries.

The field on your right beyond the woodland edge probably originated as smaller fields taken from rough woodland or common land many centuries ago. Notice the old field maple and ash trees along this field edge, still marking the common edge.

- 4 The path turns right and follows the line of a wire fence, and continues to the road.

On the right of the path, there is still a small bank and old trees along the old common and field boundary. Coopers Wood is on the left. It is different again to the other woodland seen along the path with a mixture of species and open spaces. A map dated 1840 shows that this area was part of the common, but by 1883, the common was enclosed and Coopers Wood was mixed woodland as it still is today.

- 5 At the road, cross with care and enter the field through a kissing gate. Follow the arrows right across the field to another gate, then straight ahead, diagonally left across the next field to the gate into woodland.

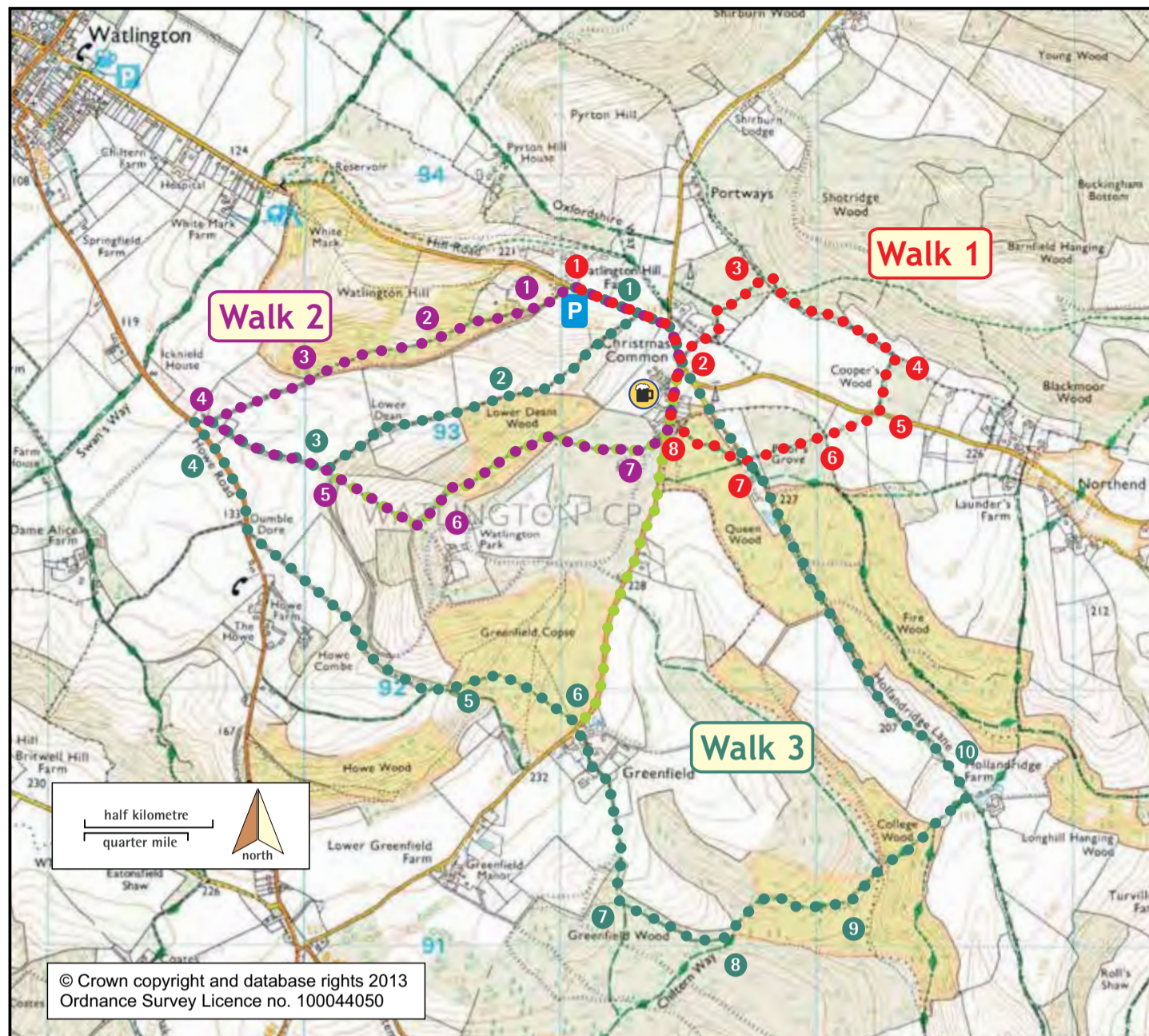
The fields you cross were part of Northend Common, which joined Christmas Common. In the summer there are plentiful flowers and grasses in these fields.

- 6 At the bottom of the field, go through the kissing gate and continue straight on through the wood until you reach a rough track.

For a shorter walk of 2¼ miles, turn right to return to the road junction.

- 7 For the longer walk, go straight across the track. In 1850 the track was called the Driftway, meaning that animals were driven along it. It leads to Hollandridge Lane and ultimately to Henley-on-Thames. Continue straight for 25m. Following signs for the Oxfordshire Way (OW), bear right through fairly open woodland. The path emerges on the road, next to The Old Church.

This woodland area is part of Pyrton parish, showing how complicated ancient parish boundaries can be. This originated from the need for each parish to have access to a variety of natural resources, such as soils, timber and grazing.



The first wood you walk through, Prior's Grove, belonged to the Deans and Canons of Christchurch in 1850. Across the rough track, the wood is Queen's Wood, owned by Deans and Canons of Windsor. In 1850, these woods were recorded as beech but now also contain conifers and some other species.

- 8 At the road, turn right, walk past the Fox and Hounds pub to the road junction. Turn left to return to the National Trust car park.

Walk 2 Watlington Hill and Park, a 3 mile circular walk

Watlington Hill is a special place as it has rare or important plants, trees and wildlife, some of which you will see on this walk.

- 1 With your back to the road, take the narrow footpath in the left corner of the car park and follow the white arrows. Go through a gate, bear right, and continue downhill.

On a map dating from 1876-77, the line of huge beech trees on the left are shown to continue along the modern National Trust boundary to the bottom of the hill. They mark the edge of the common land. The land on the left of your path was shown as open ground at this time with no woodland.

Looking across the valley you can see Lower Dean Wood which was once part of Watlington deer park. You will go through this wood later in the walk.

- 2 The path leads through woodland and through a kissing gate. Continue straight on with woodland on the right.

The path runs along a holloway which has been worn down over the centuries previously by sheep and now by walkers. The woodland on the right here (shown as a narrow strip in the 1870s) is beech mixed with scattered yew trees, some conifers and whitebeam. The conifers are shown as a plantation on a later map dated between 1880 and 1913.

Through the kissing gate, the woodland on the right becomes mainly yew with some beech. This is an uncommon type of woodland which only occurs in a few places in the south of England. Yew bark is glowing brown and peeling, with small straight needles growing in two rows each side of the stem; the needles are dark and shiny on the top and greyish underneath. The trunks often have many new shoots springing out of them, especially when they have been cut. Yew lives to a great age, and has been growing here for many centuries. Yew is very poisonous, but is now an important component of anti-cancer drugs. It is a conifer, like a fir tree, but doesn't bear cones. The male and female flowers are on different trees, the female trees producing seeds (again poisonous) which are contained in red fleshy, berry-like structures called arils. Blackbirds and other birds eat these which helps to spread the seeds. In the autumn, look for the red arils of the yew which look like little jewels, scattered on the white leaves on the ground fallen from whitebeam trees.

Yew timber is obvious with its bright red-brown colouration. It has a fine grain which feels smooth to touch and has been used for many centuries due to its strength and durability. It was famous for making long bows and handles for tools. The oldest example of its use is a yew spear head, dating to about 450,000 years ago, one of the oldest wooden finds in the world.

- 3 There is a parallel path on the left through this area which leads to the same kissing gate at the bottom of the hill as the holloway.

On the left of the holloway, the ground is more open with shrubs, grass and flowers. In the summer, the flowery grass is full of butterflies, some quite rare, and bees feeding on the pollen and nectar. These plants grow especially on chalky ground so are not seen everywhere.



Out of the woodland. Watlington Hill

- 4 At the bottom of the hill, the path reaches a wooden kissing gate. Continue through this straight on between hedges and through gates until you reach a junction with a house on the left. Turn left along the track until you reach another junction.

- 5 Continue straight on climbing up a grassy field to the gate. Once through the gate, turn left.

If you pause at the top, you can see a good view of Watlington Hill and the obvious dark green yew woodland easy to see all year. Below to the right, you can see Lower Dean Wood, originally part of the old deer park. The grassy field was shown as a much smaller open area on the 1870s map, surrounded by woodland which linked to the woodland you will walk through. On a clear day you can see across Oxfordshire, although the iconic towers of Didcot Power Station are no longer the landmark they used to be.

A little further along you can catch a glimpse of part of Watlington Park House on the right. The original house was built in 1632, but replaced in the 1750s and altered several times since then.

- 6 The path continues into woodland and is marked by white arrows. Follow the obvious path.

This National Trust beech woodland used to contain many conifers, shown on the 1870s map. The end of the National Trust woodland is marked by two posts and, as the path levels, other tree species can be seen. Cherry trees have white flowers in spring but can also be identified by horizontal lines on their shiny bark. The most impressive trees are huge, straight oak trees which are many hundreds of years old. They almost look like elephants standing amongst the other vegetation! Sweet chestnut trees can also be seen – their very prickly seed cases protect the nuts inside. The climate is too cool in England to produce full sized chestnuts so the ones we buy to eat are imported.

- 7 The path reaches a tarmac drive. Here turn left and continue to the gateway. At the road, turn left to Christmas Common, and then left again at the junction to go back to the car park.