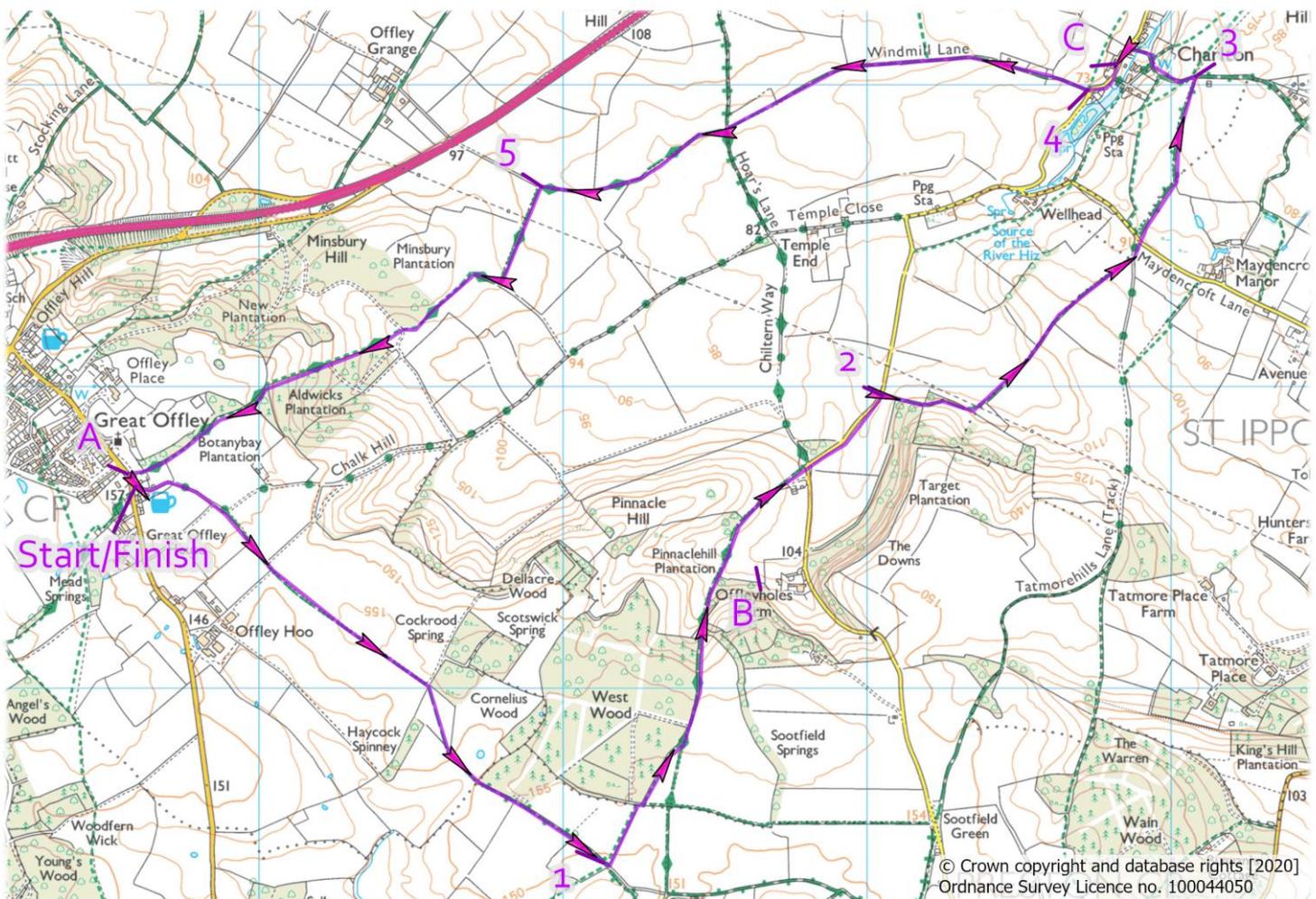


Great Offley and Charlton
By Louis Upton, Chiltern Society

Summary

The walk starts in the village of Great Offley, heading south-west along the ridge above Hitchin before descending to the small hamlet of Charlton. From there, there is a steady, scenic climb back to Offley. You should see red kites and buzzards, and perhaps a sparrow hawk or a hobby, or even a rare bee orchid.

- Length:** 6.2 miles
Terrain: A moderate stile-free walk over rolling farmland. 7 Gates
Start & finish: The Red Lion, Kings Walden Road, Great Offley SG5 3DZ Grid Reference TL 145 266
Food & drink: The Red Lion. None on route
Maps: OS Explorer 193, Chiltern Society 26, 29 & 30
Parking: Street parking, High Street, Great Offley nr. Red Lion



Route

Take the turning on the left just in front of the Red Lion pub (good beer and food and welcomes walkers). Follow the lane for 320m, 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 long 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 and turn left to take the broad track with woods to the left. Take care here as furrows from tractors can be severe. Follow the path for 650m and, before the track bears right to pass through a hedge line, turn left through a wooden kissing gate.

Waypoint 1 - Continue straight ahead on the marked public footpath to the left of a hedgerow. 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. Continue downhill with a fence on your right. At the bottom of the hill go through the large gate. 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 340m to a wide track to the right, signposted 'Tatmorehills Lane ¾ mile'.

Waypoint 2 - 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 hedgerow on the right for 730m to join an unsurfaced lane. Turn left towards Maydencroft Lane. Continue straight over the lane onto a Byway with the grounds of Maydencroft Manor to the right. Continue for 200m to Brick Kiln Lane. and follow the path straight ahead but slightly to the right.

Waypoint 3 - Turn left on the hedged lane, which becomes sunken as it descends. Where you meet a road after a house, keep straight on across a shallow ford and past the Windmill pub to the village street – Charlton Road. Turn left along the road, passing Charlton House on the right, with its blue plaque to Sir Henry Bessemer. Continue for 200m. (NB: If the water in the ford is too high (uncommon) or you have the wrong footwear retrace your steps, turn right in front of the house and follow the road round to the right to meet Charlton Road higher up).

Waypoint 4 - Take the bridleway to the right opposite the house 'Spring Cottage'. This is Windmill Lane. Follow it for 1.3km, cross the unsurfaced byway, Hoars Lane, and continue straight ahead waymarked 'Chiltern Way'. In summer the path is often lined with poppies, while the grass can be quite long and the path uneven.

Waypoint 5 - After 650m, 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 north-east. 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 to reach Offley High St. Turn left to return to the start.

Points of Interest

A Great Offley: Offa, King of Mercia, is believed to have established a palace here in the 8th century, but it is 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 can clearly be seen to the east. It 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.

C 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, an area once occupied by the Hicca tribe. They paid 'Danegeld' to the Vikings who had an encampment near the confluence between the Hiz and the Ivel. The practice is now commemorated by the Hicca Way walk. At the time of Domesday Charlton was held by King William himself, with a watermill recorded as the only dwelling. 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. The former Windmill pub stands at the centre of the village. Originally a single cottage, it was already a public house by the time Samuel Lucas, the Hitchin brewer, bought it in 1860. It was converted to a private house without planning permission and locals are trying to raise money to re-open it as a pub.