

A visit to Aston Rowant and Shirburn Hill SSSI

With **Andrew Clark**

This walk is a unique opportunity both to visit two outstanding Sites of Special Scientific Interest and view the location of one of the issues that led to the founding of the Chiltern Society. Aston Rowant and Shirburn Hill host a wide range of wildlife and are especially famed for flowers and butterflies.



START: Cowleaze Wood car park OX49 5HX.

Grid ref: SU 725 956

DISTANCE: 5 miles/8km

TERRAIN: Easy walking on good paths with numerous gates and two stiles. There's one steep descent and one steep climb with a total ascent of 500ft/155m.

Beware the tree roots in the woodland sections

MAPS: OS Explorer 171, Chiltern Society 9

REFRESHMENTS: None on route.

Nearby is The Leathern Bottle in Lewknor

LOCAL TRANSPORT: No public transport to the start. Buses stop on the B4009 at Lewknor. Please check www.traveline.info for services.

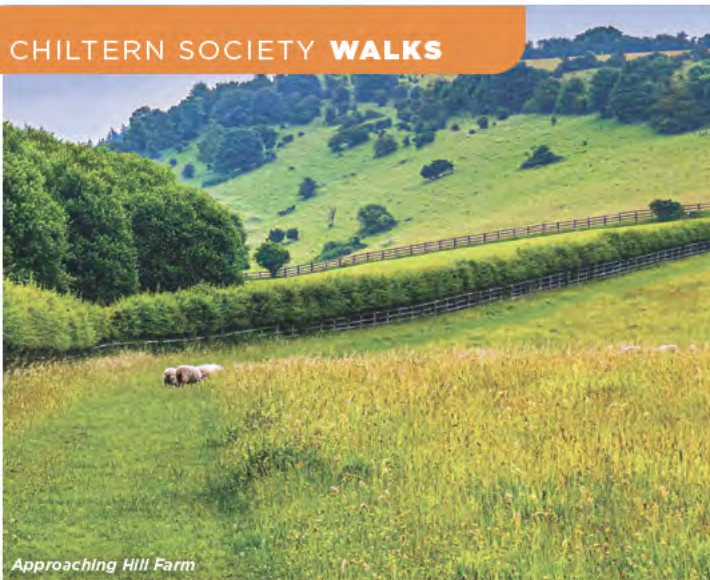
Route

Walk along to the right of the road as far as the end of the car park. Go past the metal barriers for 100m and turn left past the noticeboard to the road.

1. Cross to the path opposite and go through the gate into Aston Rowant Nature Reserve. Turn right into the field, bear left across it and go through the gate in the hedgerow to a wide track (Hill Road). **The optional shorter route starts here.* Cross straight over the track, go through the gate into the field and continue directly ahead along the field edge. On the right are the demonstration gates of the National Land Access Centre. At the end of the field turn left downhill through three gates to a road at the bottom (Hill Road). There are information boards on the way down.
2. Turn right along the road for 160m to a wide crossing track (The Ridgeway).
3. Turn left along The Ridgeway for over 1.5km to a tarmac lane (Station Road). This lane forms part of The Oxfordshire Way.
4. Turn left up the lane for 450m to a waymarked gate on the left.
5. Turn left through the gate and follow the path up to a wide track. Continue straight on as the track gently climbs uphill and along the bottom of the hill. Go through a gate, walk ahead a few metres and fork left. Stay on this path round the edge of the wood for over 800m and go through a gate into a field.
6. Walk on for a few metres and bear right steeply uphill. Near the top, go through a gate and over a stile into a field. Bear left across the field towards the houses to cross a stile in the left-hand corner onto a road.
7. Cross the road, turn left along it past the water tower and bear right into the wood to return to the car park.

***Optional route via Hill Road** – This option is gate-free, pleasant for shade in high summer, and good for birds and autumn colour. Turn left downhill and follow the track to rejoin the main route at Waypoint 2.

Continued overleaf



Approaching Hill Farm



Aston Rowant Nature Reserve



Runners on The Ridgeway



View of Shirburn Hill from Bald Hill

Points of Interest

Chiltern Society: The founding of the Society in 1965 was prompted by local protest over the proposal to cut the M40 route through the Chiltern escarpment. There was also a need to re-establish the Rights of Way network, which had become overgrown, inaccessible and unsigned during and after WWII. The threat of controversial developments and maintaining the quality of our paths are still very relevant today.

Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve: Perched high on the Chilterns escarpment, the reserve contains flower-rich chalk grassland, woodland and juniper scrub. The wide variety of habitats has allowed a huge number of butterfly, flower and bird species to flourish. There are fantastic views over the Oxford plain and it's a great place to watch red kites soaring overhead. It's a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which is worth visiting all year round. The site is at its best in spring and summer. You can expect to see a variety of orchids and, in August and September, a carpet of Chiltern gentians. Over 37 species of butterfly have been recorded, including silver-spotted skipper, chalkhill blue, marbled white and silver-washed fritillary.

A. Cowleaze Wood: This 70 acre area of woodland owned by the Forestry Commission has an attractive mix of beech, oak, coppiced hazel and conifers. It's noted for its carpet of bluebells in spring. In the wood there's a memorial to the seven man crew of a Halifax bomber who died when their plane crashed during WWII. The route through the wood used to include a sculpture trail, but sadly the sculptures have gone.

B. Bald Hill is the historic highest point in Oxfordshire at 257m, but boundary changes in 1974 meant that it was replaced by Whitehorse Hill at Uffington.

C. The Ridgeway National Trail and Swan's Way: The Ridgeway has been described as Britain's oldest road and is part of the historic corridor thought to have connected the Dorset coast to The Wash. It's now an 87 mile National Trail running between Avebury and Ivinghoe Beacon. The 65 mile Swan's Way long distance bridle route runs from Salcey Forest in the north to Goring-on-Thames in the south.

D. The Oxfordshire Way: This 66 mile route links Bourton-on-the-Water in Gloucestershire to the Thames in Henley.

E. Pyrton Hill: In 1986, Pyrton Hill along with Watlington Hill was designated as a SSSI. The woodland is dominated by yew.

F. Shirburn Hill is a beautiful area of chalk grassland, chalk heath, scrub and broadleaved woodland. Most grasslands in the Chilterns are maintained by stock (mainly sheep), but the site is unusual in that it's cropped only by rabbits. The grassland is dotted with large ant hills, many of which are over 100 years old, each one containing about 5,000 ants.

This walk was created with the assistance of Mick Venters of Natural England and Annette Venters of the Chilterns Conservation Board.