



Watership Down and Ecchinswell

Distance: 16 km=10 miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Hampshire

Date written: 16-jul-2016

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Last update: 14-apr-2025

Refreshments: Ecchinswell

Map: Explorer 144 (Basingstoke) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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Hills, views, village, parkland, woodland, meadows

In Brief

Watership Down is just another lovely high spot on the Downs in Hampshire, but everyone knows it from the great modern classic by Richard Adams about rabbits. This walk begins with a walk on the Downs followed by a roam through the horse breeding and agricultural country with several surprises.

For a mid-walk break, there is an excellent village pub in Ecchinswell (ring 01635-297355 for enquiries at the Royal Oak).

There is one short section where nettles and scratchy undergrowth are unavoidable, making shorts uncomfortable. When walked in the summer, this walk was perfectly dry except for one muddy patch after Ecchinswell.

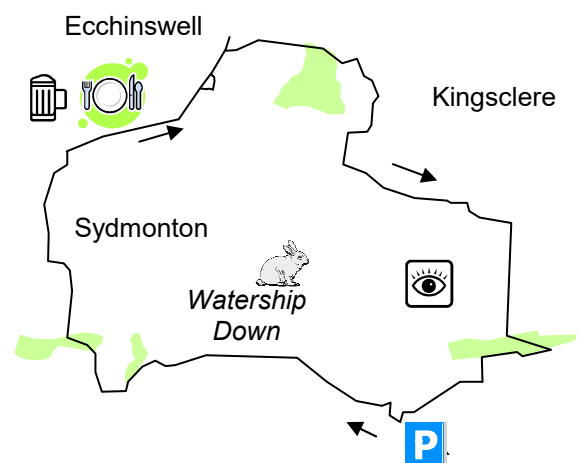
Because of the good paths used, it is a *dry walk* around summertime. However, in winter, waterproof boots, or even wellies in some parts, are advisable because of the inevitable damp sections. With only one stile and no cattle, it would be fine for your dog too.

The walk begins at the **White Hill** car park, near **Kingsclere**, Hants. The *very approximate* nearest postcode is **RG20 5PY**, www.w3w.co/tuned.daisy.swooning.

The car park is on the **left**, coming from the Kingsclere direction, and is marked with a colourful signboard. You can also park on the right, just before the entrance, on a wide roadside strip. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

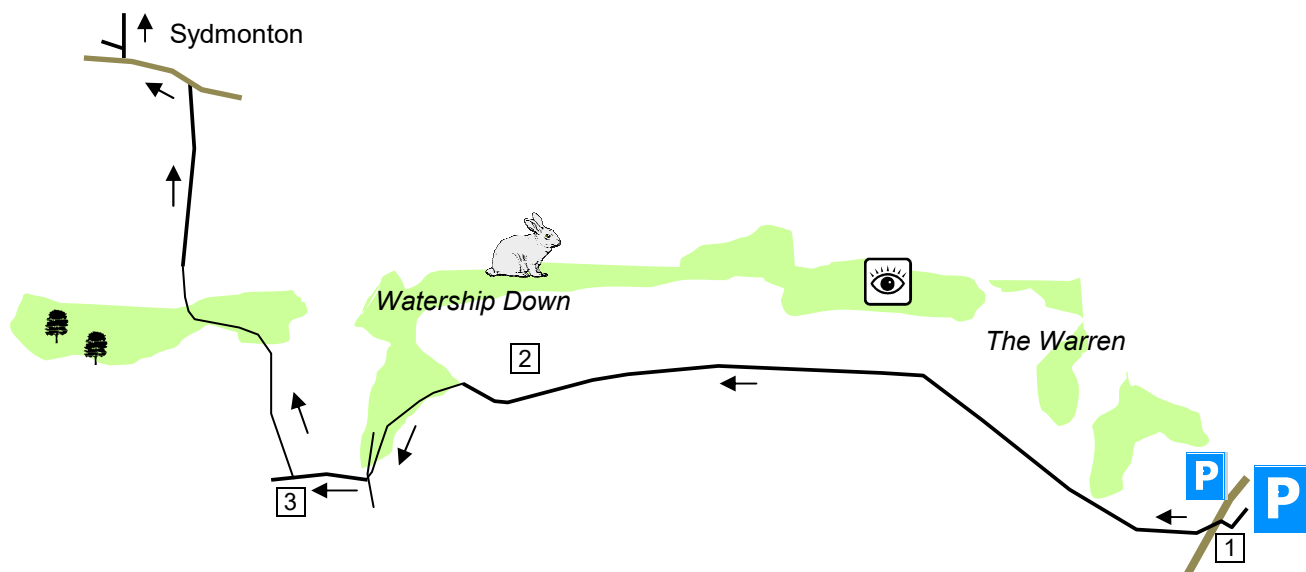


Bird's Eye View



The Walk

Leg 1: White Hill to Sydmonton 5 km=3 miles



- 1 From the White Hill car park, cross the road carefully (unless you parked on the roadside parking strip) and take a path marked with a “WW” disc on a metal pole, indicating the *Wayfarer's Walk*. Keep to the main path which immediately curves right and leads over the part of the downs known as The Warren, passing a racehorse gallop on your right. *Kingsclere is a major horse racing and breeding centre, thanks to the Park House Stables where the chief trainer is Clare Balding's brother Andrew.* You have great views to the right over Newbury. The track curves left and, 400m later, a footpath joins you through a small gate on the right. The track becomes grass and rises a little as you pass some overgrown horse jumps. On your right now is Watership Down.



Richard Adams, a local civil servant, began telling stories about rabbits to his children on a car journey and decided to publish what became a huge hit. It tells the story of a threatened warren which decides to relocate to a new place of calm and safety. The rabbits are assigned their own language, mythology and culture in what is clearly a study in leadership, inspired by the author's knowledge of Homer and Virgil and his acquaintance with military heroes.

- 2 As the path descends towards a small wooden gate, you can see Sydmonton Court, your next destination, in the valley. After the gate, your path veers left beside a flowery bank with deep woods on your right. Finally, almost ½ km from the gate, your path suddenly curves right to meet a tarmac lane. Cross straight over to go through a small wooden gate and follow a line of beeches on a pleasant wide path. In 200m, just before power lines, look right for a footpath sign and a wooden gate.

- 3 Go **right** through the gate and follow this path under trees, with views into the valley on your right. After a delightful 400m under great beeches and tall ash trees with a scattering of hawthorn, the path enters deeper woods, following a wooden fence on your right. After 250m, the path leads through a large metal gate (or over the stile). In 150m, you pass beside a new large wooden gate and join a cinder farm track. **Soon, on your right through a gap,**

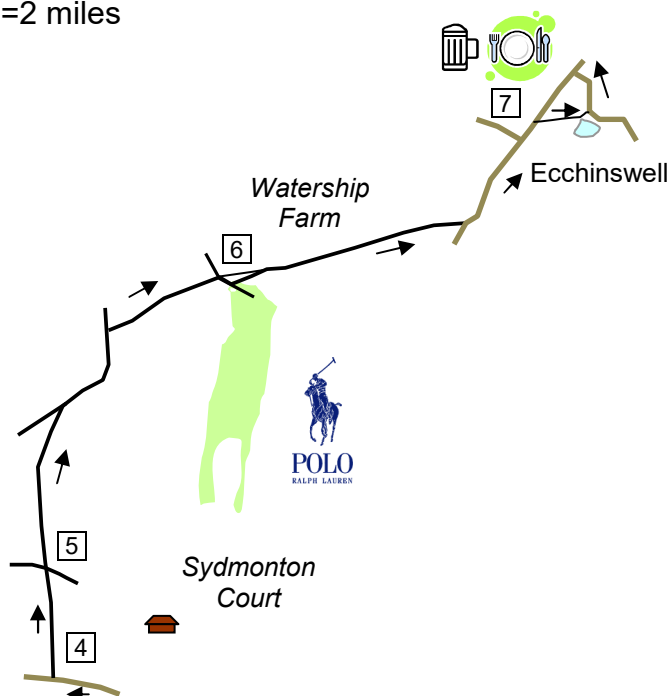


you have an excellent view of Watership Down across the pasture. Hornbeams and other large trees form a canopy until, in another ½ km, you pass beside a new, large, wooden gate. In 20m you reach a tarmac lane via a stile beside another large metal gate. Turn **left** on the lane, soon passing *Sydmonton Farmhouse* on your left. Just after this house, turn **right** on a tarmac drive between mushroom stones.

Leg 2: Sydmonton to Ecchinswell 3 km=2 miles

- 4 Keep right, through a wooden gate, onto a beautiful straight avenue lined with trimmed lime trees. You pass various gardens of the houses of Sydmonton. On your right is St Mary's Church (unfortunately on private land) and then *Sydmonton Court*, home of Andrew Lloyd Webber, with its landscaping and its lake.

Sydmonton is polo's equivalent of Henley or Ascot, a place to be seen and rub shoulders with the likes of Samantha Barks, Deborah Meaden, Michael Owen and David Gandy whilst balancing a champagne flute. Charity events are sponsored by Savile Row tailor Kent and Curwen. However, on most weekends you can go and watch the game.



- 5 As you enter the parkland, keep straight across a driveway, over a grid (or through a metal gate on its left), past cedars and limes which give out a scent in early summer, with the polo field on your right (possibly audible on a Charity Polo day). After another grid (or a similar bypassing metal gate) your route continues along a driveway, or on the mown grass verge. The track enters trees and is joined from the left by another track. The track curves left and ahead you can see the line of redbrick *Laundry Cottages*. In another 150m, turn **right** on a wide track across an open field.

- 6 In 350m, the track enters Watership Farm, a support centre for the polo events. Keep straight on, going over a track and *through large wooden gates. Continue through another wooden gate onto a cinder track which re-joins the original track by a lovely *pond ringed by weeping willows. Stay on the track as it kinks left-right. You come out to a dusty tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane, past a junction on the left and into the village of Ecchinswell. You pass on your right a cemetery and the *Old Vicarage*.

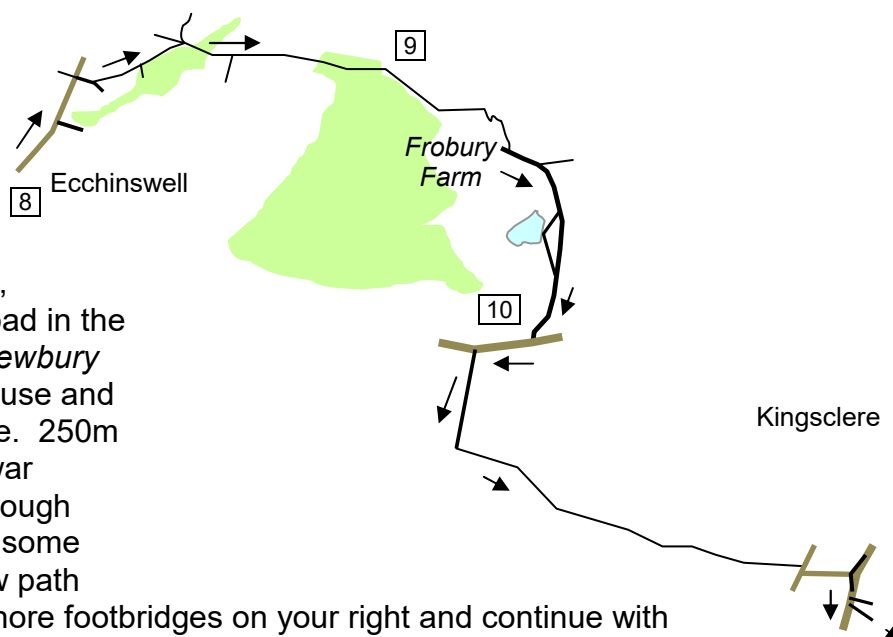
- 7 The pub is straight ahead but there is a nice little loop here to show some of the charms of the village. Immediately after the *Old Vicarage*, turn **right** on a shingle path leading into a pretty garden with a seat. Continue past a pond and out to a lane. Turn **left**, beside a stream, past cottages and back to the main road. The *Royal Oak* is on your left.



The name “Ecchinswell” arguably comes from a word for “oaks” (cf German “Eichen”). It was bestowed as part of (Kings)Clere in 931 by King Athelstan. Overwhelmingly rural, you could in the year 1300 have sold a pig for a penny, a piglet for a halfpenny, also wethers (castrated rams), hogs (young sheep), bere (mixed cereals for brewing), currall (poor wheat) and vetches (beans). You might have to pay a fine, like the ninepence from Edith Rolf for “keeping the meadow badly”, the sixpence paid by Stephen atte Brigg for “bad threshing”, clearly a practice that ought to be revived.

The “Royal Oak” recently (2016) changed hands but the signs are good. It is a traditional inn with pub favourites and several real ales on tap. Summer opening times are generous, including all day Fri, Sat, Sun but the pub is **closed** on Mondays. Food is served at “normal” times every day, extending the whole day on Sat and till 4pm Sun, and is well received by users of this guide.

Leg 3: Ecchinswell to Kingsclere 4 km=2½ miles

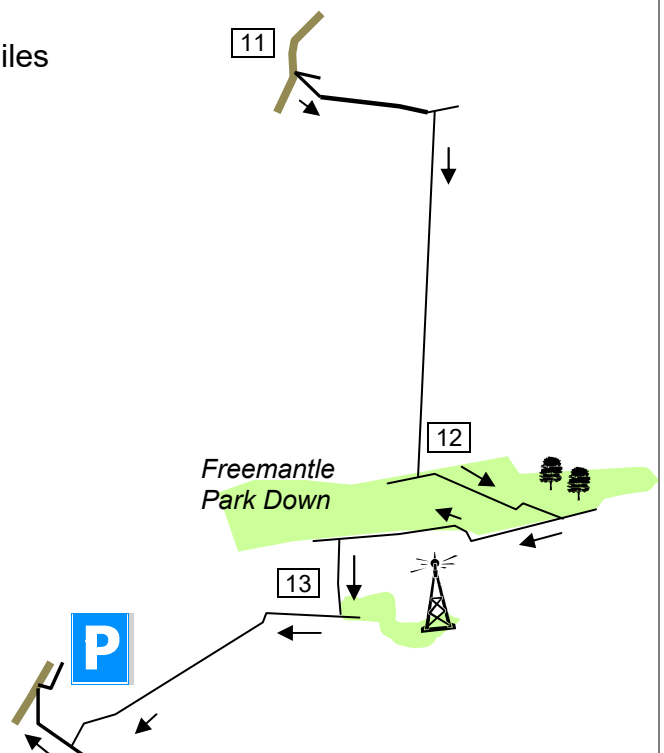


- 8 After possible refreshment, continue along the main road in the direction of the signpost *Newbury* 5½, passing a thatched house and a school, ignoring Mill Lane. 250m from the pub, just after a war memorial, turn **right** on a rough drive. Immediately before some gates, fork **left** on a narrow path running beside a ditch. Ignore footbridges on your right and continue with the stream on your right, going over one muddy patch (possibly the only one on this dry walk). As you pass a little pumping building, turn immediately **right**, over a bridge, and follow the path with the stream on your left, a crop field on your right, then on your left too. After 150m, ignore a footpath on your right. Your path comes out of the trees and runs beside the field on your left before diving back in. In another 250m, go straight over a farm track, thereby avoiding a footpath on your left, back into the trees.
- 9 This lovely woodland bridleway emerges after 200m into a crop field again, following the right-hand side. At the far end, in 200m, it takes you over a bridge and through undergrowth. On your right is an angler's pond (day tickets available). The path may be rather overgrown for a short distance before it curves right past the buildings of Frobury Farm, owners of the angling resources and a small business centre. When you reach a tarmac lane, turn **left** and stay on the lane as it bends right, avoiding a path that forks left past a thatched house. 200m after the bend, you may notice a rough track forking right. This leads to the Top Lake, another site for anglers and a spot worthy of a pause. By continuing past the lake on your right you will quickly re-join the tarmac lane. Another curvy 200m takes you to a T-junction with a major road.

- 10 Turn **right** on the road, Ecchinswell Road, for 170m and, opposite the entrance to *Kingswell House*, turn **left** on a track, signposted as a bridleway, bypassing a large metal gate (difficult with a horse!). In 300m, you reach an ivy-clad barn. Immediately before the barn, turn **left** on a path along the left-hand side of a field, going under power lines. You now have an excellent view of the Downs again, showing the territory you will be covering soon. Your path takes a course between hedges which in summer are full of wild flowers of every kind. The path follows the left-hand side of the next field and, after an overhanging hedge, proceeds in similar fashion beside the next, even larger, field. In the far corner, keep ahead past a water services enclosure, through a small metal gate to a tarmac lane on the outskirts of Kingsclere. Turn **right** and immediately **left** on a side road, Bear Hill. At the end, this road crosses a stream and reaches a T-junction. Turn **right** and keep **right** on the main road, but only for 20m. On your left, avoid the first tarmac driveway, which is private, but turn **left** on a rough track immediately after it with a signpost for a bridleway.

Leg 4: Kingsclere to White Hill 4 km=2½ miles

- 11 In 100m or so, your path joins a tarmac lane. Avoid a tempting path here on your right and continue past houses. Just after the tarmac ends, go **right** through a small wooden gate and take a footpath, heading straight for the woods ahead with the Hannington TV and radio transmitter on the hill ahead, which you will shortly be passing. (Have you noticed how good the radio reception is?) This straight path runs parallel to a fenced gallop on your left and crosses or joins the horse track in various places. [Apr 2025: extensive messy work for ash dieback, but path still clear.] Finally, after 1 km, you come past a white gate into the woodland of Freemantle Park Down.



- 12 Immediately turn **left** on a path inside the wood. In 30m, fork **right** with the path uphill. After 250m at a fairly easy gradient, your path comes through a modern kissing-gate into a lighter terrain. Continue uphill for another 100m or so to the top of the slope, where you see a fence and a crop field ahead. Just before you reach the fence, you are joined by a level track from the right. Turn very sharp **right** onto this track, almost doubling back, and follow it for about 250m where you emerge onto the hillside near the transmitter. Your path goes through a metal kissing-gate and veers right, slightly downhill, then left along the edge of the hillside where sheep graze. This path may be rather overgrown in parts in high summer. After 350m, where the field on your left ends, go **left** through a large metal kissing-gate and up the left-hand side of a wild meadow.
- 13 Looking back, you have some of the best views on this walk, with Inkpen Beacon on your right (see that walk in the *Berkshire* folder on this website). Keep walking till you meet a small signpost before a fence and turn **right** along

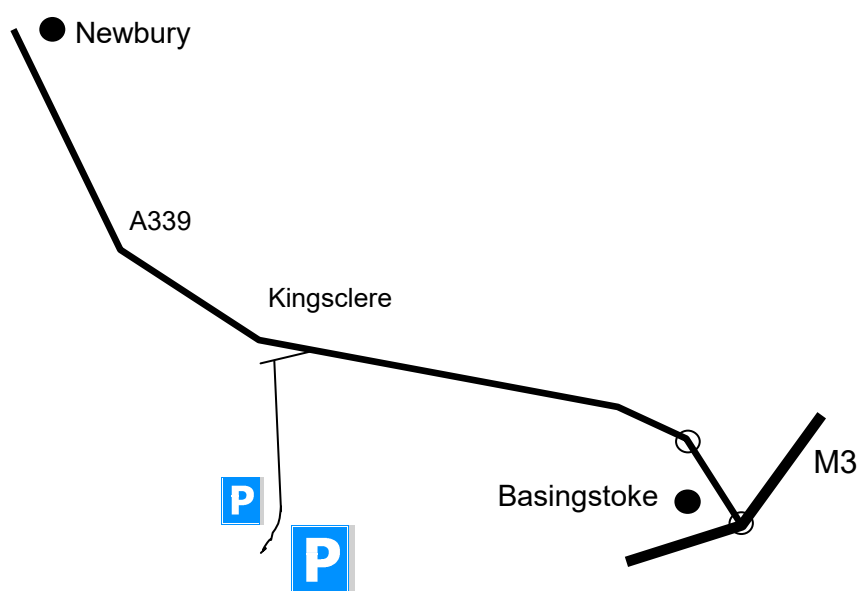
the left-hand edge of the field, going slightly downhill. In 200m, at the corner, go through a large kissing-gate and bear **left** to go down the left-hand side of a crop field. In 700m, after a left bend, in the far corner, go through a gap into the next field and immediately turn **right** on a wide path (the *Wayfarer's Walk* again). This quickly leads to the road and the car park where the walk began.



For final refreshments, Kingsclere has a free car park, two pubs and a coffee shop. The "Swan" is in Swan Street, by which you probably arrived. It is a Bel & Dragon pub is now definitely open (and said to be good value by users of this guide). The "Crown" is opposite the church.

Getting there

By car: the White Hill car park is just south of Kingsclere. For most visitors, the route would be the A339 from Newbury or (for most) Basingstoke and the M3. From the centre of Kingsclere, take the Winchester Road south, signposted just by the church to *Overton*. In just over a mile you will see a parking strip on your right but the best idea is to turn **left** into the separate White Hill car park.



By bus/train: Stagecoach South operates Bus 32 from Newbury (Market Street stop M) to Kingsclere, journey time 24 minutes. Or Bus 32 from Basingstoke bus station to Kingsclere, 35 minutes. Check <https://travelline.info> for times. You can join the walk lower down Swan Street (start Leg 4).

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