



Box Hill, Ranmore and Denbies

Distance: 12 km=7½ miles

moderate walking

Region: Surrey

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Refreshments:

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Box Hill, Burford Bridge, Westhumble

Map: Explorer 146 (Dorking) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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High hills, green slopes, views, village, woodland trail, vineyard trail, long climb with steps

In Brief

This walk was originally done to work off the Christmas excesses and it did the job magnificently. The two beauty spots that feature here seem to be so well known, but somehow the walk shows up a number of surprises, so that you may feel that you are discovering something completely new. In the tradition of walks on this site, the route takes some unusual paths, familiar to locals but less known outside the area. The last stretch includes a bridge over the Mole, followed by a very long series of steps: not for the faint-hearted!

Starting on the top of Box Hill gives you a good chance for an early snack and a refresher at the end and makes sure you don't opt out of the steepest part of the walk. But you could equally well start at Denbies Hillside (begin from section [5](#)) with the idea of a lunch break on Box Hill. This walk is easy to shorten by omitting Box Hill, but that seems a betrayal of the main idea. There are two pubs en route at Burford Bridge and in Westhumble. On popular days, a portable café and snack bar installs itself on the Denbies Hill car park. If you divert through the Denbies Wine Estate you will find an excellent restaurant and facilities.

[April 2022: "for 6 weeks" the ascending path is closed whilst the steps are repaired – putting this walk in suspense.]

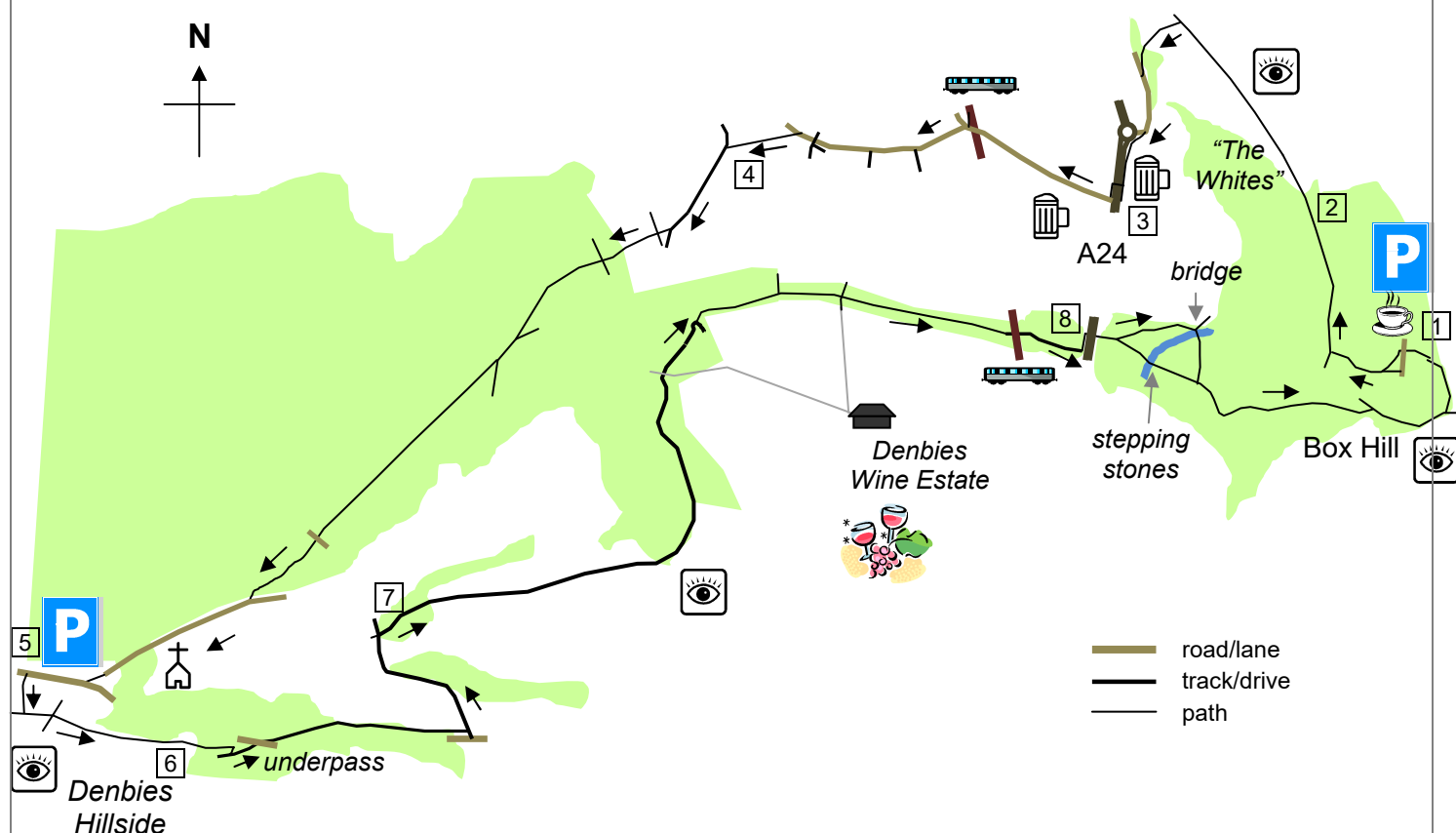


There are no nettles worth a mention on this walk. The forest path up to Ranmore Church will be muddy except in the dry part of summer and because of the gradients and a slippery descent, boots or very stout walking shoes are to be recommended. Both areas are popular with dog owners but a tight lead will be needed for the return crossing of the A24 road. A hiking pole is recommended for the chalky slopes.

The walk begins at the National Trust **Box Hill** car park, postcode **KT20 7LB** (small all-day charge). This is the car park at the **top** of Box Hill, accessed via the hairpins, or from the east side via Boxhill Village. The other principal starting point is the NT **Denbies Hillside**, near Ranmore Church. You could also begin the walk at the free **Burbridge Bridge** car park. **Westhumble (Box Hill) Railway Station** is another possible start. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk



- 1 Starting at the main car park on the top of Box Hill, cross the road to the café/shop and turn **left** in front of it. Cut diagonally across a patch of grass next to the shop to meet a crossing path in front of the private gate of *Swiss Cottage* (where, according to the plaque, inventor John Logie Baird lived 1929-31). Turn **right** on this path. In 150m or so, at a junction, avoid a path sharp left and keep **right** in the direction of the *Hill Top Stroll*. You pass a stone memorial to an eccentric Dorking resident Major Peter Labelliere, born in 1725, who is buried here upside down (for a colourful account, see the adjoining walk in this series "*Box Hill via Dorking Stations*"). In 100m or so, another path joins you from the right.
- 2 You are now going down the famous *Whites* of Box Hill, named after the exposed chalk which can be seen for miles around. You have great views across to Norbury Park up on the hill to your right and Denbies Wine Estate down to your left. Soon the chalky path gives way to a grassy slope with even wider views. As you descend, keep to the gentle gradient of the long grass slope on the right-hand side, avoiding the steeper parts on the left near the trees. After a breezy 500m or so on this wide path down the



slope, look for a line of three isolated trees immediately to the left of your route, the only vegetation on the otherwise bare slope. 10m before you reach these trees, turn squarely **left** on a narrow path which leads fairly steeply down, entering bushes. (For an *extremely careful* descent, you could continue even *further* down the easy slope, almost as far as the road, and turn **left** on a level path parallel to the road.) Finally, go through a small wooden gate and out to a road, opposite the Burford Bridge car park and *Ryka's Café*. Turn **left** on the road.

3



Go past the *Burford Bridge* hotel, a notable pub/restaurant. (You may need to cross back to the left-hand side to regain the footway.) Veer **left** beside the main A24 road. Keep **left** at a sign for the *Subway*, turn **right** through the colourful passageway under the A24 and **left** on the other side. Turn **right** shortly on a side road, passing the *Stepping Stones* pub. Continue along the road, using the sheltered footway on the right-hand side. You pass *Cleveland Lodge* which once housed the *Royal School of Church Music*. Soon, *Box Hill and Westhumble* railway station is on your left (an alternative start). Continue over the railway bridge and immediately ignore a footpath on your right. Ahead of you is an archway with a plaque honouring *Fanny Burney the Regency novelist who married a French émigré aristocrat and originated the expression "Pride and Prejudice"*. Keep to the **left** of the arch and follow the road, using the sheltered footway on the left-hand side. At the white fenced entrance to a private road, keep ahead on the main road and immediately **ignore** a signed footpath on your left. After more houses, you pass a junction of several private roads. In another 30m, fork **left** on a narrow signposted footpath which goes up diagonally across pastures between wire fences.



4

At the end of the path, turn **left** on a tarmac drive. In 300m, the drive bends left. **Leave** the drive here by forking **right** on a narrower path marked with a blue arrow. In only 25m, at a 4-way fingerpost, ignore a metal swing-gate on your right and keep straight on uphill. Your path leads up into woodland, going over a crossing path. About 300m into the wood, you meet another path coming from the left. In 30m, by a hidden fingerpost, take the **right** fork. After about 700m through dense woodland, you reach a tarmac lane. Cross straight over on a path, passing a small pond on your left. This winding path leads to a wide tarmac lane with wide grass verges. Turn **right** on the lane, using either tarmac or the verges, soon passing St Barnabas Old School and reaching St Barnabas Church.




The slender spire of St. Barnabas, high up on the North Downs, can be seen from several walks on this site, standing 700 feet above sea-level. It was built in 1859 by George Cubitt (see below) whose family had recently acquired the Denbies estate. The designer was Sir George Gilbert Scott, also known for the Albert Memorial and St. Pancras Station. The tower contains a ring of eight bells, the tenor weighing nearly one ton. Inside you can admire the extensive original marble. In 1920 the Second Baron Ashcombe converted the South Transept into a chapel as a moving memorial to his three sons killed in the Great War. The church serves teas in summer on Sundays 2-5pm, when the church is also open.




Continue to a junction with the Ranmore (Common) Road. Turn **right** on the road, using the parallel track on the left-hand side, quickly reaching the Denbies Hillside car park. (Alternative starting point.)

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 **5** By the notice board of the Denbies Hillside car park, go through a small wooden gate onto the open space with the famous view of the valley below and the Greensand hills beyond. *The big town of Dorking is to your left in the valley, with the village of Westcott to its right. Leith Hill with its tower is clearly visible.* There are seats with picnic tables and carved tree trunks. Go forward for 80m as you take in the view and turn **left** on a level crossing path, with views on your right, heading in the direction of Dorking. As you pass a fingerpost, continue straight ahead, ignoring both directions on the fingerpost, heading for a large wooden gate. After going through this gate (or through a small swing-gate beside it), keep ahead on a green level path beside woodland on your left. Your path descends somewhat and takes you through a swing-gate next to a large wooden gate into a yew forest.

6 This excellent wide chalky path runs for 100m through the forest and suddenly takes you right around a hairpin, down to meet a wide path. *Take care: the steep chalk path could be slippery or icy!* Turn sharp **left** on this path. In less than 100m your new path goes through an arch under the road. It gradually rises till it is high above the road on your right. In 200m, the path curves right round the side of a farm building (once an outhouse of Denbies House) and begins to descend. After 300m, now quite close to the road again, it reaches a T-junction with a rising path just before a field planted with vines. Turn sharp **left** on this official footpath. After 400m, you reach a 4-way junction by some fences. To your left is the site of the original Denbies House on this high spot, once known as Ashcombe Hill. Turn **right** here on a tarmac track.

 **7** You have joined the North Downs Way (NDW) which you will be following all the way to the top of Box Hill. You may be joined now by many more walkers who came via the orthodox route. Your path leads you through a tall metal gate into the Denbies Estate. This fine tarmac path gives you wonderful open views of Dorking and the surrounding hills. You come through another tall gate and your path curves left giving you some great views of Box Hill and the Denbies vineyards. After nearly 1½ km on this path, by a fingerpost, keep ahead over a crossing path. **But turning right here, although not on your route, would take you to the Denbies Wine Estate building with its shops, restaurant and – most important – its wine tasting centre. From there you can regain the route by turning sharp left at the corner, or by following the driveway out to the A24 and turning left on it.**



Denbies was once the Belgravia of the North Downs. Thomas Cubitt (1788-1855), the Victorian master builder, made his fortune by sailing to India as a ship's carpenter. Back home, he built the new front of Buckingham Palace and designed much of Belgravia. In 1851 he finished the building of a hundred-room grand mansion on the site of an older farm house which had been owned by a certain John Denby in the 1500s. This solid three-floor house, sited not far from Ranmore Church, had views across the Mole valley (now obscured by trees) where it could eye its rival, the even grander Deepdene House (another of England's "lost houses" – see the "Brockham, Deepdene and Betchworth Castle" walk in this series). It was landscaped with avenues of exotic trees (part of which you have been walking on) and serviced by an army of gardeners. The house was demolished in 1953.

The 627-acre Denbies Estate was purchased in 1984 by the water scientist, and inventor, Adrian White, and became the largest wine estate in the UK (three times the size of any other) with 300,000 vines. Its sheltered position enables it to grow the best English white and sparkling wines. In 2010 it produced the first English Sauvignon Blanc. The Estate building contains a restaurant, shop and other family entertainments and provides a wine tasting tour.



In 150m the track changes from tarmac to concrete. **Leave** the track here by keeping ahead, follow a NDW arrow, on a dirt track into woodland. Immediately, at a 4-way fingerpost [Dec 2019 with three fingers missing], keep straight ahead. Your track curves right downhill. In nearly 200m, opposite a white orange-capped post, ignore an unmarked path on your left. In a further 200m, keep straight on at a fingerposted 4-way junction. (Turning **left** here would take you in ½ km, between garden fences, to the road in Westhumble where the railway station is to the **right**.) After a small wooden gate beside a large gate, continue on a drive, going beneath an ornate railway arch. You emerge between large pillared metal gates, or through the adjoining small gate, (*note the Denbies heraldic symbol: a hand reaching towards five stars*) to reach the main A24 road.

8

Turn **left** on the A24 road and look for an opportunity to cross. **Take your time, crossing each carriageway separately. Traffic arrives very fast but there is always a gap, sooner or later.** At the other side, take a track by a NT sign for *Box Hill Stepping Stones*. Go through the small car park and keep **left** at the far side on a path to the bridge. (In summer, in dry weather, if you have steady nerves, you can take the path on the right and cross the river using the Stepping Stones.) Within 200m, the path approaches the river to bring you to a bridge across the River Mole. Turn **right** over the bridge and keep straight on. In 150m veer **left** where you meet the path coming from the (old) stepping stones. Your long ascent now begins but this adventure will be shared with dozens of families and trippers heading the same way. The path begins to steepen and you now encounter the first flight of steps. The path curves left over roots and up more steps. The gradient eases slightly but then another long flight ensues, followed a knobbly section and another ascent. A slightly easier section leads to another staircase, then shortly another almost as long. A more level section under yews graduates to a flight of shallower steps leading finally to a T-junction at the top. Turn **right** through a small wooden gate onto the open hillside of Box Hill where you have more terrific views. Follow the level path and, after a small wooden gate, keep straight on. This path leads to a viewpoint with a viewing platform. After a final moment to enjoy the view, turn **left**, over the road and across the grass to the car park where the walk began.



Getting there

By car: To reach the Box Hill car park from the A24 Leatherhead-Dorking road, turn off at the big roundabout by the Burford Bridge hotel. Follow the narrow road past the hotel and take the **first** road on the **right**. It is signposted with a brown "oakleaf" symbol and the words *Box Hill*. The road goes round two tight hairpins with spectacular views until, at the top, it passes the café / shop. Continue a little further and turn **left** into the car park.

You can also arrive via the A217 (Burgh Heath) and the B2032 (Tadworth), going through Boxhill village.

By train: Start at Westhumble / Box Hill railway station.

By bus: Bus 465 to the Burford Bridge connects with Kingston, Leatherhead and Dorking. Not weekends. Check the timetables.

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