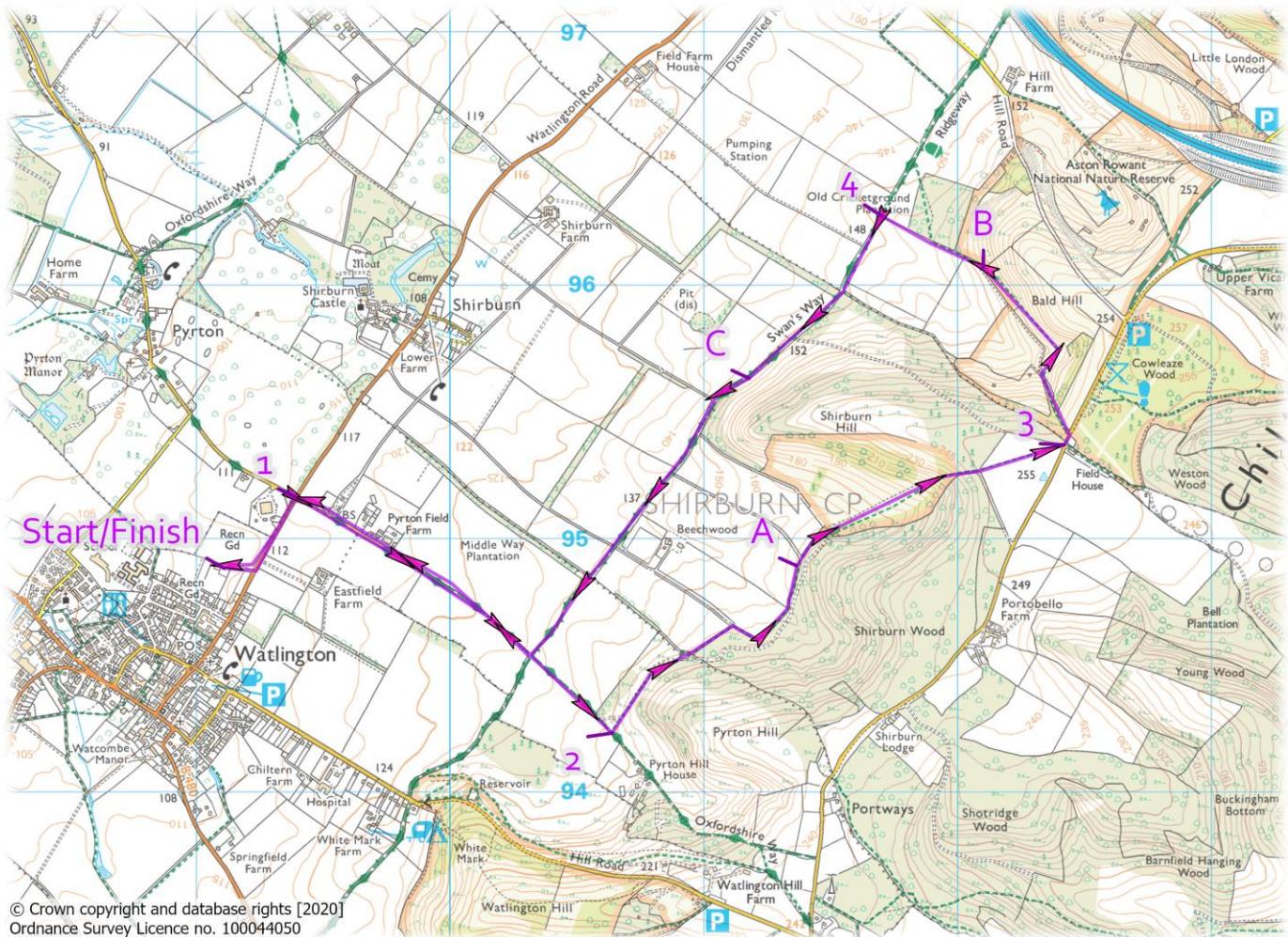


Watlington to Aston Rowant Nature Reserve circular
By Annette Venters, Chilterns Conservation Board

Summary

This 6 mile walk takes in some wonderful Chilterns scenery including rolling chalk downland, beech woodlands and ancient pathways. It follows a stretch of the Ridgeway National Trail and skirts the edge of Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve perched high at the top of the hill, with its far-reaching views over the Oxfordshire Vale. The historic market town of Watlington is well worth exploring on your return.

Length:	6.2 miles
Terrain:	Moderate walking on unsurfaced paths and lanes with two long steep climbs.
Accessibility	There are two stiles and 9 gates on this walk
Start & finish:	Watlington Recreation Ground car park, Shirburn Road, Watlington OX49 5BZ. Grid ref: SU 691 948
Food & drink:	Pubs and café in Watlington (but note restrictions due to Covid). None on the walk.
Maps:	OS Explorer 171, Chiltern Society 9
Parking:	Watlington Recreation Ground car park OX49 5BZ
Local transport:	There is a local bus service running between Oxford and Watlington, see https://bustimes.org/services/11-oxford-watlington .



Route

Leave the car park and turn left to follow the footpath along the B4009 Watlington Road (you can also cut across the recreation ground to meet the road at the far corner). After 300m you will see Station Road on your right.

Waypoint 1 - Cross over the Watlington Road with care to join Station Road (also the route of the Oxfordshire Way). Follow this quiet track enjoying the lovely views of the hills ahead. Continue past the Ridgeway National Trail and 450m later you will see a footpath on your left through a wooden gate.

Waypoint 2 – Follow this path which skirts fields and woods until you come out through a gate on to the open chalk grassland at the foot of Shirburn Hill. Follow the path which climbs steeply uphill offering panoramic views from the top. Continue through a wooded section to a stile which takes you into a field. Continue ahead crossing the field to another stile which leads you on the Christmas Common Road.

Waypoint 3 – Turn left, after 40m take the footpath on the left, through a wooden field gate into Aston Rowant Nature Reserve. Follow this path straight ahead and gently downhill to a metal gate. Continue ahead steeply downhill for another 100m to another gate. Go through the gate and turn sharp right following the footpath (do not continue straight ahead on the wide grassy track). Follow the path which runs alongside the nature reserve fenceline, down the hill until you reach a gate near the woodland. Go through the gate and continue downhill for another 150m, then turn right through a wooden gate to follow the footpath through the wood and then across a field to meet up with the Ridgeway National Trail (also Swan's Way and the Icknield Way along this stretch).

Waypoint 4 – Turn left on to the Ridgeway and follow it back to Station Road. Turn right along Station Road to retrace your steps back to the car park.

Points of Interest

Watlington is an ancient market town with many 16th century and Georgian buildings. Its unspoilt traditional feel makes it a popular location for filming, including many scenes from *Midsomer Murders*. The Chiltern Hills rise just behind the town, with the Ridgeway National Trail and the Oxfordshire Way just half a mile away. There is a good selection of independent shops in the town, along with a café, deli and two pubs.

A 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), the site is unusual in being cropped only by rabbits. The grassland is dotted with large bumps which are ant hills, many of them are over 100 years old and contain around 5,000 ants in each mound.

B Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve: Perched high on the Chilterns escarpment, the nature reserve contains flower-rich chalk grassland, woodland and juniper scrub. The wide variety of habitats have allowed a huge number of butterfly, flower and bird species to flourish at this reserve. There are fantastic views over the Oxford plain and it's a great place to watch red kites soaring overhead.

C The Ridgeway National Trail: The Ridgeway has been described as Britain's oldest road and is part of an historic corridor thought to have connected the Dorset coast to the Wash. It is now an 87 mile National Trail running from Avebury to Ivinghoe Beacon.