

Dunstable Downs

Walk: approx. 6.5 miles/10.4km **Time:** 3.5 hours

Set within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) the Downs has much to offer for recreational purposes as well as nature conservation.



Dunstable Downs

Dunstable Downs is owned by Central Bedfordshire Council and jointly managed with The National Trust. It was formed by chalk deposited on the seabed when the area was still underwater about 70 million years ago. Fossils of sea urchins, molluscs, and dart shaped fossils called belemnites are occasionally found where the chalk is exposed. The highest point of the Downs is now approximately 800feet/243m above sea level.

The chalk has affected the way the Downs have been used since humans first settled there. Rainwater passes easily through the chalk which makes the land difficult to cultivate, so since farming began there about 5000 years ago the Downs have been used principally for grazing sheep rather than growing crops.

Flora and Fauna

Over the centuries grazing of the scrub has resulted in an area of chalk grassland that supports an abundance of flora and fauna characteristic of the habitat. Many uncommon species of plants and butterflies have been recorded at the site including Great Pignut, Frog Orchid, Chalk-Hill Blue and Duke of Burgundy. The decline in sheep grazing since World War II as well as the reduction of the rabbit population due to myxomatosis has resulted in scrub invasion which has threatened the grassland communities but recent scrub clearance and the reintroduction of grazing over part of the site has ensured a continuation of this rare landscape.

Medieval Warren

Warrens were areas of land set aside for breeding and management of rabbits to provide a constant supply of fresh meat and skins.

The Downs warren consists of two pillow mounds first noted by W.G. Smith in 1894. At the time they were thought to be prehistoric burial mounds but, it is now considered that their form and location indicate the site of a warren, possibly constructed and managed by the Augustian Priory at Dunstable.

Five Knolls

The Five Knolls Round Barrow Cemetery is the only such site known in Bedfordshire. Barrows are burial mounds constructed in chalk over individual burials with later burials (usually cremations) dug into the outside of the mounds. First noted by William Stukely in the 18th century they were partially excavated in the 1850's and 1920's the results showed that the cemetery originated in the late Neolithic (3000BC) and Bronze Age (2000 – 700BC) and re-used for burial in the Roman period. The northernmost barrow was used in medieval times as the site for a gallows.

The Icknield Way

Unique among long distance tracks because it can claim to be the oldest road in Britain, The Icknield Way was ancient when the Romans arrived. Extending from Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire to Knettishall

Heath in Norfolk, a distance of 103m/166km it consists of prehistoric pathways dotted with archaeological remains.

Originating in the Neolithic Period as a means of communication from Wessex to East Anglia it ran along the foot of the chalk hills above the marshy ground of the spring line. In later prehistoric times, when demand for agricultural land increased, this broad belt narrowed down into a defined trackway.

Drovers Way

Part of a network of green lanes in the area which would have traditionally been used by drovers taking stock, especially sheep, to market in Dunstable, and probably also of ancient origin.

Strip Lynchet

This is an artificial terrace cut into the slope to form a platform and was usually created in the middle ages when every piece of land was being utilised for cultivation. The bridleway runs along a strip lynchet and the strip of woodland in the grounds of the gliding club is growing on another series of lynchets.



Circular walks

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Healthy walking

Why not get out and get healthy? There is no better way to start than by taking a walk. Just 30 minutes a day can improve health and well-being, reduce the risk of heart disease, help to prevent diabetes, improve muscle strength even reduce anxiety and depression. So make today the day you start to enjoy Bedfordshire and enjoy good health. For information on healthy walking log on to www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

Planning your walk

Dunstable Downs car park is the suggested starting point and the walk is described in an anti-clockwise direction. However it can also be started from the National Trust car park on Bison Hill (see map) and the walk can be shortened to approximately 4.5 miles/7.2km details shown on map.

Refreshments, parking and toilets

You can park at the Dunstable Downs and the National Trust Bison Hill car parks throughout the year and there are toilet facilities and refreshments available at the Chilterns Gateway Centre. See www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dunstabledowns for opening times and further information.

Public transport

For information contact Traveline 0871 200 22 33. The nearest train station is at Luton, on the Bedford to St. Pancras Thameslink Line contact Traveline or www.thameslink.co.uk

Ordnance Survey maps

The route is covered on Ordnance Survey Landranger Series map 166. It is also shown on Explorer maps 181 and 193. Both are available from local bookshops and some petrol stations.

Did you enjoy the walk?

This is one of a series of circular walk leaflets produced by Central Bedfordshire Council. If you wish to request a leaflet, give us some feedback or report any problems encountered, please contact us on **0300 300 8085** or e-mail us on recreational.routes@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Tips for enjoying your walk

Parts of the walk can become muddy especially after heavy rain, so strong waterproof footwear is recommended. Take care where conditions are rough and do let someone know where you are going. Please be aware that much of the walk is unsuitable for wheelchairs and difficult for pushchairs.

Other walks

To discover more walks in Central Bedfordshire visit www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/countryside or www.lets-go.org.uk

Or why not explore the Greensand Ridge by following the fabulous Greensand Ridge Walk, a walk that passes through many of the area's most valuable landscapes and historic towns www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/greensand



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Walk

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Sandy and Everton | 7 Rushmere and Stockgrove |
| 2 Old Warden | 8 Cranfield |
| 3 Silsoe - Shillington | 9 Totternhoe |
| 4 Ampthill - Maulden | 10 Dunstable Downs |
| 5 Ampthill - Millbrook | 11 Whipsnade |
| 6 Woburn - Eversholt | ■ ■ ■ Greensand Ridge walk |

 @BedsCountryside

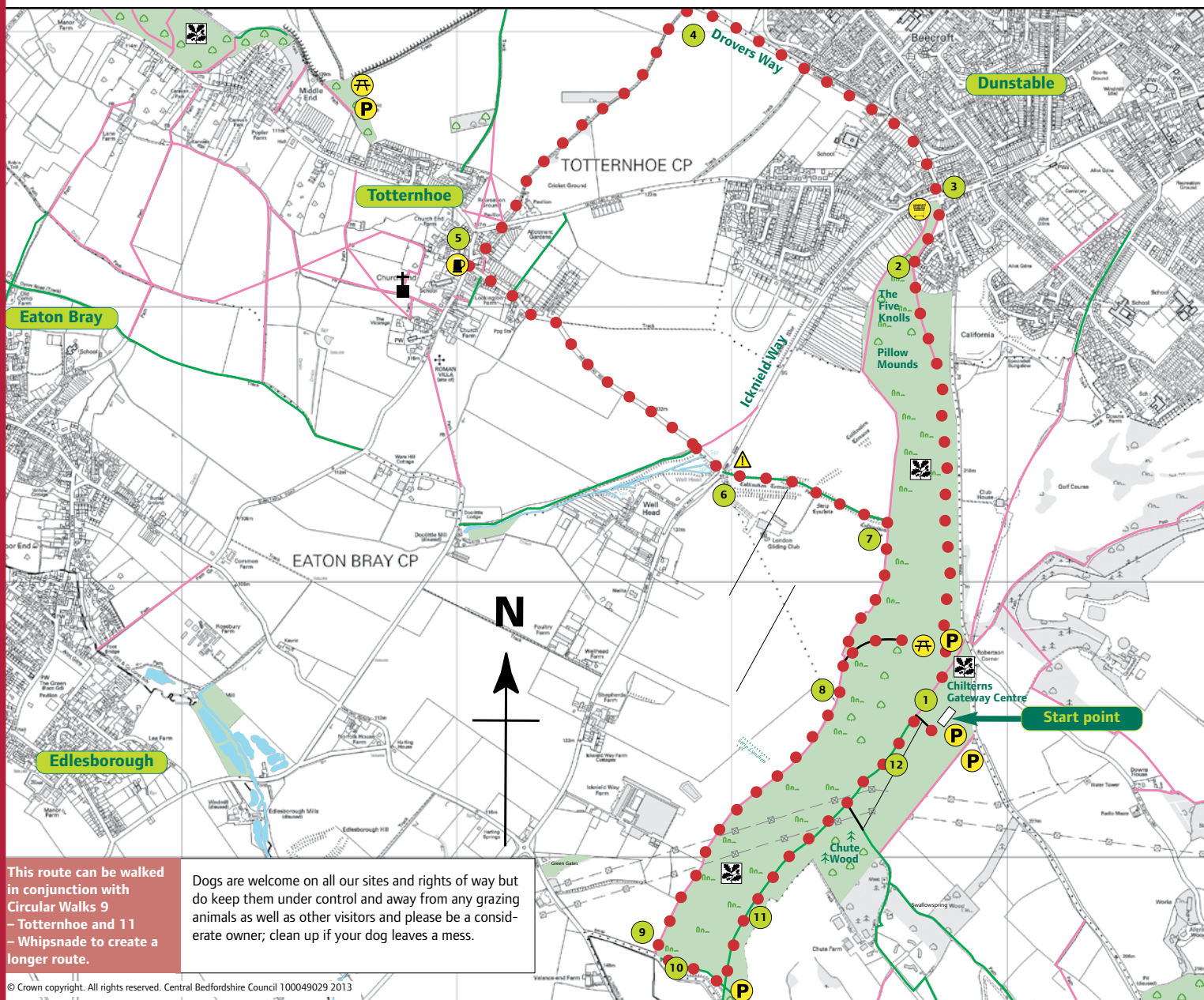
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| Key | |
|--|----------------|
| ● ● ● ● ● | The walk |
| — | Footpath |
| — | Bridleway |
| — | Other Paths |
| 🌳 🌳 🌳 🌳 | Woodlands |
| | National Trust |
| | Church |
| | Parking |
| | Public house |
| | Local shop |
| | Picnic area |
| | Open space |

This route can be walked in conjunction with Circular Walks 9 – Totterhoe and 11 – Whipsnade to create a longer route.

Dogs are welcome on all our sites and rights of way but do keep them under control and away from any grazing animals as well as other visitors and please be a considerate owner; clean up if your dog leaves a mess.

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Countryside code

- Be safe – plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home

- Keep dogs under close control
 - Consider other people.
- www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk

- 1 Leave the Chilterns Gateway Centre, walk down past the Windcatcher sculpture and turn right, follow the path along the top of the slope as far as the Five Knolls tumuli.
- 2 Continue downhill to West Street, which runs along the line of the Icknield Way.
- 3 Cross West Street on to the Green Lane opposite, this is also known as Drovers Way. As you follow the Drovers Way look for the northward facing promontory of Ivinghoe Beacon in the distance to your left, its summit occupied by the defences of an Iron Age hill fort. Looking back towards the Downs, the Five Knolls are visible as bumps against the skyline, just to the left of the highest part of the hill. When the chalk mounds were first built, they would have been prominent landmarks to travellers on the Icknield Way.
- 4 Walk down the Green lane, walking past the first Green Lane on the left and continue to the cross roads of Green Lanes. In the field diagonally to the right, the line of trees marks the rampart of Maiden Bower, another Iron Age hill fort. Turn left along the Houghton Green Highway into Totternhoe village.
- 5 Cross Dunstable Road and follow Furlong Lane, turn left on to Church Road and left again on to Well Head Road. Follow this as far as the B489 (Icknield Way) near Well Head. On the right hand side of the road are a series of springs which give rise to the River Ouzel; this joins the River Great Ouse at Milton Keynes.
- 6 Cross the road (with care) and follow the bridleway opposite, passing the London Gliding Club on the right, as far as the base of the Downs.
- 7 At the end of the bridleway, turn right and follow the footpath at the bottom of the slope, through the stock fence, until a trackway is reached on the left. *Should you wish to take the shorter walk this leads uphill back to the starting point along an ancient hollow way.*
- 8 Follow the waymarked path along the bottom of the hill. At the kissing gate you can choose to follow the bridleway to the right a slightly easier route without gates or go through the kissing gate and follow the lower path.
- 9 Before reaching the road, turn left and climb up hill parallel to the road.
- 10 The steps here have been designed to make this path suitable for horses and people.
- 11 At the top of the hill, near the Bison Hill car park follow the bridleway that leads to the left, entering a pasture via the bridle gate. Cross this large field keeping roughly to the same contour. There are superb views over the surrounding countryside, including the Vale of Aylesbury.
- 12 The bridleway goes through another gate, continue straight ahead, returning to the Chilterns Gateway Centre.