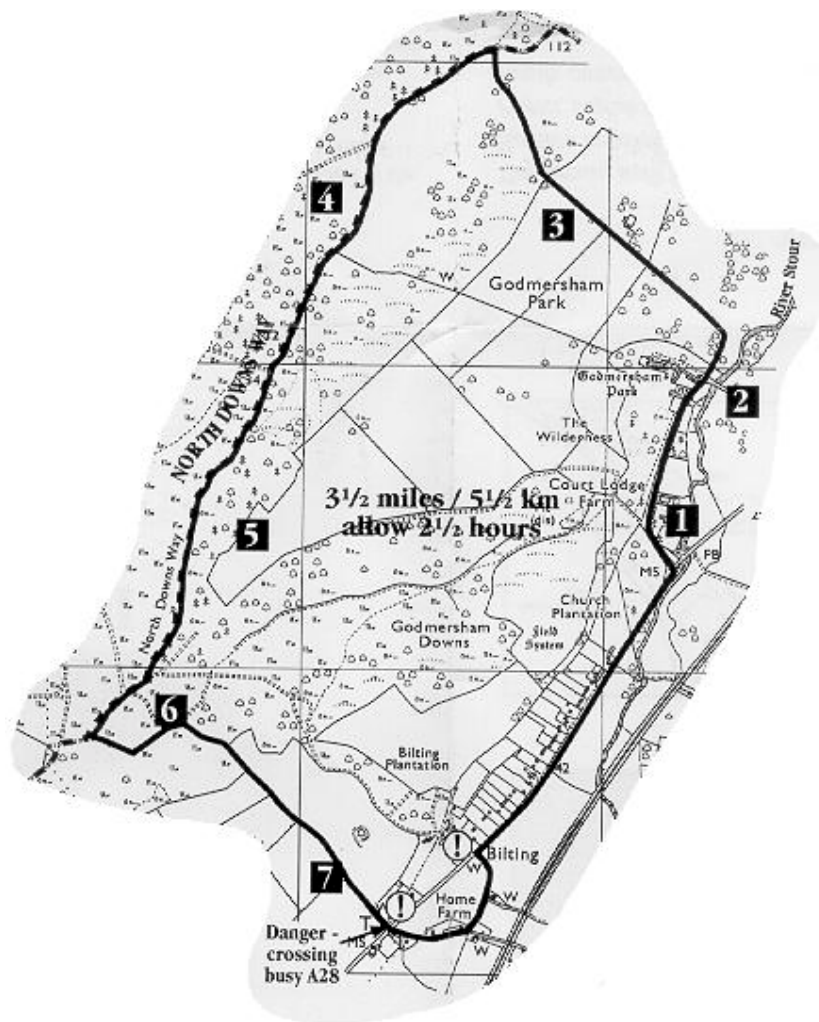


NORTH DOWNS WAY WALKS

Godmersham and Bilting



The Godmersham area has many signs of human activity ranging from Iron Age earthwork boundaries on the Downs to Roman burial sites and a name dating back to a Saxon farmstead belonging to 'Godmaer'.

Godmersham is first recorded in the Anglo Saxon Charter of 1036 when Archbishop Athelnoth granted the Manor to the Monks of Christchurch Canterbury. This association with the Church lasted until 1590 when part of the area was bought by the Bordeaux family who in 1852 subsequently sold to Edward Knight.

In the mediaval period the site of the mansion would have looked very different to what we see today. There were actually two memorial buildings, one centred on the Court Lodge and a second called Foord sited by the River Stour. The Foord Manor was surrounded by smaller dwellings including cottages and farmsteads. A mill was also situated by the river. The buildings were gradually removed by the Brodnax family, which with their increased prosperity entered into a programme of gentrifying the manor to largely what is seen today.

While undertaking this walk look out for remains of medieval and earlier field patterns which can be seen in the arable and pastoral fields of the Park. They are best viewed on a sunny winter's afternoon when a low sun casts long shadows throwing the low shallow banks into

sharp relief. As the footpath climbs the Downs it crosses step like structures called 'lynchets' – medieval or earlier, terraces formed to help cultivation of the steep sided Downs.

The house sited along the footpath is called the Deer Lodge and as the name suggests was home to the Deer Keeper and it was here that the venison was stored in the game larder.

At the top of the Downs where the footpath meets the North Downs Way are 18th century park pale was sited. This was an earthwork bank once topped with a railing fence. To the left is evidence of a brick deer keep which enabled bucks to leap into the park but hinder their retreat.

This circular walk follows a route through the Godmersham Park Estate and has been installed in conjunction with the Kentish Stour Countryside Project, English Heritage, the North Downs Way Project and the Sunley Family, owners of the Estate.

The walk passes through woods, across pasture land, follows drove roads and the North Downs Way from which excellent views of the Stour Valley can be obtained.

The walk starts at Godmersham Church where there is limited car parking space and then follows the road northwards through to the Parkland.

There are bus stops nearby in Godmersham and Bilting Ring 0870 6082 608 for public transport information.

Accommodation, tea rooms, shops and services are available in the nearby villages of Wye and Chilham.

The Kentish Stour Countryside Project gives advice to landowners on habitat management and available grant aid, runs volunteer conservation and access projects, provides interpretation through leaflets and guided walks, and encourages visitors to the area to enjoy the wildlife and landscape.

1. The Church of St. Lawrence dates back to the 11th century, with general restoration by William Butterfield, 1864-6. It is typically constructed from flint and rubble, with plain tiled roofs, Jane Austen's brother, Edward Knight (died 1852), is remembered in the east window of the church. His old nurse, who went on to nurse all his children, lies under the ancient yews in the churchyard.

The Kentish Stour Countryside Project manages part of the churchyard for its wildlife value. The grassland supports a diversity of wild flowers, such as marjoram, burnet saxifrage, ox-eye daisy and violets. The unmistakable song of the goldcrest, the smallest European bird, can often be heard in the churchyard's yews.

The narrow road skirting the church and bordered on one side by the perimeter wall of Godmersham Park, a listed structure, is an original route of the Pilgrim's Way. It stretches past the Old Vicarage and ends at the entrance to the grounds of the mansion. Pilgrims were apparently always welcomed at the church at the 13th century priory nearby, Court Lodge, which unfortunately was demolished in 1955.

2. The River Stour is the major watercourse in east Kent and, from its source in Lenham through to its mouth in Sandwich, measures 58 miles. It supports a healthy population of fish, including trout, pike, bream and dace, and a small discrete population of otters. The Stour Project is attempting to encourage otters by building a

number of otter holts along the length of the River Stour. Cushions of the white flowered river water crowfoot can be seen in the clear waters of this part of the Stour.

The Godmersham bridge was built in 1698 on the site of the ford or crossing point. Nearby, women felons were drowned in the ordeal pit in the river. Male criminals were hanged locally at Babbele near Little Eggerton.

3. Godmersham Park Estate presently covers 345 hectares . It is a fine example of a Kentish landscape with its parkland, river meadows, woodlands and chalk grassland.

The parkland was not formally laid out by a professional landscaper, but allowed to evolve gradually, enhancing the sweep of the Downs and the vale. From the 1870s, there began a period of gradual decline in the management of the park, culminating in the storm of 1987. Today an intensive restoration programme has returned the house to some of its former glory and replaced many of the trees lost in the gales.

The mansion was built in 1732 for Thomas Brodnax (later Brodnax-May-Knight) on the site of an older house, and was restored in the 1930s. The original structure actually dates back more than five hundred years when it was called Ford Place. The manor was owned from 1797-1852 by Edward Austin-Knight, brother of Jane Austen. Jane Austen was a frequent visitor and was supposed to have written some of her works here. She supposedly used Godmersham Park and its inhabitants as prototype for 'Mansfield Park', and there is no doubt that the vicarage occupied by the Revd. Collins in 'Pride and Prejudice' was based on the building a hundred yards from the church. The folly that can be seen across the valley on Temple Hill is said to be a place where Jane enjoyed writing.

4. This section of the walk follows the North Downs Way and you will see a milestone on the edge of the woodland to mark this.

The North Downs Way is one of ten National Trails in England, and runs for 150 miles from Farnham in Surrey to Dover in Kent, with an alternative route to Canterbury. It provides an opportunity to walk through some of the best countryside landscapes in south-east England, rich in wildlife and human history.

Fine views across the Stour Valley can be gained from the North Downs Way. Look out for plants such as columbine and deadly nightshade, and numerous badger sets with the large characteristic excavations of chalk rubble.

Just after the milestone, a bench is sculptured into a sweet chestnut tree. This was made by Tim Norris, a Kent Institute of Art and Design student. Other sculptures can be found in King's Wood.

5. During the First World War, a large airship hangar was gauged out of the base of a hill in the southern end of the park. Airships were moored here to prevent them being seen on the coastline. Below the hole was an underground dugout which was supposed to be a World War 2 collecting point for resistance men on the run in the event of a German invasion. It provided shelter, food and water for 120 people. The floor of the airship hole was dug out to make the shelter and then the soil was replaced to make it look like the anchorage again. The shelter was reached by a vertical shaft.
6. Much of the woodland you will see is sweet chestnut coppice. The chestnut, which is particularly associated with Kent, is cut at approximately fifteen year cycles after

which it re-grows from the stools that are left. In the past this process was used to provide a regular supply of small wood products for tools, hurdles, firewood, thatching spars, and many other uses. Today, however, the timber is mostly used for fencing and paper.

7. The track coming down from the woods into Bilting is an old drove road along which people used to herd their cattle. This track is part of a system of historic drove roads which can often be traced from one market place to another. The drove roads were usually surfaced with flint.

Behind the main row of houses in Bilting is a line of beech trees, parallel to which can be old A28. Evidently some of the older residences in Bilting have their front doors facing towards the beech trees.

Remember to wear appropriate clothing and footwear and please follow the Country Code

This walk can be found on OS Explorer 137 starting at GR 062504