Happy Valley, Netherne and Alderstead Heath walk. 3.9 miles (6.2 km), 2 hours

A circular walk that begins and ends at Chaldon Church.

Location of the start and end of the walk. OS Explorer Map 6. Map reference: TQ309557. Post Code: CR3 5AL. what 3 words: parts, swan, much

Using this self-guided walk

The directions for this walk are in number order on Page 1 to Page 5. Waypoints are numbered in the text in brackets. There is a map of the walk on Page 9, the last page. These directions were accurate in October 2025, but please note that over time gates, stiles and footpath signs may change. If you have a dog you must bring a lead as you will be crossing busy roads and sometimes there may be livestock in the fields.

Descriptions of points of interest and local history are included at the end of the walk directions from Page 5 to Page 8. These are indicated by the direction number and an alphabetical letter in bold italics. For example, **2A** refers to the second direction and the associated information.

1. From the church gate (1) turn left and walk to the right of the green, passing a green rubbish bin on the right-hand side of the road. At the end of the road turn right onto Church Lane and then left onto a footpath with a wooden fingerpost (2) showing the direction to Piles Wood. There is a green metal pole blocking vehicle access to this field to stop fly-tipping, which is a major problem in this area.

Dogs on a lead to cross this road

2. Cross this field with horse paddocks on the right. To your left is a large open field with a view down the valley towards Farthing Downs. Keep on the footpath passing Piles Wood with tall holly hedges on your left. Continue to a T junction with a gravel track (3), which is the Leazes Bridleway. There is a footpath post and fingerposts showing the direction to Happy Valley to the left and Leazes Avenue to the right. ***2A***

3. Turn left onto the gravel Leazes Bridleway and walk down this passing the entrances to four houses on the right-hand side of the bridleway until it narrows into woodland after the gates to the fourth house (Broadwood) on the right. Piles Wood is on the left and Broad Wood is on the right. These are both private woods and in April are full of bluebells.

4. Continue on the bridleway with a wood and wire fence on the right side. The bridleway goes gently downhill until you reach the end of the wooded area of Piles Wood. On the left there is a gap with a wooden fence and wooden posts and this is the entrance into the open field of Happy Valley (4). Turn left (west)

into Happy Valley and keep to the path on the left hand (south) edge of the open field. ***4A***

5. Continue on the path at the south end of the valley, with woods to your left and the valley floor to your right. At the end of the first field go through a gap in the hedge and cross over another footpath. On the left there is a wooden bench and a wooden footpath post with two signs. The one on the right shows the direction to Farthing Downs, ¾ mile. You follow this.

6. Go in the same direction as before into the next open field and follow the path on the left side of the valley. Continue for about 150m until you pass on your left another wooden bench, set back in the hedge and after another 20m a wooden post on the left in the hedge marking the Downland circular walk. Shortly after passing this post look for a gap in the hedgerow to the left and the entrance to an unmade track on your left which goes uphill through woods. There is a wooden bench on the right side of the entrance to the track (5). Turn left and walk up this track, with a wire fence on your left and woods on your right. The track is named Love Lane.

7. When you reach the top of the slope and emerge from the woods, walk slightly to the right and over a small grass hump into a large almost square open field of grassland and surrounded by hedges (6). In May these hedges will be white with flowering May, Hawthorn and Blackthorn blossom. Follow the grass path that goes diagonally across this field.

8. When you reach the right hand edge of the field, do not take the muddy track going right, but turn slightly to the left and go ahead through a gap in the hedgerow. This takes you into woods with a pond to your left and a wooden barrier to stop horses to the right. There is also a wooden post on the right with a red circular mark. Stop to view the pond. There is an information board on he left edge of the pond (7). From there go back and through the wooden barrier following a path through the woods. You may be able to hear cars on the road (Ditches Lane) on the other side of the woods on your left. In April there will be plenty of bluebells in this wood.

9. The path continues parallel with the road, passing on your right a Nature Trail (NT) post with a red circle (Number 23). Continue on the path crossing over another path coming in from your right and going left towards a green metal barrier on the side of the road. Ignore this cross path and continue in the same direction as before to pass another NT post with a red circle (Number 24) and through another wooden barrier to emerge on a corner of Ditches Lane (8). Turn right here through a green metal barrier onto a path, with a large white iron post on the right. This is a coal post. ***9A and 9B***

10. Having joined the track by the coal post turn sharp left within 2 m into the woods on a narrow path going gently downhill. When you reach a T junction of paths turn left (9) onto a path with a wooden bench on the left and walk towards the road (Ditches Lane). You pass another NT post with a red circle (Number 26)

on the right and when you reach Ditches Lane with a wooden fence and gate (10) cross straight over the road.

Dogs on a lead to cross this road.

11. There is a footpath post on the roadside showing the direction, with hedgerow to your left and a large open field to your right. Continue on this path which follows the left-hand edge of the open field and then goes gently downhill towards a line of trees. ***11A***

12. The path enters the tree line through the remains of an old iron gate (just the post remains) and goes more steeply downhill with a wood to the left and a hedge with concrete fence posts on the right. Further down the slope the right hand hedge ends and you are looking across the valley at another large open field. In the valley floor are a series of square concrete humps which is the line of a sewer main. Ahead of you rising up steeply from the valley floor is Boxers Wood.

13. When you reach the valley floor you pass closely by one of the concrete sewer manholes on the left of the path, in which you can hear the water flowing and in summer you can also smell this. To your right the view across the open field is towards Cane Hill, where you can now clearly see the square water tower.

14. The path climbs up the steep bank into Boxers Wood, with a wire fence to the left. Take care as this slope can be slippery in winter or after heavy rain. In these conditions it is much easier to climb up this bank than come down it, and you can used the recently installed wooden railings to haul yourself up. Half way up the slope you pass a path and footpath post on the right and continue uphill. When the path levels out, catch your breath and continue with a fenced field to your left and the woods to the right.

15. After passing an iron gate on the left the path meets a T junction (11) with a tarred road (Tugwood Close) and modern houses. This is Netherne on the Hill, a modern private estate built in 2008 in the grounds of a former asylum. ***15A***

Keep dogs on a lead on the roads.

16. Turn left on the road (Tugwood Close) and follow this passing the gates into a large older yellow painted house on the left, which is Netherne House. Keep on the road passing Broadwood Road on the right into Bowen Way. There is a large open space to your left with low wooden railing and you turn left onto a tarred path with a white sign, NWL Land (12). Follow this path as it bends slightly to the right, with open grassland and woodland to your left and large red brick buildings to your right. These are the original asylum buildings now converted to luxury flats.

17. Keep on the tarred path through a line of mature chestnut trees with a hedge on the left and the asylum buildings across the green on the right. When you reach a red bin at the far end of the hedge and a bench to the left, the tarred path bends to the right (13). After about 15m you turn left onto a grass path going towards a grass hummock, with hedgerow on the left.

18. The path crosses over the grass hummock. This is not natural and is the buried rubble from the building works. The developer of the modern estate agreed to keep this land as recreation space. The hummock is a good point at which to look back at the old asylum buildings, including the chapel and water tower. To the right is a playground and a long hedge, behind which are tennis courts (14).

19. Continue down the other side of the hummock into a dip and cross a path. To the right you can now more clearly see the tennis courts. Keep in the same direction going back up from the dip till the path levels out and you are heading for open playing field. To your left the view across the valley is towards Chaldon (north east). You may see the buildings of Court Farm in the distance to the left.

20. Continue towards the playing field. There are three tall flagpoles at each edge of the field, the fourth flagpole is broken and you pass this as you enter the field. In the summer there will probably be white football goals at each end of the field. Looking slightly to your left across the hedge on the right as you enter the playing field you will also see a green wooden cricket pavilion. There is a cricket pitch behind the hedge. This pitch, the playing field and the tennis courts were all part of the old asylum and was area was the recreational space for staff and patients.

21. Cross the playing fields going slightly diagonally to the left towards a line of tall trees in the woods ahead of you (Netherne Wood and Grasscuts Shaw). You need to cross over the football pitch and head towards the tree line. You may see a faint outline of the path on the left hand side of the football pitch. Follow this this into the wood through a narrow gap in the hedge. Just before you enter the wood look right for a clear view of the water tower.

22. Keep on the path in the wood as it bends to the right through mature beech trees. The path bears left and then right to meet another path coming in from the right. Turn left onto this path keeping left and then keep ahead on this path.

23. You will reach a junction (15) with a wider path coming from your right which is down a short bank of earth from the path you are on. To the right (west) this wide path joins Netherne Road which you can just see at the edge of the woods and you may hear vehicles on this road. To the left is the path to Alderstead Heath and this is the direction you take. ***23A***

24. Go down the earth bank and turn left then walk for a few metres with several fallen trees in the wood to emerge into a large open field. There are the remains of a wooden stile on the right as you enter the field. The footpath across this field leads to the access road and the entrance to Alderstead Heath Caravan Park. The caravan park is about a quarter mile ahead across the other side of this field and slightly to the left. You may not see this until you get closer.

25. Go straight across the open field to a metal gate. Unless recently ploughed the footpath should be clear. The strange looking circular concrete humps in this field are the sewer main. You pass close to one on the left.

26. When you reach the access road to the caravan park cross this and pass to the left side of a green metal gate on the side of the access road, with a footpath post on the right. You enter onto a concrete apron into Alderstead Heath.

Dogs on a lead to cross the road. 26A, 26B and 26C

27. From the crash site, with your back to the silver birch memorial follow the concrete path on your left, not the one to the right. The path to the left goes between two metal poles, then down a dip and back up. About 50m from the bottom of the dip turn left (16) onto another concrete path and follow this through the wood. The path bends to the right, (17) going slightly downhill and passing a low ruined brick structure on the left.

28. Continue until the path bends sharply to the right (18) and you will see a gap in the hedge to your left with a wooden stile to the right of a large coppiced beech tree. There is another path coming in from the right and a small footpath post.

29. Turn left by the beech tree (19) and cross the wooden stile to turn sharp left into an open field with a hedge on the left. Ahead is a wide path crossing the open field. The path goes down into a shallow valley and then back up the valley slope. To your left are the buildings of Court Farm and in the far distance Farthing Downs. To the right across the open field and behind a hedge you may get a glimpse of vehicles on Rook Lane.

Keep dogs on a lead as there may be livestock in these fields.

30. Continue on the path which goes gently up to the remnants of a wooden gate and hedge-line and into another open field. The path goes slightly left across the fields towards an iron gate with a kissing-gate. As you cross the field you will see Chaldon Church ahead.

31. Go through the second kissing-gate and look to the left to the pond on the left side of the farm road. This is one of the ponds that were used by Chaldon villagers as a local water supply until the late 19th Century when piped water was finally available. Cross the road to the church gate and the end of the walk (1).

Points of interest and local history

2A Leazes Avenue Sequoias.
Looking to your right you can see the open green in Leazes Avenue, and to the left of this green you can see a line of very tall Giant Sequoia trees, (also known as Wellingtonias). These were planted at some time between 1876 and 1885 by the local landowner, James Bank Taylor to mark the avenue to his estate at Fryern Farm, (which is about a mile north east of here across what is now a golf course).

4A Happy Valley
The valley to your right (north) slopes downhill to a wooded area at the bottom of the valley. You may be able to detect a line of yew trees in this wood. These are ancient yews planted in the 16th Century which mark the northern boundary

of the Parish of Chaldon. This also marks the modern boundary of Surrey and Greater London, as the northern edge of Happy Valley is in the London Borough of Croydon.

Happy Valley is 100 hectares (250 acres) of open parkland and woodland. It is located in a chalk down valley that runs east to west, with the Surrey National Golf Club at the eastern end and Farthing Downs, owned by the City of London, at the western end. Acquired by Croydon Council in 1937 as Coulsdon Greenbelt Lands it was renamed Happy Valley Park in 1970.

There is a possibly apocryphal story that the area was commonly known as "happy valley" because of its close proximity to the St Lawrence's mental hospital in Caterham. The inmates of which were let out for happy time recreation in the valley.

This is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of the range of wildflowers, insects and wildlife that thrive here. If you visit during May to July you will find a vast range of wildflowers, including orchids and yellow rattle. This valley contains the majority of all the yellow rattle plants to be found in Britain.

In its guide for tourists British Airways has rated Happy Valley as one of the six loveliest remote walks in Britain.

9A Coal posts

After the 1666 Great Fire of London, Parliament passed legislation to tax the entry of coal into London. The revenue from this was used to rebuild the City of London. You can see that the post displays a City of London shield, which is white with a red cross. The tax paid for the rebuilding of St Pauls and other City of London churches that had been destroyed by the fire. Coal posts marked the boundary within which the coal tax was levied. In 1845 the Coal Duties Act set the boundary around London as 20 miles from the General Post Office in the City of London.

By the 18th Century the tax revenue was no longer needed for rebuilding and was designated to the building 50 new churches in London. Only 12 of these "Queen Anne Churches" were built, of which six were designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor in the 1720's. The coal tax continued to be collected during the 19th Century and with the rapid growth of London and the demand for coal this became a major source of income for the City of London. The coal tax was finally abolished in 1889.

This coal post dates from the reign of Victoria. You can tell this from the writing on the side of the post. This reads, 24 & 25 VICT CAP42.

CAP42 refers to an Act of Parliament and 24 and 25 refer to this Act being passed in the 24th and 25th years of the reign of Queen Victoria (VICT). Victoria's

reign began in 1837 so this Act was passed between 1860 and 1861. This is the 1861 London Coal & Wines Duties Continuation Act.

There are still 200 coal posts left. Most are made of cast iron like this one, some are smaller and made of stone and a few are obelisks. Many can be found, like this one, on land owned by the City of London. The coal tax revenue accumulated by the City paid for the purchase in the 1880's of open land and commons surrounding London to stop urban development. This coal post is on the edge of Farthing Downs, which was purchased in 1883.

Locally the City of London also owns Ashtead Common, Coulsdon Common, Kenley Common, Riddlesdown, Spring Park and Wickham Common. To the north and west of London it owns Epping Forest, Wanstead Common, Hampstead Heath and Burnham Beeches. This incredibly farsighted decision made in the 19th Century and paid for by the coal tax limited the urban sprawl of London and preserved these valuable London "lungs".

9B Devilsden Wood and Farthing Downs

You are now on the edge of Farthing Downs and this is Devilsden Wood. This is a very ancient wood which dates from about 10,000 years ago when the glaciers of the last ice age were retreating and before any human settlement. The wide range of tree and flower species and the insect and wild life species found here on Farthing Downs and in this wood make this an SSSI.

11A Cane Hill, Coulsdon.

To your right (west) the view beyond the open filed is towards South Coulsdon and on the horizon a ridge with the water tower and buildings of Cane Hill, a former asylum.

15A Netherne Hospital

Opened in 1909 as the Surrey County Asylum this is a former mental hospital. In 1867 the Metropolitan Asylums Board began a programme of building asylums to accommodate the former inmates of the London workhouses who were considered to be mentally deficient. This included a large number of the elderly, single mothers and children whose behaviour did not fit the standards of Victorian and Edwardian society.

Most of these new asylums were built on the periphery of London from 1870 to the early 1900s and are located in a ring around the capital which closely matches the location of the M25. Oher local examples of these asylums are St Lawrence's in Caterham and Cane Hill which you saw in the distance earlier in this walk. The poet and novelist Ian Sinclair rather aptly described these asylums as the "Gulags of London".

Almost all of the asylums were closed in the 1990s and have been converted into private housing estates. Netherne closed in 1994 and the housing estate dates from 2008. The brick water tower was converted into flats.

23A Alsted Manor

Netherne Wood on the west side of Netherne Road, (the opposite side of the wood from where you are standing), was the site of a Medieval Manor House, Alsted Manor. This was a sub manor of Merstham Manor and dates from 1211. Merstham Manor was owned by the Prior of Canterbury Cathedral. There was also an associated farm and a forge for iron smelting. After archaeological investigation in the 1970's the site has been re buried. The name Alderstead is a corruption of Alsted.

26A Alderstead Heath Caravan Park and a tragic plane crash
There has been a caravan park here since the early 1950s and originally this was called Dean Lane Camp. It was a children's holiday camp in the 1930's.

As you enter the Heath from the caravan park access road look to your right across the concrete apron to see a memorial tied to a silver birch tree. This memorial marks the site of the crash of an RAF Avro Anson NK607 on 29th September 1944 in which all five crew members were killed. The plane was flying from Northolt to Belgium or France. It is reported to have hit trees while flying in low cloud.

26B Alderstead Heath
The tracks in this wood are solid concrete. During WW2, the Royal Army Ordnance Corps used Alderstead Heath as an Armoured Fighting Vehicle depot. Designated Number 9 AVF Depot. Prior to D-Day in 1944 it was also used by the armoured vehicles of the Canadian Army, who were stationed in Redhill. The Canadians' barracks were located at what is now East Surrey Hospital, which is on Canada Avenue. So that their armoured vehicles could get up Dean Lane from the A23 the Canadians demolished part of the road bridge over the railway just before Dean Lane joins the A23.

26C Alderstead Fort
In 1890 Alderstead Fort was built nearby, to the south of here (about half a mile to your right), as part of the London Defence Position which was a string of forts from Epping Forest to the North Downs. This fort is preserved as an ancient monument, but not open to the public.

You cannot see the fort from this walk, but you can see it on the right-hand side of the road as you drive on Alderstead Lane just before you reach Shepherds Hill. Locally the best-preserved fort of this type which is open to the public is on Reigate Hill and is owned by the National Trust.

Walk map on next page

Happy Valley, Netherne and Alderstead Heath walk. 3.9 miles (6.2 km), 2 hours

