

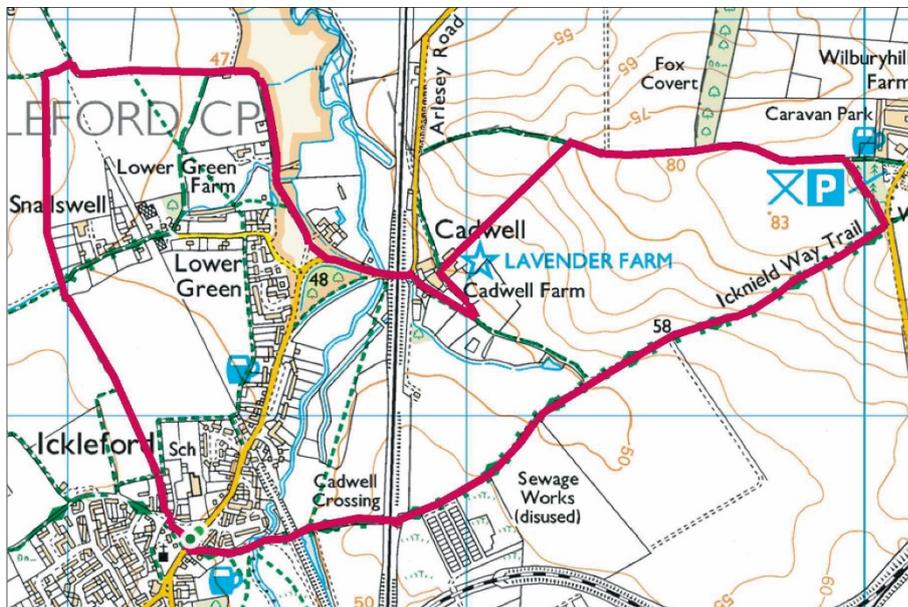
Ickleford and Hitchin Lavender Farm (4 miles)

Walk description by Al Maceachern (Stag Walkers)

Start point: Upper Green, Ickleford, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 3YD. On-street parking should be available on Upper Green or in front of St Katharine's Church, just along Arlesey Road, SG5 3YJ.

This walk starts in the village of Ickleford, just outside Hitchin in North Hertfordshire. The route goes past a major attraction in the area, Hitchin Lavender at Cadwell Farm. It is an especially enjoyable walk on a summer evening with the lavender in bloom, but the pleasant countryside and wide-ranging views make this a route worth walking at any time of year. Boots are advised for the muddier paths in winter but the terrain is mostly easy, with just one gentle climb uphill; however, stairs up and down at the Cadwell Crossing railway bridge may mean that a diversion is required for anyone with pushchairs or wheelchairs.

The walk begins at Upper Green, one of two greens in the village. Upper Green is bordered in part by St Katharine's Church, dating back to the 12th century, and by the Victorian village school. On the Green you can also see the village sign depicting travellers at the ford from which the name of the village is derived; Ickleford lies on the route of the Icknield Way, the ancient long-distance trackway, and on the western bank of the River Hiz. The four-mile route described here follows small parts of the 114-mile Icknield Way Path and of two local trails, the 11-mile Hicca Way which follows the course of the Hiz and the 12-mile Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP).



From Upper Green, use the zebra crossing and turn right, passing the bus stop (to the right of the bus stop, you may see an information board for the Hicca Way). Turn left at the signpost which indicates 1¼ miles to Wilbury Hill and is marked with signs for the Icknield Way; the track becomes unsurfaced as you approach a grassy field. Keep to the left and follow waymarkers for the Icknield Way and the HOOP. A bridge takes you over the River Hiz where the ford used to be.

Keep straight on with an old willow plantation to your right and you will pass remnants of the Hitchin-Bedford railway line which closed in the 1960s; on your left is the brick abutment for a bridge which used to take trains over the byway, and on your right is an embankment converted to a wooded nature reserve. A small pond here is known as Gerry's Hole: the pond was dug out when earth was moved for the railway works, and the story goes that sadly Gerry the navvy fell in and drowned after a night in the pub... a cautionary tale if you wish to visit one of the village hostelrys after your walk.

Just after Gerry's Hole, with trees on each side the track rises gradually as it approaches the pedestrian bridge over the East Coast mainline. On the other side of the bridge, after a few minutes walking on a tree-lined path the view opens up with Wilbury Hill and Letchworth ahead, while to the right are arable fields and the flyover carrying trains on the Cambridge line. Continue straight on here, ascending the chalk path up the hill.

At the top of Wilbury Hill, it is worth looking back to enjoy the view across Hitchin with the easterly Chiltern Hills beyond (as pictured on the front cover of this issue). From here, the Icknield Way continues into Letchworth, becoming a residential street of the same name; but our route turns left through a small wood. Keeping to the left as the path winds through the trees, we come to a bench erected by NHRG. The route then continues through the woods until a junction where we leave the HOOP and turn left again. We continue with an arable field on our left and trees and hedgerows to the right. Through gaps in the hedge we can see Arlesey and its Blue and Green Lagoons and the towers of the former Fairfield Hospital.

We enjoy a wider view ahead across the Bedfordshire plain as we continue past a wood named Fox Covert; then as the route descends further downhill the lavender fields can be seen in front of us (in flowering season, from

mid-June to mid-August you may catch its scent on the breeze from the top of Wilbury Hill). At a choice of paths, take the left, which runs directly alongside the lavender field. At the bottom of the hill, continue straight on through the farmyard, passing the farm exit on your right; just after this, turn left along a track between a large barn and a stable. This bridleway is known as Plum Pudding Lane due to its muddy nature. Continue along



this track for a short time; you may wish to admire the rows of lavender uphill to your left, but keep an eye out for a kissing-gate on your right. Go through the kissing-gate into a field and turn right, following the footpath in a straight line, through another metal gate and an additional kissing-gate at the far end (there may also be some temporary paddock fencing in use within these fields, with a further temporary gate). Continue straight on between two houses to a small pond, then turn right, towards the road. The road passes under a railway bridge where care must be taken, because there is no footway under the bridge and it comes after a bend in the road. However, there is a button you can press to activate a light warning cars to go under the bridge with caution. Past the railway bridge, continue onto the pavement and over another bridge crossing the River Hiz.

For a shorter walk, returning through the village (total 3 miles), you may wish to detour here: just after crossing the river, cross the road and take a footpath (signposted) across Christmas Common, which takes you onto Arlesey Road; continue along the pavement in the same southwesterly direction, passing The Cricketers pub, to return to the start point at Upper Green.

For the 4-mile route, coincidentally mapping a rough boot shape around the village, the route extends around the fields north of Ickleford. Rather than crossing the road, follow Arlesey Road until you reach the second of Ickleford's greens: look out for a post with a Hicca Way sign, indicating a track to take across Lower Green. Pass a riding school to your right and join the wide avenue between chestnut trees. This becomes a bridleway; continue along it, past a few houses on the left giving way to paddocks, with Ickleford Common on the right.

Keep going along the bridleway as it curves round to the left and the ground becomes more rough underneath. Continue in a straight line, ignoring a farm track to your right and a bridleway to the left; the path here becomes more open, with arable land on your left and trees to the right, and the ground rising slightly. Ignore a cross-field footpath on the left; continue straight ahead. Where the path goes between some trees, follow a kink in the route to the right and almost immediately left again, in the direction of a footpath signposted to Holwell. On a summer evening, this part of the route is a good spot to stop and watch bats dart along the tree-lined path and back again.

Another reminder of railway history can be seen here: a bench marks the site of the Three Arches Bridge, which took the path across the Hitchin-Bedford line. The railway cutting was apparently used for landfill and covered over, so there is little sign of it now left on the ground.

Just after the bench, turn left down a footpath between two crop fields; this is the flattest part of the route, with wide open skies above. This path leads back to the village, mostly in a straight line; after passing more horse paddocks, ignore a byway to the left and a footpath to the right and keep heading in the same direction towards Ickleford. After the path cuts between some trees, beyond a meadow on your left you may once again see the colourful slopes of the lavender farm. Continuing straight on, the footpath narrows as it passes the village burial ground, then runs alongside a row of terraced houses before emerging at the top of Upper Green and the end of the walk.

For post-walk refreshments, The Plume of Feathers is well-placed on Upper Green and The Old George is just a minute's walk away on Arlesey Road next to St Katharine's Church. There is a cafe and shop at Hitchin Lavender where you can also pay a visit to walk in the fields and pick your own lavender. Additionally there is a village convenience store opposite the church.