Five

National Trust car park at the top of Watlington Hill. All three circular walks a short distance from the public transport from to the starting point. Call if you are walking, take www.traveline.info runs from Thame to Watlington and places in between. Check just after The Ridgeway the footpath on the right with Traveline.

By bus: Christmas Common (01491 612599). There are also pubs, Take a picnic to eat on Watlington Hill and enjoy the views. www.visitchilterns.co.uk The T1 service by Thames Travel runs from Oxford to Hollandridge Lane. Watlington Hill At the next junction turn left, then almost immediately just after Greenfield, take a narrow flinty path on the right, marked opposite the field, take a narrow flinty path on the right, marked with care and follow the road straight on to the junction signed finally leading down to a wide open area of tracks.

As you walk uphill along Hollandridge Lane you may notice banks with care and follow the road straight on to the junction signed finally leading down to a wide open area of tracks.

At the top of the hill where the path is level, you are likely to see silvery remains of the flower stalks. At the woodland edge near a stile, look out for a view of Howe dene.

When you reach the road, turn left and walk with care, along the verge if possible. Opposite a house and black barn called Dumble Dore on the right, take the footpath on your left, over a stile. Turn right and follow the track parallel to the hedge for about 200 metres you can see the road, opposite Greenfield. Turn left here along the road to return to Christmas Common. (NOTE the track in front of you is not a public path.)

The path leads to a solid wooden gate which opens onto the road, opposite Greenfield. Turn left here along the road to return to Christmas Common. (NOTE the track in front of you is not a public path.)

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The path leads downhill through old scrub with many hawthorn trees. This area was originally grassland and the trees have grown as grazing has ceased. Further along on the right you will see a large grassy field stretching down the valley; a map of Watlington Hill shows this road, opposite Greenfield. Turn left here along the road to return to Christmas Common. (NOTE the track in front of you is not a public path.)

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**Walk 1 Common Boundary Banks, a 2½ mile circular walk**

There are no stiles on this fairly level route.

1. From the car park, go back to the road, turn right and walk to the junction. Bear right towards Christmas Common.

2. Just before the next junction, look for the path on the left next to the 30mph sign. Follow the grassy path, bearing right, then left, following the white arrows, passing a house on the right. Here the path becomes a track which leads straight on. Continue until you reach a junction with pointed arrows on the trees. Turn right (P13).

3. This area was part of the old common land belonging to Pytton which was sold when the open commons were enclosed. Look out for a mixture of trees, including yew and oak. Some have been coppiced, ie cut at ground level. The size of the multiple trunks that have m-grown shows that this took place many years ago.

After a short distance in this open woodland you will reach a large bank. Pause here to notice the different vegetation on either sides of the bank. The beech trees are tall and straight and little there is ground vegetation. In contrast to the variety of vegetation you have just walked through, this area has been wooded and managed for either fuel or for chair making for hundreds of years.

4. Bear right and follow the path alongside the bank passing large pits which are probably old quarries. Continue straight on, ignoring the path going off to the left. You follow the bank for a good distance until the path turns right, leaving the bank.

The bank marks the ancient boundary of the edge of common and which stretched from the top of Watlington Hill to Northend and also the boundary between Watlington and Shirmburn parishes. The bank varies in size now but can see it on your right as you walk, still clearly marking these ancient boundaries.

5. The path turns right and follows the line of a wire fence, and continues to the road.

On the right of the path, there is still a small bank and old trees along the old common and field boundary. Coopers Wood is on the left. It is different again to the other woodland seen along the path with a mixture of species and open spaces. A map dated 1840 shows that this area was part of the common, but by 1883, the common was enclosed and Coopers Wood was mixed woodland as it is still today.

6. At the road, cross with care and enter the field through a kissing gate. Follow the arrow across the field to another gate, then straight ahead, diagonally left across the next field to the gate into woodland.

The fields you cross were part of Northend Common, which joined Christmas Common. In the summer there are plentiful flowers and grasses in these fields.

7. At the bottom of the field, go through the kissing gate and continue straight on through the wood until you reach a rough track.

For a shorter walk of 2¼ miles, turn right to return to the road junction.

8. For the longer walk, go straight across the track. In 1880 the track was called the Brithway, meaning that animals were driven along. It leads to Holland Ridge Lane and ultimately to Henley-on-Thames. Continue straight for 25m. Following signs for the Oxfordshire Way (OW), bear right through fairly open woodland. The path emerges on the road, next to the Old Church.

This woodland area is part of Pytton parish, showing how complicated ancient parish boundaries can be. This originated from the need for each parish to have access to a variety of natural resources, such as soils, timber and grazing.

**Description of route:**

Three separate walks are described, but they can be combined if you would like a longer walk. All three circular walks start and finish at the National Trust car park at the top of Watlington Hill, a short distance from the crossroads at Christmas Common.

The routes follow paths across fields and through woods and some paths can be muddy in places. There are some stiles on Walks 2 and 3 and some of these paths are very steep. Take care when walking short stretches on, or crossing, country lanes.

*Wear suitable footwear and allow time to rest and enjoy the views.*

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Out of the woodland. Watlington Hill

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9. There is a parallel path on the left through this area which leads to the same kissing gate at the bottom of the hill as the holloway.

On the left of the holloway, the ground is more open with bracken, grass and flowers. In the summer, the flowery grass is full of butterflies, some quite rare, and bees feeding on the pollen and nectar. These plants grow especially on chalky ground so they are not seen everywhere.

10. At the bottom of the hill, the path reaches a wooden kissing gate. Continue through this straight on between hedges and through gates until you reach a junction with a house on the left. Turn left along the track until you reach another junction.

11. Continue straight on climbing up a grassy field to the gate. Once through the gate, turn left.

If you pause at the top, you can see a good view of Watlington Hill and the obvious dark green yew woodland easy to see all year. Below to the right, you can see Lower Dean Wood, originally part of the old deer park. The grassy field was shown as a much smaller open area on the 1870s map, surrounded by woodland which linked to the woodland you will walk through. On a clear day you can see across Oxfordshire, although the iconic towers of Didcot Power Station are no longer the landmark they used to be.

A little further along you can catch a glimpse of part of Watlington Park House on the right. The original house was built in 1632, but replaced in the 1750s and altered several times since then.

12. The path continues into woodland and is marked by white arrows. Follow the obvious path.

This National Trust beech woodland used to contain many species, shown on the 1870s map. The end of the National Trust woodland is marked by two posts and, as the path levels, other tree species can be seen. Cherry trees have white flowers in spring but can also be identified by horizontal lines on their shiny bark. The most impressive trees are huge, straight oak trees which are many hundreds of years old. They almost look like elephants standing amongst the other vegetation! Sweet chestnut trees can also be seen - they’re very prickly seed cases protect the nuts inside. The climate is too cool in England to produce full sized chestnuts so the ones we buy to eat are imported.

13. The path reaches a tarmac drive. Here turn left and continue to the gateway. At the road, turn left to Christmas Common, and then left again at the junction to go back to the car park.

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**Walk 2 Watlington Hill and Park, a 3 mile circular walk**

Watlington Hill is a special place as it has rare or important plants, trees and wildlife, some of which you will see on this walk.

1. With your back to the road, take the narrow footpath in the left corner of the car park and follow the white arrows. Go through a gate, bear right, and continue downhill.

On a map dating from 1876-77, the line of huge beech trees on the left are shown to continue along the modern National Trust boundary to the bottom of the hill. They mark the edge of the common land. The land to the left of your path was shown as open ground at this time with no woodland.

2. Locking across the valley you can see Lower Dean Wood which was once part of Watlington deer park. You will go through this wood later in the walk.

3. The path leads through woodland and through a kissing gate. Continue straight on with woodland on the right.

The path runs along a holloway which has been worn down over the centuries previously by sheep and now by walkers. The woodland on the right here (shown as a narrow strip in the 1870s) is beech mixed with scattered yew trees, some conifers and whitebeam. The conifers are shown as a plantation on a later map dated between 1880 and 1891.

4. Through the kissing gate, the woodland on the right becomes mainly yew with some beech. This is an uncommon type of woodland which only occurs in a few places in the south of England. Yew bark is glowing brown and peeling, with long straight needles growing in two rows each side of the stem; the needles are dark and shiny on the top and greyish underneath. The trunks often have many new shoots springing out of them, especially when they have been cut. Yew lives to a great age, and its use is a yew spear head, dating to about 450,000 years ago, one of the oldest wooden finds in the world.

5. Yew is very poisonous, especially when they have been cut. Old trees on the left are shown to continue along the modern National Trust boundary to the bottom of the hill and also contain conifers and some other species.

6. At the road, turn right, walk past the Fox and Hounds pub to the road junction. Turn left to return to the National Trust car park.

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**Walk 3 Northend Common,**

7. This woodland is marked by two posts and, as the path levels, other tree species can be seen. Cherry trees have white flowers in spring but can also be identified by horizontal lines on their shiny bark. The most impressive trees are huge, straight oak trees which are many hundreds of years old. They almost look like elephants standing amongst the other vegetation! Sweet chestnut trees can also be seen – they’re very prickly seed cases protect the nuts inside. The climate is too cool in England to produce full sized chestnuts so the ones we buy to eat are imported.

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