

THE NORTH DOWNS WAY

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THE NORTH DOWNS WAY

by

Kev Reynolds

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www.cicerone.co.uk

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Third edition 2017
ISBN: 978 1 85284 861 3
Second edition 2011
First edition 2001

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in China on behalf of Latitude Press Ltd

All photographs by the author



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Route symbols on OS map extracts



route



start point



finish point



direction of walk

For OS symbols key see OS maps.

Front cover: Quintessential Kent: oasthouses on the Canterbury loop

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Cobbs Hill gives a view down to Water Farm and Stowting (Stage 10)

INTRODUCTION

The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do just as one pleases... Give me the clear blue sky over my head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner – and then to thinking!

William Hazlitt (1778–1830)

I'm one with Hazlitt, when it comes to long-distance walks. Except, perhaps, my preference would be for an eight or nine-hour march to dinner, rather than just three. Spread the day thinly, I say; set out soon after breakfast with a cheese roll and an apple in the rucksack, dismiss from mind any thought of the next night's rest – and simply wander. Let the trail ahead guide your feet, leaving each of the senses free to absorb whatever the countryside has in store.

Walking the North Downs Way provides ample scope for the liberty to think, feel, do just as you please. Mostly the trail is clear, waymarking adequate, the spacious Downs edging a far horizon as they make that long, generous arc round the low-lying Weald, so that there are few (if any) demands to check the map or compass, and you can free the mind to drift with the clouds. Others have done just that, for generations.

'From the Straits of Dover to Farnham,' said Hilaire Belloc, 'Nature herself laid down the platform of a perfectly defined ridge, from which a man going west could hardly deviate,

even if there were no path to guide him.' And we, going east, could hardly disagree.

The North Downs have acted as a highway since before Neolithic times. Because the Wealden forest was too dense and tangled to allow easy access, the high and broad-backed downland gave an opportunity to hunt, to travel, or to drive livestock from one pasture to another, and (much later) from pasture to market. Drove roads gave way to green lanes, while some of the footpaths and trackways adopted by the North Downs Way in the 21st century may well have been stamped out long before the Romans came to these shores. Now there's food for thought...

Today the line of the downland scarp is traced here and there by motorways and a high speed railway, and nothing can better underscore the frenetic nature of modern living than to view in the distance the haste of wheeled traffic while you stroll across a rabbit-cropped meadow, birds singing from a nearby spinney, as you let the hours drift slowly by. Walking day after day for a hundred miles and

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more is the perfect antidote to the stresses of workaday life; it's the best of all exercises, a relaxation, and a means by which to get life in perspective. And along the North Downs Way you can discover something of our ancestry, learn from the past and balance those lessons with the present.

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Exploring every aspect of the Surrey Hills and Kent Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the North Downs Way (NDW) National Trail offers the walker a very different experience from that on the South Downs Way (SDW), for example, for while the SDW challenges with some steepish ascents and descents, the NDW is much more gentle with fewer

climbs, and where these are made, the gradients are generally much less demanding. There's more habitation along the North Downs Way but, surprisingly in view of the proximity of major centres of commerce and industry, and large residential areas (especially between Farnham and Detling), you meet far fewer walkers, and most of those you do meet are locals out exercising their dogs, or enjoying a circular walk. Although it is claimed that around half a million

- 1 *Cowslips are common on the downland chalk*
- 2 *Bugle (Aguja reptans) appears in open meadows*
- 3 *May is when hawthorn blossom fills the hedgerows*



people a year walk sections of the trail, even in mid-summer it's perfectly possible to wander the NDW for long periods in splendid isolation.

The North Downs are more heavily wooded than their counterpart on the south side of the Weald. Some of the loveliest are the mixed woods of beech, oak and ash, carpeted with wood anemones, bluebells or ramsons in spring and early summer. And when the trail emerges from the woods there's often a surprise view to stop you in your tracks, the revelation of patterned field and meadow, or orchard, vineyard or hop garden spread below as if to underline the fact that in parts of Kent the Downs form a backing to the 'Garden of England'.

That garden is explored in detail on a spur to Canterbury, while the direct route to Dover excites with the famous white cliffs plunging to the surf hundreds of feet below the footpath.

There are many historic sites along the Way: Neolithic burial chambers, Roman roads and Norman churches, charming villages and tiny hamlets, England's premier cathedral city and its busiest ferry port. There are bold stone castles and country cottages trim with thatch. There are literary connections with Jane Austen, Dickens, Joseph Conrad, George Meredith and JM Barrie – among others.

There are streams and rivers, ponds and lakes that catch the sun

and dazzle its light, that attract wildlife and a rich diversity of plantlife too – anyone interested in natural history will find much to occupy them. And, of course, there are the contrasts of landscape that enrich each day's walk and make a journey along the North Downs Way a truly memorable experience.

The NDW is really the child of the much older Pilgrims' Way, which ran along the base of the Downs from Winchester to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. That route dates back to the 12th century, but the modern world has smothered large sections in tarmac, so a better, more peaceful and safer route was devised along the crest of the downland wall, although in some parts of Kent it descends to the Pilgrims' Way where that original route is either a trackway or a mostly untroubled country lane. Instead of beginning in Winchester, it starts in Farnham on the Surrey/Hampshire border; and while the Pilgrims' Way ends in Canterbury, the North Downs Way continues to Dover, and is now part of the E2 – a major European trail.

WALKING WEST TO EAST

As the quotation from Belloc suggests, the route could be tackled from Dover round to Farnham, but the journey described in this guide takes the opposite view, preferring instead to walk eastwards, as would the pilgrim. So for the sake of our modern-day

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pilgrim the National Trail, which was officially opened in September 1978, begins in Farnham and ends in Dover.

At Boughton Lees near Wye the route forks; one stem heading north to Canterbury, while the main and more direct route continues through Wye and follows the escarpment to the outskirts of Folkestone, then on to Dover by way of a breezy path over Shakespeare Cliff. The direct route to Dover measures roughly 123 miles (198km), while the alternative that takes the Canterbury loop is about 130 miles (208km) long, and for most of its course between Farnham and Canterbury, it either coincides with, or parallels, the older Pilgrims' Way.

For the first 14 miles (22km) out of Farnham the route plots a course along a range of sandy hills to the south of the Downs, but after crossing

the lovely viewpoint of St Martha's Hill east of Guildford, it strikes north to the chalk crest of Albury Downs at Newlands Corner. From then on the North Downs Way remains true to its name and mainly keeps close to the southern escarpment on a series of footpaths, tracks and brief stretches of quiet country lane as the North Downs spread east and southeast across Surrey and Kent before being stopped abruptly by the English Channel.

In four places the downland wall has been breached by river valleys. In Surrey it is the River Mole below Box Hill which causes the first breach. In Kent it is the Darent at Otford, the Medway at Rochester and Great Stour near Wye that have broken through the lofty chalk barrier to create valleys, each with very different characteristics. The Mole's is a comparatively



Blue Bell Hill provides a great vantage point across the Medway Valley (Stage 7)

narrow valley, a wooded slice with Dorking to the south and Leatherhead to the north. The Darent Gap north of Sevenoaks is a much more open swathe, the low-lying water-meadows beside the innocent stream teasing with prospects of gentle walks for other days. The most profound breach is that caused by Kent's major river, the navigable Medway, tidal as far as Allington near Maidstone. Where the Medway has muscled its way through the Downs, the valley has been industrialised, although the trail of the North Downs Way barely has a glimpse of this before crossing high above the river on the M2 motorway bridge. Contrast this with the Great Stour whose valley breaks the downland wall between Wye and Canterbury, a rural backwater of splendid tranquillity and long views.

Between Farnham and Guildford the trail remains low, weaving across arable farmland interspersed with woods, coming now and then to a patch of heath from which the Hog's Back is seen to the north. The Ordnance Survey map shows major highways scoring through the country nearby, yet walkers on the North Downs Way are largely unaware of unseen (and mostly unheard) traffic on those roads. In springtime bluebells make a smoky haze on the woodland edge, in summer foxgloves stand sentry beside the trail, and in early September ripe bilberries tempt among the heathlands. In places wild raspberries brush against the path; elsewhere it could be blackberries that provide a juicy snack along the way.

The River Wey interrupts the line of the walk on the outskirts of



Bluebells carpet King's Wood in springtime (Stage 10a)

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Guildford, shortly before the path joins that of the Pilgrims' Way leading onto St Martha's Hill, crowned by a flint-walled church at 573ft (175m) above sea-level. Although of modest altitude St Martha's offers the first of many awe-inspiring views across the heavily wooded Weald, but it is here that the route deserts both the Pilgrims' Way and the sand hills, turning north to cross a shallow valley then slanting up to Newlands Corner on Albury Downs to experience the walk's first true chalk downland.

For some distance east of Newlands Corner the trail pushes through woodland, breaking out here and there to cropped grass, cowslips and orchids, and surprise views south to Leith Hill and an extensive ridge of greensand beyond which lies the Weald. Then, having crossed Ranmore Common, the route skirts England's largest vineyard as it descends into the Mole Valley. Here the river is crossed on romantic stepping stones, followed by a sharp ascent of much-loved Box Hill which signals the start of a roller-coaster section, dodging in and out of woodland interspersed with open panoramic highpoints, one of the best being between Colley Hill and Reigate Hill.

Between Reigate Hill and Ockley Hill a plague of motorways and railway lines threatens to disrupt the onward route, but the North Downs Way planners have successfully negotiated a way across with very little tarmac underfoot, and soon

after leaving Merstham the crest of the Downs is regained once more, where the Pilgrims' Way carries the journey over agricultural land for a while. Above Oxted the line of the Greenwich Meridian is crossed, and between here and Westerham Hill the trail exchanges Surrey for Kent. Where the county boundary is met, a special marker stone announces that you've walked 48 miles since Farnham, but have another 65 miles to go to Canterbury, and 77 to Dover.

Briefly beyond Westerham Hill a hint is given of high-rise buildings on the outskirts of London – a reminder that the city is half a day's walk away. But you quickly shun this by dodging back into woodland, and when the path re-emerges it is to see the Darent Gap looming. Below lies graceful Chevening House, official country residence of the Foreign Secretary, its northern façade partly concealed by trees as it slumbers at the foot of the Downs.

Across the Darent Valley at Otford another sharp climb returns the trail to the downland crest for a section that mostly keeps to the scarp edge – with all the visual delights that entails – before making a sudden descent to the Pilgrims' Way which, since Otford, has been restricted to a narrow metalled lane. Where the North Downs Way joins it, however, this becomes a track, then footpath, leading to Wrotham. Trosley Country Park is next where, thanks to its great popularity, you're likely to lose any



A broad firm path takes the NDW through Trosley Country Park (Stage 6)

sense of solitude – but only for a brief while.

Out of the Country Park a sunken track takes you down to the Pilgrims' Way yet again, joining it just a short stroll away from one of the Neolithic burial sites that form part of what has become known as the Medway Culture. The Pilgrims' Way is followed eastward for only a mile before returning up the scarp slope at Holly Hill, then plunging into an extensive woodland section above the Medway Valley.

Crossing the Medway on a motorway bridge in view of Rochester's castle and cathedral is at once exhilarating and hideous! Exhilarating because you're high above the river and with long prospects downstream with the Downs arcing blue into the distance;

hideous on account of the heavy traffic thundering past, forcing you to muse on the madness of speed and its effect on the environment. Thank heaven that crossing is soon over!

Over Wouldham Common sanity is restored on an undemanding walk to Blue Bell Hill, then it's down to Kits Coty House, the giant upright stones of another Neolithic burial chamber standing on a downland slope with far-reaching views across the Medway Valley.

East of Kits Coty a long stretch with few distant views delivers the North Downs Way to Detling, beyond which a sudden return to open country shows the vast expanse of the eastern Weald spread below. The trail tucks round the outline of Thurnham Castle, slopes down to rejoin the

STAGE 1

Farnham to Guildford

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Distance | 11 miles (17.5km) |
| Maps | Harveys North Downs Way West 1:40,000 OS Landranger 186 Aldershot & Guildford 1:50,000 OS Explorer 145 Guildford & Farnham 1:25,000 |
| Accommodation | Farnham, Puttenham, Guildford |
| Refreshments | Farnham, Compton, Guildford |

'The soil is good; the houses are neat; the people are neat; the hills, the woods, the meadows all are beautiful.' So said the much-travelled William Cobbett of the area covered by this stage of the North Downs Way. Cobbett (1763–1835) was born in Farnham in what is now the pub named after him, and although he walked nowhere unless it was impossible to ride, he had an unchallenged intimacy with the Downs and the Weald that adds weight to his words. Nearly two centuries on they remain largely true.

This initial stage of the long walk gives no real flavour of the Downs, but it makes a fine introduction with an abundance of wild flowers in the meadows, banks and hedgerows, and plenty of wildlife too. The walking is not too demanding, with no major ascents or descents to tackle – these will come later – and the way is mostly very well defined. In the place of open downland, this western end of the route offers a series of gentle agricultural landscapes, punctuated by woodland and one or two sandy heaths. The route passes through only one village and for long stretches there will be little habitation visible. However, study of the map will show that you are never very far from a farm, road or a group of houses, even if these are not visible from the footpath.

Close to the Surrey/Hampshire border, Farnham marks the official start of the North Downs Way with a large steel structure set beside a busy junction on the A31 a little west of the town's railway station. From the station walk downhill to the traffic lights (SU 844 466) and turn right. A tarmac footpath soon brings you to a narrow lane where you bear right. The lane is flanked by trees, and



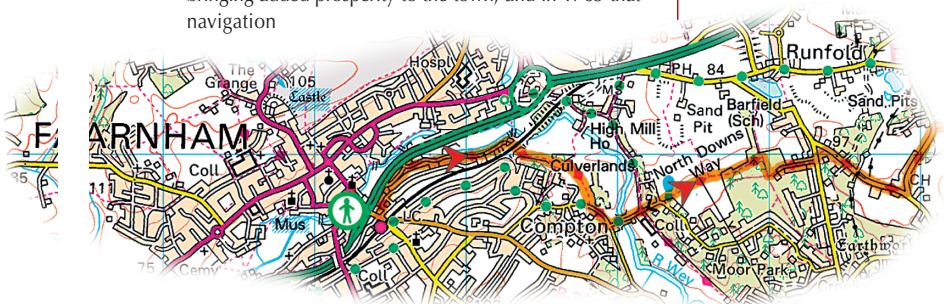
FARNHAM

Farnham is overlooked by a 12th-century castle built by Henri de Blois. Besieged by Cromwell, it belonged to the Bishops of Winchester until 1927, then the Bishop of Guildford held it until 1956. It is now a training centre, but the Norman keep is open to the public. North of the castle stretch the 300 acres of Farnham Park, while to the south, between the castle and the river, the town has some handsome Tudor and Georgian houses. In 1763 William Cobbet, politician, journalist and author of the influential *Rural Rides*, was born here. The Romans settled in Farnham for something like 400 years, but the town's wealth came first through the cloth trade, then via brewing. At one time Farnham had no less than five breweries. The town has B&B and hotel accommodation, pubs, restaurants and an assortment of shops. (For further information go to www.farnham.gov.uk.)

at a T-junction you turn right again on another metalled lane which becomes a pitted drive running alongside the **River Wey**, here a reedy, rather unimposing – but nonetheless pleasant – stream. At the entrance to The Kiln turn right to pass through a brick railway arch, where a foot-path continues ahead between woodland and meadows. Across the meadows to the left **High Mill House** can be seen.

The north branch of the River Wey is little more than a stream when first seen in Farnham, but joining the south branch in Tilford, it becomes navigable from Godalming to Weybridge via Guildford. The **River Wey Navigation** first connected Guildford with the Thames in 1653, bringing added prosperity to the town, and in 1763 that navigation

Map continues on
page 26

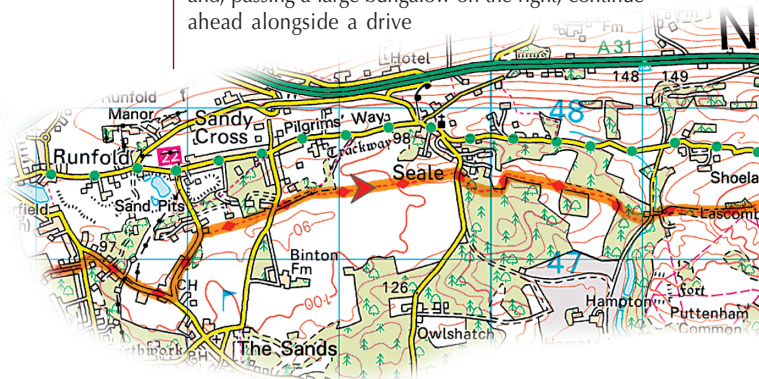


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extended to Godalming. It stretched further south in 1816 as the Wey and Arun Canal, to complete a link between the Thames and the South Coast. With the coming of the railways the Canal became obsolete and finally closed in 1868. Where the North Downs Way crosses the navigable river south of Guildford, the bank-side footpath forms part of the **Wey-South Path** – 36 miles (58km) linking Guildford with Amberley on the South Downs Way.

At a junction of paths the North Downs Way veers left, shortly after which you go through a kissing gate on the right where you pass a specially carved NDW seat. A grass path now takes you beside a line of trees, and eventually onto a minor road (SU 858 466). Turn left, and at a junction of lanes soon after bear left once more. Cross the River Wey, and then pass the entrance to Moor Park House and continue uphill along Compton Way. At the top of the slope where the lane curves to the right, bear left on a fence-enclosed footpath beside the drive to Wey Hanger. (Hanger refers to a woodland on a steep slope, and the term is often used in regard to the Downs.)

The path leads into a field where you follow the left-hand boundary to a woodland on the far side. Maintain direction through Runfold Wood, which is a nature reserve, ignoring alternative paths until you descend a few steps to a crossing bridleway and turn right along a sandy trail. When this brings you to a fenced boundary bear left and, passing a large bungalow on the right, continue ahead alongside a drive



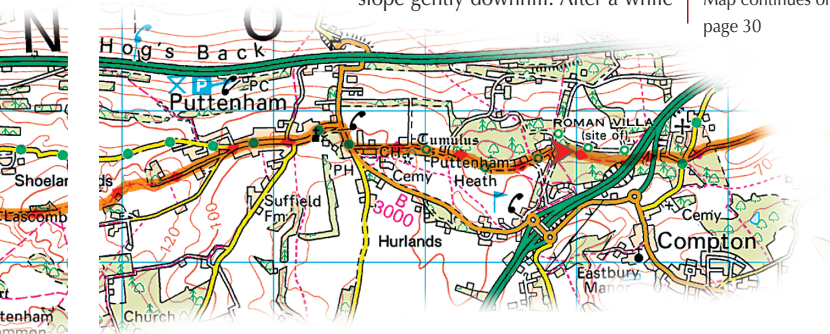
which eventually leads to a road south of Runfold. Turn left. About 20 yards later turn right on another footpath among trees. This soon brings you to Sands Road (SU 873 471) where you turn right. About a third of a mile along this road come to Farnham Golf Club **clubhouse** at a junction of lanes, and bear left into Blighton Lane.

After about 500 yards, when the lane curves left, take a footpath on the right which goes alongside a wooded garden. Remain on this path until it brings you to another country road, which you cross directly ahead into a region of arable farmland with wooded hills beyond.

On coming to a group of pine trees the path forks. Veer right, and at a fenced area bear right, then left, and keep alongside a hedge beyond which, hidden by a high bank, is a **sand pit** – the first of many extractions on the North Downs Way. Continue along the left-hand edge of two large open fields, and eventually come onto a country road opposite Landthorne Hatch Cottage, where you briefly turn right. (**Seale** is a short distance along the lane to the left.) In a few paces go through a kissing gate on the left to gain a path alongside a wood. After about 300 yards cut off to the left, soon following a fence. When the fencing ends go through another kissing gate and turn right, now walking along the top edge of a sloping meadow beside pinewoods (Payn's Firs) and with views ahead through a valley, flanked on the north side by the ridge of the **Hog's Back**.

At the end of the meadow enter more woodland to slope gently downhill. After a while

Map continues on
page 30





Puttenham is the only village on the route between Farnham and Guildford

cross a track and continue ahead. The path eventually swings right then left, and descends as a sunken pathway between steep banks of bluebells in springtime, and where foxgloves stand sentry-like in summer. The path spills onto a very narrow lane. Turn left, and in a few paces bear right opposite a red-brick bungalow. Cross a minor stream which (unseen) flows south into a series of ponds, and rise up a slope on an eroded, sandy path among trees to **Puttenham Common**. Towards the head of the slope honeysuckle and dog roses flank the path and, on warm summer days, fill the air with perfume.

Where the path forks on the crown of the hill, take the left-hand option through bracken. This eventually curves left below a house and becomes a sunken path among more foxgloves, and with enticing views left towards the Hog's Back before coming to the head of a drive by a house. Continue directly ahead on a track which feeds onto a narrow lane, and follow this down to **Puttenham**, which you enter in The Street.

Puttenham is a trim village with some pleasant houses and cottages as you pass through. Keep ahead along The Street to reach The Good Intent pub, and maintain

direction towards the parish church of St John the Baptist. As the road veers left around the church, note a sign on the left indicating the approach to Puttenham Camping Barn. Continue along the road as far as a T-junction (SU 934 479), where you turn right and walk beside the B3000 as far as the Harvester pub/restaurant. Here you cross the road onto a gravel drive leading to a golf course.

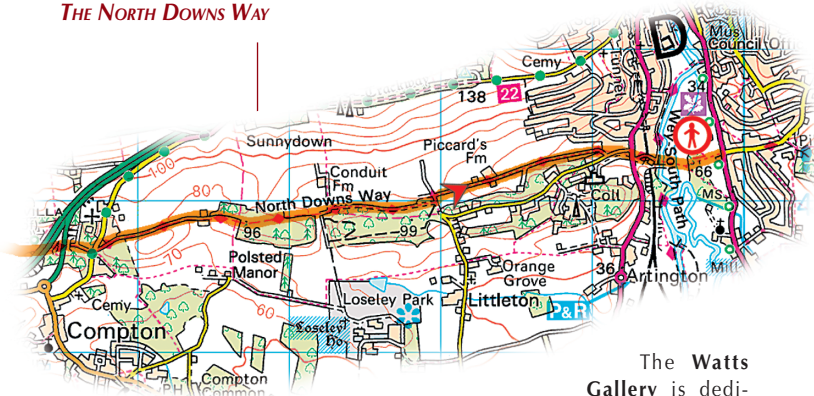
Puttenham Camping Barn is an attractively restored listed barn that was converted to provide simple war-dened accommodation for walkers, cyclists and horse riders. With places for up to 12 people, it has self-cater-ing facilities, and showers heated by solar panels. The Camping Barn is listed in the Independent Hostel Guide, but advanced booking is essential (www.puttenhamcampingbarn.co.uk).

After passing the clubhouse continue ahead. After a while pass a barn, then the way forks. Take the main left branch (the right-hand option goes to a cricket pavilion) and shortly after this it forks again. This time take the right branch (the left branch goes to Greyfriars Vineyard), in effect continuing straight ahead along the edge of the golf course. After a while you pass houses, then the way narrows to enter woods. At a staggered crosstracks keep ahead; the track is now little more than footpath-wide and it takes you out to a metalled lane which goes beneath the A3 and a second road bridge adorned with two large wooden crosses.

Turn left at a T-junction, and in a few paces leave the road by the entrance to Watts Gallery. ► The North Downs Way now journeys along a sandy track whose banks are honeycombed with rabbit warrens. After passing between barns the way narrows and rises through wood-land. At a crosstracks continue ahead with the Loseley Estate's nature reserve on the right. Leaving trees behind the way cuts through deep sand, and coming to a junc-tion of paths you briefly veer left on a track, then right on another track rising between fields and woodland. Large aerial masts can be seen on the ridge to the left.

Refreshments are available at tearooms here.

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The Watts Gallery

is dedicated to the work of George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), the highly successful 19th-century painter and sculptor who came to Compton with his second wife, Mary Fraser-Tytler, who was also an artist. (His first short-lived marriage was to the actress Ellen Terry.) The gallery, designed by his friend Christopher Turnor and begun when Watts was 83, contains more than 200 of his works. South of the gallery along Down Lane, on the way to Compton, stands an extraordinary red-brick mortuary chapel built in 1896 by Mrs Watts with a local builder and a team of villagers.

Entering woods you eventually come to a T-junction of tracks and turn left. After about 30 yards the track, which has become a narrow surfaced lane, turns right and leads to **Piccard's Farm**, after which it reverts to a track once more. About half a mile beyond the farm come onto a road and bear left. This leads to the A3100 opposite Ye Olde Ship Inn. Bear right, then take the next turning on the left, which is Ferry Lane. The lane slopes downhill, and over a railway bridge the slope is a steep one between houses. At the foot of the slope lies the River Wey on the southern outskirts of Guildford.

◀ Bear right to cross a footbridge, and on the east bank of the river turn left for about 20 yards, then bear right when the path forks. Soon enter **Shalford Park** and cross

For overnight accommodation and all facilities, turn left and follow the towpath for about ¾ mile to the centre of town.



straight ahead to the A281 (SU 999 483) which you reach by a bus stop (where services into Guildford can be picked up).

The River Wey on the southern edge of Guildford

GUILDFORD

The county town of Surrey, Guildford has a conspicuous red-brick 20th-century cathedral which overlooks the nearby University of Surrey, and the keep of a Norman castle built on the east side of the river. In the High Street stands a group of 17th-century almshouses and a very fine Guildhall with a famous clock overhanging the road, while the Angel Hotel boasts a wooden gallery and a coaching yard. In the Middle Ages Guildford prospered through the wool trade, but when that trade began to decline it was replaced by the opening of the River Wey Navigation in the 17th century. Today the town is largely divided by the A3, and spills east and west into the surrounding countryside, but its heart is graced by the River Wey which hints at a rural atmosphere. The town has all facilities, including B&B and hotel accommodation (www.guildford.gov.uk).