

Samaritans National Walk 2023

Information on the walk routes



There will be three circular walks of different lengths (approximately 20, 13 and 5 miles), all starting in the pleasant grounds of **Hitchin's Priory School** on Bedford Road. The walks will take you through the surrounding countryside into the attractive Chiltern Hills and through Hitchin town centre.

Shortly after the start, all walks enter **Oughtonhead Common**, following the south bank of the River Oughton, a chalk stream, which eventually flows into the Great Ouse. Oughtonhead Common was a medieval 'cow common', where Hitchin 'commoners' grazed their cattle. The 16-hectare site is a local wildlife site and local nature reserve, which has a rich diversity of plant and bird life.

As you walk, you will be able to note Alder trees and the arching stems of pendulous Sedge; both like wet conditions. Further along, opening to the west, is the grazing common, where English Longhorn cattle maintain the grazing tradition. Across the river is Oughtonhead Nature Reserve – an area of wet woodland dominated by alder and silver birch. Watch out for kingfishers, woodpeckers and a variety of butterflies.

When the routes arrive at Springhead, they turn back towards Hitchin, climbing gradually to enter Gray's Lane, with views of the ancient market town.

Where the routes meet the A505, the **short walk** veers east and into Nuns Close, passing the North Herts & Stevenage Samaritans branch premises before arriving in the market place, a multipurpose traffic-free community space.

Hitchin town centre has retained much of its historic character and medieval street pattern. It is one of the oldest towns in the county, and short walkers will be able to follow a self-guided, illustrated historic walk. This includes the 'must-see' St Mary's Church – the largest parish church in Hertfordshire; and the **British Schools Museum** – a unique place in the history of education, boasting the world's last remaining purpose-built Monitorial schoolroom.

Samaritans National Walk 2023

Information on the walk routes

The longer walks then pass through the edge of Hitchin, including the hamlet of Charlton, heading south-west in undulating terrain to then climb the Chiltern Hills chalk escarpment to Offley village.

From the checkpoint here, the **medium walk** passes through the village and continues in a more northerly direction following the escarpment, with views out across the countryside. From Little Offley, part of the route follows the Chiltern Way before reaching Wood Lane then heading to the attractive village of Pirton. From here, the last leg brings walkers to Westmill, over the River Oughton, into Oughtonhead Common and back to Priory School.



The **long walk** from Offley heads south-west over some attractive dip-slope countryside to Lilley Bottom and then towards Mangrove Hall, before doubling back in a northerly direction to Lilley Hoo and Telegraph Hill. This is some of the most attractive and typical Chiltern Hills countryside.

The route then runs towards Pegsdon, before following the western edge of the typical chalk-escarpment dry valley of the **Pegsdon Hills and Hoo Bit nature reserve**. From here it reaches the high point of Deacon Hill, before crossing the B655 to head north and north-west, following Wood Lane to Pirton Village and the finishing leg, as in the short walk.

