

HISTORY, PREHISTORY – AND A FOLLY – ON COTSWOLD EDGE

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Although fairly short and not especially demanding, this month's walk is full of interest, including some fascinating historic and prehistoric sites, superb views over the Severn Plain and a close encounter with one of Gloucestershire's most recent follies.

The walk starts at Horton, signposted off the A46 four miles north of Junction 18 of the M4. As you enter the village, turn right and drive to the church (ST766851), half a mile away down a narrow lane.

Horton church is a little gem, light and spacious, and with some superb carvings (look out for the bagpiper) in the porch. Although very old – it dates from the fifteenth century – Horton Court, next door, contains one of the most remarkable survivals in the county – a Norman hall, knocked around, to be sure, over the centuries, but still recognisably a dwelling place built around 1140.

The court, nestling below the Cotswold ridge, is owned by the National Trust, and the hall – along with a fascinating ambulatory, with four extraordinary stucco medallions of Roman emperors, added by one of Henry VIII's courtiers – can be visited on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons until 20 October. It really is worth the effort to visit this extraordinary building.

Just north of the entrance to the court, where the road swings sharply to the right, look for a bridleway on the left. Go through a small gate and follow the bridleway across a field.

When you come to a metal gate (ST762848) with a choice of paths – bridleway straight on, footpath to the right – take *neither* option, but instead go through the gate, and, after a few metres, turn left and follow the hedgerow (this is a right of way, even though it's not marked).

At the next gate, where you're again faced with a choice of footpaths, take the one heading more or less straight on. On the far side of the field, go through a kissing gate onto a path leading to a driveway down to a road, where you turn left.

Walk uphill until you reach a Cotswold Way sign on the right (ST762843). Follow this across a succession of stiles for 1500 metres (not the quarter of mile indicated on the signpost) to Little Sodbury. Continue following the Cotswold Way, turning right along the road and then left past the church. Behind the church, notice how the land is ruffled into a series of ridges, the legacy of a medieval rabbit farm. After 500 metres, turn left up a driveway, and then almost immediately right up a footpath which then swings to the left.

Climb up through woodland until you reach a converted barn, and follow the Cotswold Way as it swings sharply to the right – but remember this spot (ST761827) because you'll soon be coming back to it. Carry on along the Cotswold Way as it plunges through the double ramparts of Sodbury Camp, a massive iron age hill fort covering some eleven acres – prehistoric civil engineering at its most formidable.

Retrace your steps to the spot where the Cotswold Way emerged from the woods and go through a five-barred gate at the end of the converted barn (this is another unwaymarked right of way). Once through the gate, turn left and follow the hedgerow into a field where a clearly-marked path leads diagonally across to a ladder stile some 700 metres away (ST764833). (If crops have been planted and the path is temporarily obscured, follow the hedgerow on the left and it will eventually lead you round to the stile.)

Once over the stile, take the road straight ahead. At a T junction, 1000 metres on, turn right up the road signposted Hawkesbury Upton and Dunkirk. After 100 metres,

turn left down a minor road, and after another 500 metres, turn left along a footpath towards Horton Camp – the second Iron Age fortification on the walk.

Views over the Severn Plain have been somewhat restricted of late, but, as you reach the top of a short flight of steps up the rampart of Horton Camp, the most spectacular so far is suddenly revealed, with the grassy amphitheatre of the fort opening onto it like the backdrop to some fabulous spectacle.

The fortifications at Little Sodbury enclosed the fort; here, on the brink of the escarpment, they were only built on two sides. The precipitous descents on the other two sides were thought protection enough, with the result that there is nothing to impede the spectacular view.

Once inside the camp, turn left and go through a gate leading out of the camp, with Widden Hill House, built in Greek Revival style in 1813, straight ahead. Head down to the right, past a pepperpot folly erected in 2000 as a home for owls. After passing the folly, the path swings to the right before dropping down to Horton school, built in 1860 and still in use. Turn right up the road for 1000 metres to get back to the starting point.

Length of Walk: 5 miles; 2.5-3 hours, not including visit to Horton Court.

Difficulty: Easy. Short stretches may be muddy.

Map: OS Explorer 167 recommended.

Horton Court is open from 2pm to 6pm on Wednesdays and Saturdays until 20 October.

No refreshment stops en route. The Beaufort Arms at Hawkesbury Upton two miles north of Horton is open all day with food served noon to 2.30 pm and 7pm to 9.30pm. (www.beaufortarms.com)