



## Chillerton and Gatcombe Parish Council



### Wildlife walk

(with views to the north and east coasts)

Original directions: G Belben



#### Introduction

This is a circular walk on bridleways, footpaths and rural lanes in the centre of the Island, through a mix of arable, downland and woodland, with plenty of stunning views from high points, opportunities to spot birds, animals and wildflowers.

**Access:** Commence walk from St Olave's Church, Gatcombe PO30 3EH

**Grid Reference:** SZ 49237 85090

Alternative Access: Brook Lane PO30 3BR

**B**

**Grid Reference:** SZ 49196 84391

**Distance:** Approximately 4½ miles

**Time:** Allow **2.00 hours** walking at a moderate pace  
with pauses to look at views.

**Difficulty:** Generally fairly easy with one steep hill climb and descent.

**Terrain:** Some muddy sections in winter. Paths and tracks clearly defined

**Stiles:** None **Gates:** Two

**Dogs:** Dogs to be kept on leads on Bowcombe Estate section from Newbarn Farm to gate onto Garston Down.

**Bus access:** Route 6 near the turning into Gatcombe Road (opposite the road sign for St Olave's Church)

**Parking:** Along the road outside St Olave's church.

**Bicycles:** Not suitable for footpaths on this route

**Toilets:** None **Refreshments:** None



**Route: (A)** From St Olave's Church, turn left onto Footpath G11 and take the steep path upwards through mixed woodland.

In late spring it is a carpet of strong smelling wild garlic, also known as ransoms, with large white flower heads and lush green leaves, which are now fashionably edible as wilted greens, in soup and in pesto. Although, throughout the walk, you will have caught sight of a variety of hedgerow, woodland and farmland birds, on summer evenings the wood is awash with birdsong and the buzzing of bees attracted to the honey dew that forms on the leaves of sycamore.

At the top of the track, leave the wood and enter a narrow sunken path bordered by hedge and arable fields on the right, with distant views to Tolt Copse. The old name for the woodland to the left is **The Wilderness**. This path takes four right angled bends before opening out to a wider track with a

stone house to the right. The path can be very muddy in winter and overgrown with foliage in summer.

Continue along the track past two semi-detached stone cottages to the top of Brook Lane. Here, turn right. **B** *Access here from the bottom of Brook Lane.*

The signpost signifies the direction as a Public Bridleway (G8 not shown) which is a sunken, hilly track continuing to climb, with banks and overgrown hedgerow trees on the right.

*In summer the banks are full of wildflowers and bramble and pollinating insects. Look out for scabious, knapweed and wild marjoram.*

As the track levels out it enters an area with arable fields to the left and right and views of Chillerton Down and Ramsdown to the south. *A degraded hedgerow of patchy elder and some thorn runs along the right hand edge of the track. Herbicide spraying and poor hedgerow management, along with enrichment of the arable fields with fertiliser, have affected the banks, which now host a preponderance of nettle, thistle, matted grasses.*

*Ahead is Tolt Copse, a hanging wood of mixed oak, ash and hazel that sits on the northern eastern flank of Chillerton Down. The beech plantation, alongside its entrance track, was planted for future exploitation but has since been left to do its own thing.*

*Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, birds of prey suffered from persecution and pesticide poisoning so that, at one point, only one pair of buzzards could be found nesting on the Island in Tolt Copse.*



Further ahead, to the right, you will see your destination, the steep-sided and gorse covered Newbarn Down.

Continue past Bridleway G6 (on the left) signed Main Road Chillerton to follow G6 to New Barn Farm Lane, instead, passing by the entrance to Tolt Copse and then straight ahead through the gap. Follow the track, with the hedgerow on the right hand side, downwards, beside arable fields on the left. Views opening up to the left are of a steep sided valley with hanging woods on both sides and arable on the valley bottom. The track can be very muddy. The field on the left is called Floodlands, where water from the downs can collect in a small lake after particularly heavy rain.

**(C)** At the bottom of the track, briefly join a rising tarmac lane which curves up from the right before continuing straight ahead. The sign post here points out Bridleway G7 to Garstons Down. Continue until the road comes to an end at the entrance of New Barn Farm. Here, follow the track alongside to the farm until it curves sharply to the left after a gate bearing the sign, 'Bowcombe Estate No Access'.

*This is the largest estate by area on the Island and although it has an arable/sheep rearing arm, its main business is in running pheasant and partridge shoots. During the shooting season you might see guns ranged along the downland and in the valleys. Game rearing takes place in the woods. Look out for feeders and drives cut into the gorse.*

Follow the steep track upwards, either through a sunken path bordered by overgrown hedgerow trees, or alongside of the field next to it. When a permanently open gateway is reached, note the sign 'Bowcombe Estate Dogs Must Be Kept On Leads'. The way ahead enters open downland proper, with a white chalk track and springy turf on either side.

In springtime you may see purple dog violets and purple orchids. Later in summer there are harebells and scabious on the banks.

Once in the open, this would be a good time to stop, turn round and enjoy the view across the East Wight as far as the chalk Culver Cliff and ships in Sandown Bay. Towards the Arreton valley you will see St Georges Down gravel pits and a large solar farm to the left and the village of Rookley to the right.

When a sign post with indistinct wording is reached, on the left, turn sharp right up a steep, unsigned grassy path towards a gate at the top. Once through the gate, turn right. You are still on Bridleway G7, and skirting the top of Garstons Down. (D)

On the left the down is planted with brassicas and corn, purely for game bird food and cover. To the right are more views of the East Wight, Gatcombe village is directly below you, and round to the north there are views of Newport, the Medina river, the Solent and Portsmouth. Further along this path is a fence and steep hanging wood to the right. Look out for well-defined animal tracks where fox, badger and rabbit have burrowed under the fence and made their way up the Down.

You should also see a large badger sett among the trees, evidenced by banks of exposed chalks shards and soil.

If very lucky, in May/June, you might see, on the left, very rare bee orchids. On a warm, still day this area is home to a number of butterfly varieties and you are likely to hear the joyous tune of the skylark.

By now you should be looking over the sycamore, ash and hazel trees on the right to even more of the Medina valley, Cowes and Southampton.

Stop at the next gate for views of the Bowcombe valley ahead and Carisbrooke Castle to the right.

When the thermals are right this is an excellent spot for gatherings of kestrels and buzzards.

To the right is a disused chalk pit. Head downwards, following the yellow post markers, towards the large, stone Garstons house. Once through the gate, you are off Garstons Down and onto a track where there is a signpost to your left, showing 'Byway, Snowdrop Lane to Gatcombe.'

With Garstons house on the left, look right to a mature hedgerow which in the autumn is covered in wild plums known as bullace (slightly larger and sweeter than sloes).

After about 50m, there is the entrance to Garstons, on the left, from where the road, Snowdrop Lane, leads to Gatcombe (E)

A careful look in the hedge next to Garstons may give a glimpse of an old, wooden 'Byway' sign.

Continue straight ahead on the stony farm track which is Bridleway G10 (unmarked).

Banks on the right have primroses and celandine in spring. Soon you will be able to have views of Chillerton Down and Mast to the right. This is a good blackberry picking area in summer.

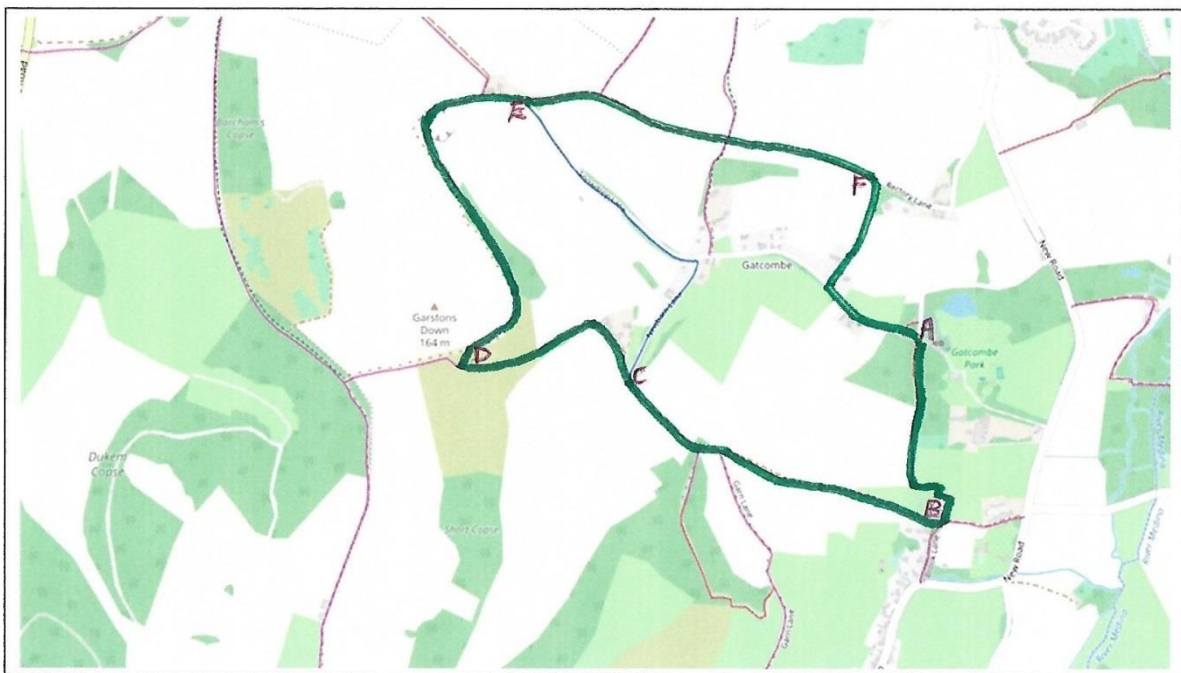
When the hedge on the right runs out, a cross roads of paths is reached. To the left is the very old G6 Shepherd's Trail to Carisbrooke and Newport. Continue straight on to the downward chalk track, signed G10 (The sign post is to the right, lower down)

From late spring into summer, the bank on the left is a riot of butterfly and bee attracting flowers, maybe including bee orchids among the scabious, knapweed and marjoram. To the right in the valley below you will see that you are walking in parallel with Gatcombe Village Road and its small number of houses. You should also be able to see Gatcombe Church tower. Herons hunting for small mammals and amphibians in the fields are a common sight here, as there is a heronry on the lake behind the church. Towards the end of the track there are high bramble banks, where chalk gives way to greensand, and primroses evident in Spring.

**(F)** At the junction, at the end of G10, turn right and continue down the hedge-bordered tarmac lane (*Rectory Lane/Doctors Lane*) unmarked at this point



In the spring the banks on the left are full of snowdrops and daffodils, some purple violets also linger at the base among the large round plate-like Winter Heliotrope leaves. In the depths of winter these are the first to flower, with heavily scented lilac coloured blooms on tall stems. Look through the trees on the left to the old Rectory, a handsome building with south facing views to Chillerton. Towards the end of the lane, there is a small stream to cross, a tributary of the river Medina, before the T-junction with Gatcombe Road is reached. Turn left, past the red Victoria Regina postbox and a thatched cottage, then continue on the lane rising back up to Saint Olave's Church gate, **with Tucker's Mead woodland on the right, and a fine stand of tall beech and oak on the left - a favourite haunt of red squirrels.**



## Wild Flowers and Fruits



Bee Orchid



Purple orchid



Blackberry



Primrose



Brassica



Scabious



Bullace



Snowdrops



Celandine



Wild Garlic



Daffodil



Knapweed



Wild Marjoram



Purple Dog Violet



Winter Heliotrope