

Walk 1: Downe circular

Tread in Charles Darwin's footsteps on this walk among woods and meadows in the North Downs. Easy walk, good for kids. Combine with trips to Downe House and Christmas Tree Farm

How long? 45mins-1hr
2.5 miles (4km)

Public transport: 146 bus runs hourly every day until late from Bromley North and Bromley South (25-minute bus journey from Bromley). R8 bus runs every 80 minutes from Orpington railway station (20mins). 12 mins by taxi from Hayes railway station.

Parking: easy, in Downe village
Start of walk: footpath next to Christmas Tree Farm, Downe
Steep slopes? None

Walk highlights

Christmas Tree farm. Darwin's garden and house, wild flower meadows, hedgerows, the chance of seeing Battle of Britain aircraft, beech trees and old, flint and wooden houses and a great church. Nice cake/tea shop and two pubs with decent food. An easy walk, no steep inclines. Great to combine with a visit to Downe House, where Darwin wrote *Origin of the Species*. His study is kept in the condition in which he worked in it. Thirty minutes' drive from East Dulwich

Covered on Ordnance Survey Explorer 147 map



St Mary the Virgin church, Downe

Get off the bus by the church of St Mary the Virgin (13th-century; look out for the graves of Darwin's family) and walk east past the George and Dragon pub on Cudham Rd. The walk starts with the marked footpath a few metres east of the very cute Christmas Tree Farm (which has donkeys, llamas and a wonky house), on the road heading towards Cudham (POINT 1). Follow the path, with the enclosures of the farm on your right. There is a drive on your left. Stop and admire the donkeys if you will, then follow path diagonally across a field of grasses to a clump of trees.

The path now takes you diagonally left towards a farmhouse (POINT 2). Watch out for the footpath sign, skirt the house and continue round the edge of a field then (POINT 3) take a sharp right (to head west) at the intersection of footpaths (if you were to go left here, you'd soon enter a fantastic bluebell wood, best seen in May of course). Cross the road (POINT 3.5) and enter the meadow (brilliant with daisies and buttercups from May to July) bordering Darwin's house and garden, with small cricket pitch on your left (the boundary is within range of a decent forward defensive).

The path meets the western corner of Darwin's garden (POINT 4) – you can have a quick peek, but you'll have to pay if you linger – then head across the great man's Sandwalk and diagonally left across another field with a great view of a wooded valley. This is my favourite part of the walk as you look over unbroken treetops to the western horizon for what seems like miles. At dusk, watch out for wild deer at this point. Superb sunset vistas also. Don't let the occasional waft of kerosene jet fuel from the airfield detract from the timeless vibe of this part of the walk.

The path descends slightly into the valley then joins another



Darwin's meadow (point 4)

trail (POINT 5), this time running north to south. So, turn right here (heading north) and just keep on going through the woods. Biggin Hill airfield is just beyond the trees on the other side of the valley. There is a quiet golf course on the floor of the valley (West Kent Golf Club). After a few minutes you will cross a lane (POINT 6) and continue on the footpath heading north.

This woodland is mentioned by Geoffrey Wellum in his astonishing book *First Light*, covering his time at RAF Biggin Hill as a 19-year-old Spitfire pilot. The airfield played a key role in the Battle of Britain and today is used by leisure flights and executive jets. In recent years a few

Spitfires, a Hurricane and assorted spotter aircraft have been based there and are often flown.

Soon the path breaks into the open and you'll see superb beech trees on your right (and some Luftwaffe bomb craters from 1940). You'll cross three fields on this path (the third is POINT 7) before entering a copse and, after about 30 metres, turning 90-degree right to go over a hidden stile (POINT 8) and head east across a field. Until late March 2015 this field was a wild pasture with flowers and hawthorn trees, but now it's a cereals field, very attractive in June, not in winter.

After about 300 metres the path narrows to become a kind of alley and brings you out in Downe by a bus stop. There's a great little cake and tea shop, much used by weekend cyclists, by the Rajdoot curry house and then you'll be at the Queens Head (POINT 9). The pub made the news on March 22, 2015, when protestors dressed as breastfeeding babies ambushed the UKIP leader Nigel Farage and rather spoiled his Sunday lunch.

Adam McCulloch
amac49@hotmail.co.uk