

Devil's Punch Bowl and Surrey Heaths

Bentley station - Alice Holt Forest - Frensham Great Pond - Rushmoor - Pitch Place - Gibbet Hill - Haslemere station

Length: 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles (22.0 km)

Underfoot: Almost entirely on well made paths, sandy soil or minor roads. A couple of short sections - along the River Wey and some of the beech woods just before Haslemere, will be muddy after rain. Good footwear recommended in any case due to terrain and length.

Terrain: Steep climbs and ascents a couple of miles either side of the Punch Bowl. Otherwise, climbs and descents mainly gentle.

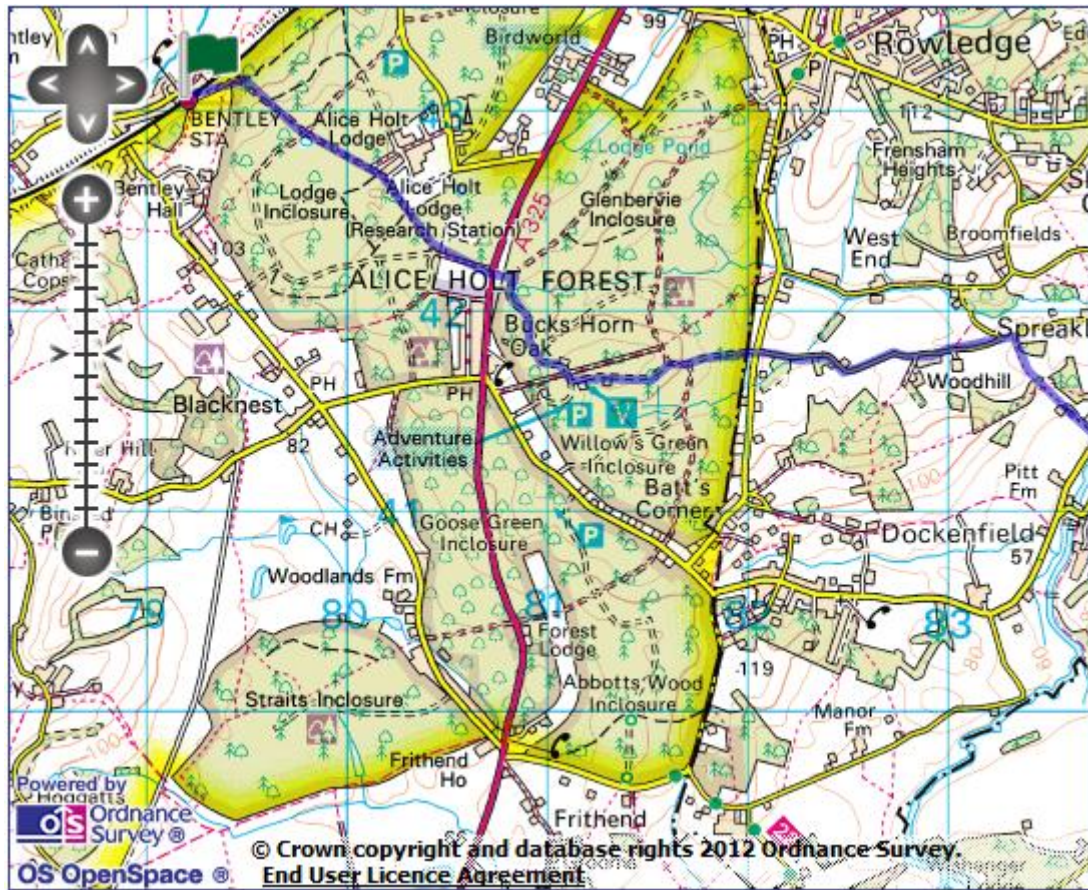
Maps: 1:50,000 Landranger 186 Aldershot & Guildford; 1:25,000 Explorer 145 Guildford & Farnham *and* 133 Haslemere & Petersfield (note that the Explorer maps miss the first mile from Bentley - navigation is very easy on this section, however.)

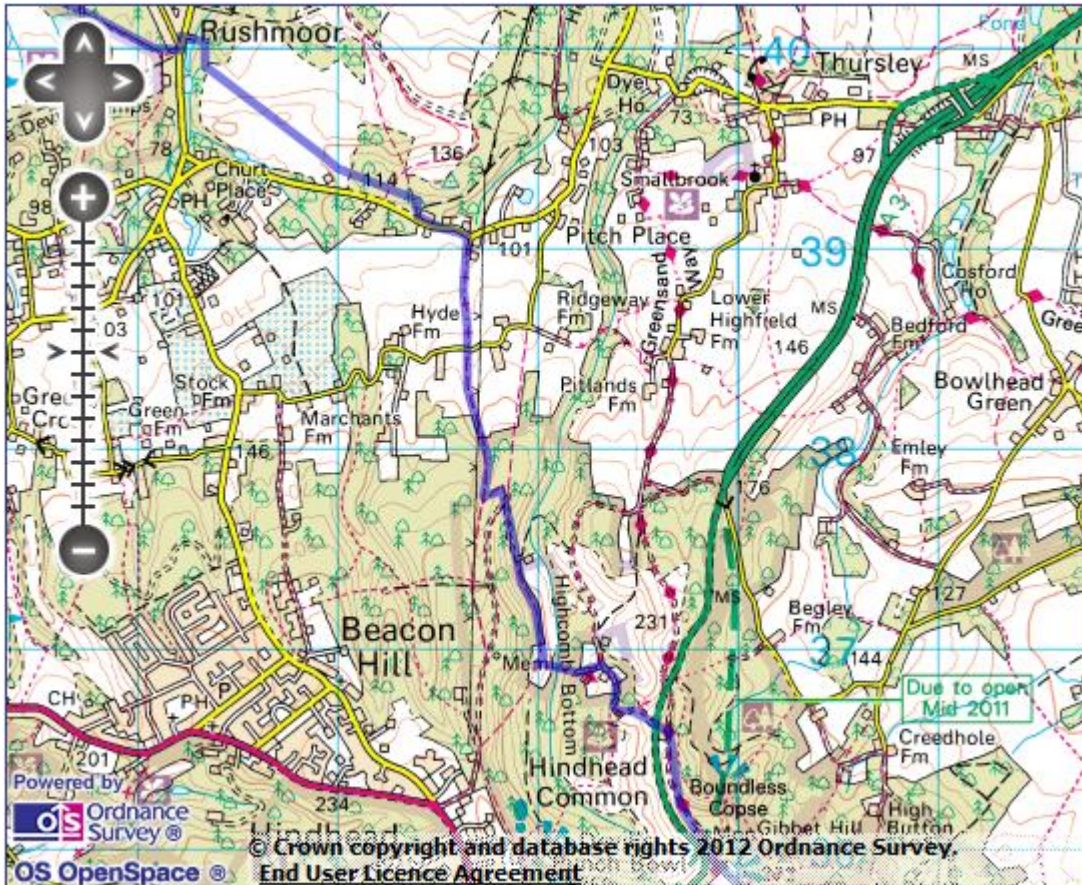
Getting there: Bentley is served by hourly South West Trains service daily from London Waterloo (69 minutes) via Clapham Junction *for connections from London Victoria and London Overground services* (62 minutes). Coming from Waterloo, it is normally quicker to take a fast train to Woking and change there for the Bentley service (journey time c.60 minutes) - this will show up on journey planner sites.

Useful websites: The route passes through [Alice Holt Forest](#), crosses the MoD training grounds of [Hankley Common](#) and through the National Trust properties of [Hindhead Commons and the Devil's Punch Bowl](#).

Getting home: Haslemere has 4 South West Trains services per hour (2 on Sundays) to London Waterloo (49-61 mins), with 2 of these each hour serving Clapham Junction (50 mins) *for London Overground connections and services to London Victoria*.

Fares: Bentley and Haslemere are on diverging lines, so you will need to purchase two tickets to make these journeys. The cheapest combination is a London-Bentley Off Peak day return for £17.50 (child £8.75, railcard £11.55) *making sure you book to Bentley in Hampshire, not Bentley in South Yorkshire* and a Super Off Peak single from Haslemere to Guildford for £5.70 (child £2.85, railcard £3.75). Whilst you won't pass through Guildford on your way from London to Bentley, travelling via Guildford is a 'permitted route' so your return ticket will be valid from Guildford. All Haslemere-Waterloo trains call at Guildford, so splitting your ticket there is unproblematic.





Bentley station is a rather isolated wayside station, situated a mile south of the village it claims to serve, but with a row of railway houses next to the station. Until the 1970s, this line was an alternative route to Winchester and Southampton, and Bentley was a junction for a line serving the army camp at Bordon. The remaining line now ends a few miles west of here at Alton, and the line beyond Farnham has been reduced to single track, with Bentley as the only passing loop.

- Trains arriving from London can use either platform at Bentley, depending on whether they need to pass a train coming from Alton. If your train arrives on platform 1, walk to the London end of the platform and use the foot crossing across the tracks to access the path which leads off platform 2. Turn left, through the white footgate (signed to Alice Hall) along the tarmac path.
- Continue straight ahead past the Bentley Station Meadow nature reserve, after which the path curves south eastwards to climb steadily through the mixed woodland of Alice Holt Forest, with views back to the white houses of Bentley. At the junction at the top of the hill, by a pond, continue straight ahead.

There is no Alice Holt - the forest, a former royal hunting ground, has had this name since the late 14th century, and it is thought to be a rather complex derivation from Ælfsige, a 10th century Bishop of Winchester, who had guardianship of the land on behalf of the king. The oak trees which once predominated the forest largely fell prey to the 18th and 19th centuries' insatiable desire for wooden warships, meaning that the Forest is now much more heavily coniferous than originally. Some of the remaining oak was used for the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre in London.

- Emerging at the edge of a clearing by the Forestry Commission's Research Centre's row of staff cottages, leave the tarmac and keep straight ahead on a broad path past the vehicle barrier (following Shipwright's Way waymarks). The path re-enters the woods.
- After around 500m, you reach a path junction and head left (still on the Shipwright's Way) to reach the busy A325 Farnham-Bordon road, at the entrance to Bucks Horn Oak hamlet.
- Cross the main road with care and continue straight ahead back into the woods. At a junction by a bench, turn sharp right on a sandy forest track. Keep straight ahead along this track through a couple of dips to emerge at the wooden education centre buildings and the forest car park.
- Take the tarmac road ahead, before soon heading left at a barrier on another forest road running between the café and cycle hire building. This easy track leads through the trees, to come to an end at a T-junction.
- Here take the track descending right to another junction, where you take the left hand fork. Before long, this path brings you to the edge of the forest to join Boundary Road. Continue ahead on minor Woodhill Lane almost opposite. Follow this pleasant lane for around 1 mile as it twists through the peaceful, rolling fields, passing Woodhill and Woodhill Farm.
- Just after the junction with Summer Hill Lane, at the brow of a hill, take the footpath waymarked to the right. At the edge of an open field, follow the vague direction of the signpost diagonally across it, heading for the stile in the far left hand corner. Over the stile, turn left then at the field corner follow a waymark right, dropping towards the large houses at Pittshanger, with views ahead across the Wey valley. The path joins a drive just below 19th century Pittshanger house, passes the attractive 16th century Kingswood to reach a road.

- Turn right here - this road is quite busy, so take care - along the pleasant Wey valley, the riverside fields often full of grazing geese. Just past Pitt Farm, with its decapitated oast houses, turn left on Mill Lane. The road curves over the Wey, widened at this idyllic spot by the confluence of the main channel and mill leat.
- At the end of the bridge, turn right on the drive to The Mill House (there is a non-obvious bridleway sign). Past the houses, the bridlepath runs (muddy in places) close to the river. Ignore the footbridge to the right and keep beside river. The Wey eventually branches off to the south and you follow a smaller tributary, with bracken-covered slopes on the left. The path curves around the edge of a good-sized pool to emerge on Bacon Lane beside the much larger Frensham Great Pond.

The pond is one of a pair (Frensham Little Pond is a mile to the north west across the common), much larger than something which would normally warrant the description of a 'pond'. These are 13th century artificial fish ponds, which when in use would have been drained every 5 years so that the fish could be harvested for the Bishop of Winchester. The Great Pond was more recently drained during World War II, to prevent it being used as a navigational aid by Luftwaffe pilots. In the film The Mummy the reed lined shores of the Great Pond stood in for the Nile.

- Turn right, and in front of Frensham Pond Hotel go left on Pond Lane, past the dinghy park. This road passes through woods, with glimpses of the Pond to the left through the trees. As you approach the main road, duck left at a bridleway waymark on a clear path into the wood. Just before a wooden chicane, follow the bridleway waymark right to the A287.
- Cross this fast road with care and take the sandy bridleway opposite, onto Frensham Common, a lovely landscape of heather, birch and pine. Climb a low rise and keep straight ahead at the top on a sunken path, dropping to a large path junction.

Frensham Common is a 922 acre area of heathland, now forming a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Historically, the Common would have been a source of fuel for the local villages, but is now an important habitat for species including sand lizard, Dartford warblers and nightjars.

- Take the bridleway signed left. There are a lot of paths around here, most of which will end up in the right place if you keep in the correct direction. Generally, keep to the left hand path, keeping level and skirting the right hand edge of most of the trees.
- You will eventually catch glimpses of white Lowicks House through the wood to the right and shortly afterwards the path drops slightly to approach a small track amongst the trees. Follow the 'Cycle Route' waymark to cut right to this track and follow it left, almost immediately forking right on a track through woods towards the brick house at Grey Walls, just visible ahead.
- Past the house, join a small road ahead, crossing the footbridge next to the ford (after heavy rain there is likely to be a second ford too!). Continue ahead on the road (Sandy Lane) through the regimented scots pines. Immediately after passing the driveway to Lowicks House, turn left through a metal footgate (footpath sign) to follow a forestry track.
- On soon reaching a large junction/forestry vehicle turning circle on the edge of an expanse of heathland, turn L on the broad ride just inside the trees. Arriving at a gate, you can divert slightly right to visit the picturesque little pond of The Flashes. Otherwise, keep straight ahead on a wide fenced ride along the edge of the heath, from which there are fantastic views across the heathlands to the wooded hills of The Devil's Jumps. Just over a second rise, past a gate, follow the footpath waymark left on a sandy path to a road on the edge of the scattered village of Rushmoor.

- Keeping to the larger road, turn left. Just past a bus stop on the right hand side, cross and follow the wide path dropping straight ahead into a small valley. Having crossed the valley, you reach a track junction with signs marking the edge of the MOD training area of Hankley Common.

Along with much of Surrey's heathland, the huge expanse of Hankley Common is used by the MoD for training purposes, helping to protect it from housing and other development. This is a 'Managed Access' area, meaning that no live ammunition is used in training and there is public access throughout the Common at all times, though obviously you should be aware of any military activity and not disrupt it. The most intense activity on these commons occurred in the run-up to D-Day, where preparations included a reconstruction by Canadian troops of part of the Atlantic Wall coastal defences built by the occupiers along the northern coast of mainland Europe.

- Turn right, quickly coming to another junction on the edge of open heathland. Take the middle of the 3 tracks here, cutting diagonally left across the heath. Ignore the large track to the right, but where the route forks, take a broad path right, curving uphill on the bare heather slope ahead. At the top of the rise you cross a track and keep straight ahead on a path, heading along the ridge towards a house on the edge of woods.
- Eventually, you join a broad track beside the heath boundary fence. Keep ahead on this track, climbing slightly. Paralleling the road, you pass a small car park and by the next telegraph pole, cut right on a path through the bracken to the road.
- Turn left with care on this busy, twisty road, past the cottages of Pitch Place, before turning right on a byway next to Little Pitch house. This track, much of it sunken, leads steadily uphill. At a fork, keep right to reach a minor road, where a bridleway continues the climb straight ahead.
- Another long sunken section leads you to a footgate into National Trust land. Keep to the broad path leading up the small wooded valley. Just before entering a grassy clearing with a pylon in centre, turn sharp left on a gently climbing track (with a bridleway waymark). At a track junction on top of the ridge, keep straight ahead then veer right to drop towards Highcombe Bottom.
- Keep SA above an isolated cottage, the track now running along the valley side towards the hollow of the Devil's Punch Bowl at the head of the valley. After passing through a gateway about 500m beyond the cottage, turn L through a kissing gate on a steep path to the stream.

The Devil's Punch Bowl is a large natural amphitheatre at the head of the Hindhead Valley, filled with heathland, woods and streams. The formation of the depression is believed to have been springs eroding the layer of clay which lies beneath the sandstone in this part of Surrey, then causing the sandstone above to collapse. Of course, there is a slightly more apocryphal version of the formation: that the devil, whilst engaged in digging a dyke through the South Downs so as to use the English Channel to flood the newly Christianised inhabitants of Sussex, was startled by a cock crowing. Believing that dawn was coming, he leapt from the Devil's Dyke, near Brighton, to here, where his landing caused the creation of the Punch Bowl. Take your pick. The Punch Bowl is now a very popular beauty spot, and a Site of Special Scientific Interest managed by the National Trust.

- Cross the footbridge and climb the steps leading out of the valley. Join the Youth Hostel's drive and continue uphill, passing pretty Highcombe Farm. Ignore the footpath to the right and continue steeply uphill on a tarmac road. At a fork by an information board, take the earth track to the right. Takes you across course of old A3, fast being actively returned to nature, to join another small tarmac road.

Since 1826, the main London to Portsmouth road climbed up the side of the Devil's Punch Bowl and up on to Hindhead Common. With steep gradients, this was always a slow part of the road, and as the rest of the A3 was upgraded, became to only bit of non-dual carriageway between London and Portsmouth - plans for widening were scuppered by the Punch Bowl's SSSI status. The Punch Bowl and Hindhead became notorious for peak hour congestion. A major trunk road running through hardly enhanced this incredible landscape, eventually leading to plans for a tunnel to take the A3 under the hills - at 1.2 miles, the longest road tunnel in the UK not running under an estuary. Construction started in 2007, and the tunnels opened in June 2011, transforming the area. Most maps, including the ones above, still show the surface route, but this has closed completely and is rapidly being returned to nature.

- Turn right on this lane, running along the wooded ridge, with glimpses down into the Punch Bowl on the right hand side. Where the road drops slightly to an area used for car parking, veer left at a metal barrier (waymarked as a National Trust permissive path), then take the first path on R to climb slightly to the open space on top of Gibbet Hill, with it's Celtic cross, trig point and sweeping view.

At 272m, Gibbet Hill is the second highest point in Surrey, with superb views to the north and east, including - on a clear day - the London skyline, nearly 40 miles away. The Celtic cross stands on the site of a former gallows, and is believed to have been erected by judge and Whig politician Sir William Erle in 1851 to dispel local fears of evil spirits.

- Take the path dropping ahead from the trig point. You soon reaches a complex path junction. Turn right and immediately fork left (following a bridleway waymark), descending through a footgate. At another fork shortly afterwards, keep left.
- The path cuts across an open field and then re-enters the woods (this can sometimes be a muddy stretch). Join a track and keep straight ahead past small pond. Just after the point where the track swings right, fork right on a waymarked bridleway down the side of the valley, through beech woods.
- On reaching a signposted junction, keep straight ahead on a footpath. The clear path runs through the wood, suddenly emerging by giant scots pines that dwarf the beeches. Shortly afterwards the path reaches a house and you follow the footpath sign left down the drive. You are now clearly in the stockbroker belt, as you pass large houses in fine gardens.
- At a crossroads, turn right on Bunch Lane. Follow this quiet road along the pleasant valley with scattered detached houses, for around 1 mile. As the houses become a bit denser, you can join a pavement on the left hand side.
- Just as the road swings right, turn left down a small tarmac drive (following a footpath sign). The path crosses a small stream and then follows it past a car park to reach a road junction by the railway bridge, with the Crown and Cushion pub just to your right. Pass under the railway and follow the road up the hill to reach Haslemere station.