Punhbowls and Totem Poles

Ascot station - Silwood Park - Cheapside - Valley Gardens - Callow Hill - Virginia Water station

**Length:** 9 ½ miles (15.4km)

**Underfoot:** The route is mostly on well made paths, or minor roads. A couple of very brief sections could be boggy, though the worst of these are crossed on broadwalks.

**Terrain:** Very gentle, rolling countryside, with no significant ascents or drops.

**Maps:** 1:50,000 Landranger 175 Reading & Windsor and 176 West London; 1:25,000 Explorer 160 Windsor, Weybridge & Bracknell.

**Useful websites:** Much of the walk passes through Windsor Great Park, including the fine Valley Gardens.

**Getting there:** Ascot is served by a daily twice-hourly South West Trains service from London Waterloo (53 mins), via Clapham Junction (45 mins) for connections from London Victoria and London Overground and Richmond (37 mins) for District line and London Overground connections.

**Getting home:** Virginia Water has two trains an hour daily to London Waterloo (there is a third service via Hounslow, but this is much slower and is overtaken by the following direct service) taking 45 mins, via Richmond (26 mins) for District line and London Overground and Clapham Junction (35 mins) for London Overground and connections to London Victoria.

**Fares:** An off-peak return to Ascot for £13.60 (child £6.80, railcard £9.00) will cover both journeys.
Route description

- Arriving at Ascot from the London direction, descend to the subway and turn right (signed to South Ascot). Exiting, keep straight ahead on the road you emerge onto, passing a business park and swinging left to reach the A330 by a pleasant little green.

- Turn very briefly right along the main road then cross and head left along Oliver Road. Where the road reaches the railway and swings right, instead turn left under the line (byway sign) along a pleasant lane.

- At a junction by a width restriction sign [1], head right, following another byway sign. Beyond the woods, the track loops through the grounds of a school.

- Reaching houses, you arrive at another junction [2] where you head right on minor Wells Lane to reach the A329.

- Cross with care to the pavement and turn right for about 200m to a road junction. Here turn left on Cheapside Road for a further 200m.

- Opposite Queens Hill Rise, turn right through a footgate [3] to follow a fenced path down the field. Cross the marshy valley bottom on a broadwalk (noting the iron oxide stained stream) and continue straight ahead out of the valley to emerge at the end of a small road by Sunninghill's church.

- Cross the road and enter the church car park, following the graveyard wall to swing left on a track. Pass through an elderly iron kissing gate and follow the path between high fences, dropping towards the woods. The path skirts round just above Silwood Lake, which you get glimpses of through the trees.

The reason you are kept so well penned in along this section, is that Silwood Park has for the past 60 years, been the ecological research station for Imperial College - they aren’t keen on you straying into the ecosystems that provide the basis for the research! Imperial College purchased the Georgian mansion from which the park takes its name in 1947, in recent years constructing four new sets of buildings in the park, including a small nuclear reactor for the civil engineering school. There are around 200 graduate students studying here at any one time.

- Just beyond the lake, you reach a junction of fenced paths [4], and head left (footpath sign). The path cuts through the woods and climbs past university buildings, followed a little further on by the houses of Cheapside, to emerge on a road at the edge of the village.

- Head left and immediately after the junction with Watersplash Lane, head right beside a thatched cottage into Sunninghill Park (footpath sign).
Originally part of Windsor Great Park, Sunninghill Park’s 665 acres was given away by Charles II in 1630. A mansion was built here in the 19th century, and after a brief period as a US Airforce base during World War II, this was repurchased by the crown in 1945, as a home for the then Princess Elizabeth and her future husband, but the house burnt down in 1947 before they could occupy it. In 1990, part of the walled garden was used to build a new residence for Prince Andrew, the first new royal residence for over a hundred years, often compared in style to a Tescos. Prince Andrew has now moved into the Queen Mother’s former residence and Sunninghill was sold, under a rather murky deal, to a Kazakh businessman who allowed the house to remain empty and virtually derelict.

- Keep to the tarmaced Home Farm drive as it drops to a small wooded valley before entering the more open landscape of the park. Where the tarmac road swings left towards Lower Farm, keep straight ahead on a concrete track. [5]

- Just before the track starts to climb, head right at a footpath sign along an unsurfaced track between the meadows. Beyond a gate, this narrows to a tree-lined path and soon reaches the busy B383.

- Turn briefly right to reach the white gates leading into Windsor Great Park [6], turning sharp left through the footgate beside them and following the drive uphill.

Windsor Great Park comprises 5,000 acres of varied landscapes, including classical parkland, a ‘wild’ managed deer park, gardens and farmland. The park was first established when Windsor became a royal residence in the 11th century, and gradually grew as a resource to supply Windsor with wood, meat and fish. Over time, the park’s utility for supplying the monarchy decreased and it became more of a recreational hunting ground. It remained under direct royal ownership (save for a brief privatisation by Oliver Cromwell) until the late 18th century, when George III transferred management of royal lands to parliament. It is now managed by the Crown Estate. Having been used as the road cycling venue for the 1948 Olympic games, the park was gradually opened to the public during the 1950s.

- Keep to this main drive as it swings right through the forest before dropping to the lodge house at Prince Consort Gate [7], which leads into the more open parkland.

- Nearing the bottom of the descent from the gate, turn right on a sandy ride heading south just inside the trees.

- Keep to this broad ride, ignoring turns to left and right for a little over a kilometre. When the ride drops to a stream, with a tarmac drive just the other side of a fence, turn left before the bridge [8] (‘No entry for horses’) on a broad grassy path just above the stream. Before long, the stream has broadened into one of the arms of Virginia Water.

Around two miles long, Virginia Water was created as an ornamental lake by the damming of the River Bourne in 1746, possibly using labour from Jacobite prisoners of war. This lake was much smaller than today’s version, and the dam was destroyed by flooding in 1768. Reconstructed into its present form in the 1780s, it was at the time the largest artificial body of water in the country. During World War II, the lake was drained, as it could have provided a vital navigational aid for a German air assault on Windsor.
Eventually you reach a tarmac drive which has crossed a bridge over the Water [9]. It is worth stepping onto the bridge for the views, but otherwise turn left, joining a broad path paralleling the drive and a ride over a stretch of heathland.

The path crosses a pair of tarmac drives [10] and then cuts across the grass ahead to rejoin the main drive at a causeway over another arm of the Water.

Immediately after the causeway [11], take the broad path right, following the edge of the lake. The arm joins the main body of the Water and you get good vistas the length of the lake.

The path swings sharply around a small inlet [12] (ignore the path branching off here) and then runs between tall rhododendron hedges before re-emerging on the main lake shore.

By another, smaller inlet, the path begins to climb [13]. Before it does, veer left up a grassy swathe towards a white pavilion on the hillside ahead ('Dogs on lead' sign).

You are now entering the Valley Gardens proper, 250 acres of landscaped gardens stretching across the hillsides above the lake, mainly developed after World War II by Deputy Ranger Sir Eric Savill. Collections of different families of plants are mainly grouped together, often using the parallel valleys as delineation, including national collections of rhododendrons, heathers and camellias.

At the foot of the hill with the pavilion on it, turn right up a dry of wooden steps ('Route to Totem Pole' waymark) [14]. Keep straight ahead uphill.

At the top, ignore the waymark pointing right to the totem pole but turn left on a sandy path, heading immediately right to a viewpoint over the Punch Bowl, spectacular with azaleas in the spring.

Take the narrow path heading left immediately in front of the viewpoint, swinging round the top of the Punch Bowl. When you reach a short flight of wooden steps on the left, take it, and turn right on the broader path just above.

Keep to this main path as it swings left. On reaching a junction of large paths at the foot of a giant redwood tree [15], follow the red waymarks to take the second right. This broad path soon curves to descend past more redwoods, with the totem pole at the end of the avenue.

The totem pole was a gift to the Queen from British Colombia, to mark the crown colony's centenary in 1958 - it is a symbolic 100 foot high. Carved from a single log of western red cedar, the pole weighs 27,000 pounds and is decorated in the traditional style of the Pacific coast tribes. Each figure on the pole represents a clan's mythical ancestor, including a beaver, a sea otter and a whale.

Turn right on the tarmac path behind the pole. Immediately after crossing the Wick Pond causeway [16], swing left onto the grass to follow the pond's shore, where you soon join a broad path heading in the same direction, up the valley.

Eventually, the path swings left to cross the stream. Almost immediately beyond, turn right [17] on another broad path continuing along the valley, now through woodland.
Keep straight ahead on this path, which eventually veers left and away from the stream, joining a broader path. Approaching a busy road junction, the path forks [18]. Head right to exit the park through a footgate by the junction.

Turn right beside the A30 on the shared use foot and cycle path. After about 400m keep an eye out for a footpath sign on the other side of the road and cross with care to take it. If you reach the entrance to the American Community School, you have gone too far.

The path runs through scrubby woodland beside a pond and the American School's playing fields, before reaching another busy road.

Here turn left for about 50m along the pavement, before turning right at a footpath sign along a narrow path. Running between fences, the path soon starts to descend quite steeply to a wooded valley bottom, which may be a little muddy in places.

Just out of the valley, you reach a footpath junction [19] and turn right (signed to Callow Hill). The path twists through the woodland, following a high fence. Where the fence ends, the path continues at the foot of a bank to rejoin the road by the Rose & Olive Branch pub.

Cross with care to the pavement and turn left, up the hill. Where the road turns sharply right, recross and take the track ahead (bridleway sign) [20]. You soon reach a T-junction with a tarmaced drive and turn left (again following a bridleway sign). Pass an old age people's home and a gated mansion. Shortly after this, veer right on a tarmaced path (waymark) [21]. This quickly becomes an earth path through the trees, dropping to the end of a minor road [22].

Leave the signed bridleway here and head right, downhill on the road. At the junction head left on Pipers End, passing a very wide range of costly houses.

At the end of the road keep straight ahead on the gravel path [23], keeping to the narrow path ahead at the junction ('Estate Footpath to Trotsworth Avenue'). This quickly brings you out at the end of a slightly less exclusive suburban cul-de-sac which you follow, descending slightly.

At a junction [24], keep straight ahead into another dead end where a kissing gate leads you out onto another small road. Turn left and by some garages turn right, passing apartment blocks. Beyond them, cut left down a small path through the hedge to reach a main road.

Cross and take the road opposite, turning left at the end on Station Parade, which leads in about 200m to the station. Fast London trains normally depart from platform 1, but check the station departure boards.