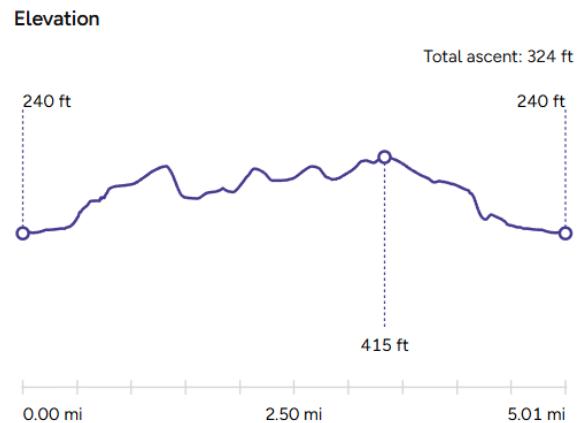


The Shepherd's Hut, Ewelme

Chinooks, Chilterns, Chaucers & that Church, 5 miles

OVERVIEW

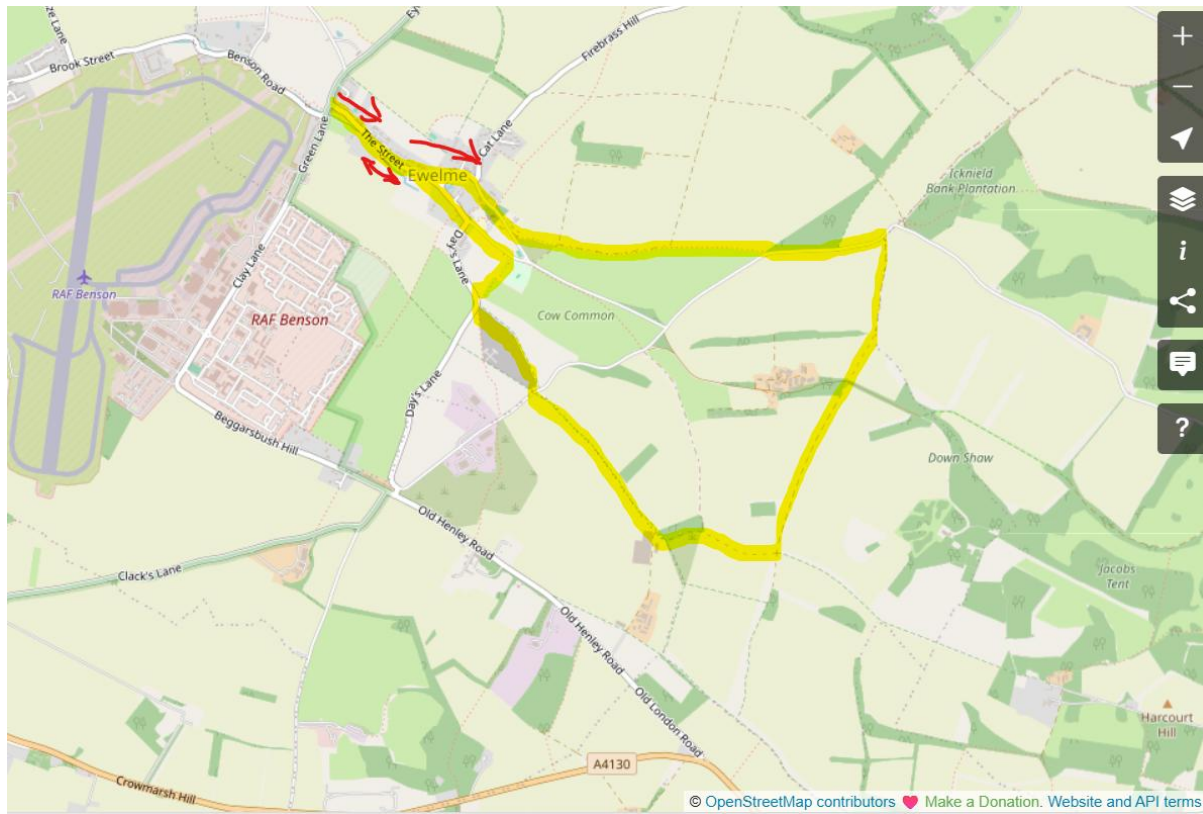
The route threads together layers:
 the chalk-stream industry that once fed the village;
 the tale of Nancy, Ewelme's own World War I returning War Horse who walked herself home from the Shepherd's Hut when her master stopped for a pint;
 the long, easy lines of the Chiltern Way;
 the open farmland where red kites wheel and pig farms announce themselves before you see them;
 and finally the quiet descent back towards the village, where the amazing medieval church & school tell of an ancient past built on wool industry money, but so much more.



That's an interesting circular connection to the pub at the start or end of this easy walk. And all the time, a reassuring soundtrack from RAF Benson nearby.

Start/Finish	The Shepherd's Hut, High Street, Ewelme, OX10 6HQ. 01491 836 636		
Parking	At The Shepherd's Hut		
Grid Reference	SU 639 919		
What3Words	///successes.incursion.stumpy		
Distance	5 miles / 8 km	Time 2.5 hrs	Ascent 320 ft / 100 m
Paths/Terrain	Lanes, fields, wooded tracks, stony farm tracks.		
Difficulty	Easy, some gates.		
Public Transport	Bus services pass through Ewelme from Watlington, Walingford, Henley.		
Toilets	At The Shepherd's Hut		
Other Pubs Nearby	The Crown Inn, and Three Horseshoes, both in Benson; Home Sweet Home at Roke; The Nelson at Brightwell Baldwin.		

DIRECTIONS



1. Turn left from The Shepherd's Hut to follow the village lane, called The Street, through the village. Stop at the Watercress Beds Centre on your right, opened by the Duke of Kent in 2004. It's a significant part of the history of this place.
2. At the junction beyond the thatched village hall, turn left to pass the village shop. There's a house with stables next door and across the road from it, on the site of the old village Pound (used in the early 19th century to pen stray farm animals), a story of Ewelme's local War Horse.
3. The road curves round to the right, uphill, with a junction off to the right, signposted for the Church St Mary the Virgin. Turn right here. Do not walk past the Church! Go in, soak it in, and read the Notes section to get a sense of the magnitude of the past that drips from this place.
4. Just past the church is the Rectory, and diagonally opposite is a Chiltern Way way-marker up a driveway. Follow the signs. It's a straight walk on a clear path, soon along field boundaries across numerous fields.
5. The route eventually emerges onto a quiet lane, turn left and follow until the first brideway footpath marker on the right, ignoring an earlier Chiltern Way sign on the left 100m prior.
6. Take the brideway path into a field, following the field hedge on the left, gradually uphill, and where it meets the next field boundary, cross through to the left, following a clear path, with the next field hedge now on your right.

7. This field path arrives at a lane, with multiple direction markers. Our route is easy – straight ahead on a stony farm track.
8. You'll eventually pass a small copse across a field to your right, and soon after, a footpath marker. Take a right hand turn here, to follow a clear path between two hedges, slightly uphill.
9. This starts the return towards the village.
10. As you reach the top of this slight uphill you'll come to a junction, with paths to the right, but continue straight ahead until reaching a large, smelly farm yard – Potter's Farm, one of the intensive pig farms in this area.
11. Follow the footpath signs to the right, hugging the farmyard edge and onto a clearly marked track (Swan's Way & Chiltern Way), called Potters Lane.
12. Continue until the path emerges onto a concrete hard standing – entrance to fields either side- and then onto a road. Take care here. There's a path straight across, but turn right on the road and cross it – you'll see the footpath we want 20m ahead.
13. Numerous Red Kites wheeling away above.
14. Follow this path past old quarry workings on your left, and it then emerges in front of a small parking area alongside a lane into Ewelme, with a wonderful view at a farm gate across fields to the village school.
15. Just to the right of you is a footpath sign heading right, but the path quickly changes direction to lead you through the fields you've been looking across, towards the village, via two kissing gates, the first on this journey!
16. Cross the cricket pitch to join the road, and turn left past the ancient buildings of Ewelme's Church of England Primary school. Head back along this lane to rejoin The Street, and retrace your steps back towards the pub.

NOTES - Chaucers, de la Poles & the Astonishing Church at Ewelme

I'm pretty sure that most people walk up to Ewelme church, St Mary the Virgin, expecting a pleasant parish building with a bit of age to it. What they find instead is a structure whose interior feels like it belongs in a cathedral city, not a Chiltern village. The surprise is part of the experience — and it only deepens when you learn who built it, and why.

Ewelme's church shouldn't be here — at least, not like this. From the outside it's all understatement: a low tower, no spire seen from miles around, nothing to hint at grandeur. But step inside and you're suddenly in a space that feels lifted from a cathedral. The question I had as I sat looking at the Church — *why here?* The answer is the key to understanding the whole village.

A missing palace explains everything

In the 1400s, this quiet Chiltern valley was the country seat of the Chaucer-de la Pole family, one of the most powerful dynasties in England. The manor that once stood just beyond the church wasn't a farmhouse or a gentleman's residence — it was a moated palace significant enough to host:

- Henry VII, who stayed for a month,
- Henry VIII, who brought Anne Boleyn here,
- and Princess Elizabeth, later Elizabeth I.

Its demolition in the early 1600s leaves the church looking oddly oversized today — the surviving half of a medieval power complex.

Alice Chaucer: the force behind the vision

Born here in 1404, Alice Chaucer (Geoffrey's grand-daughter) was no decorative noblewoman. She rose through three marriages to become Duchess of Suffolk, a major landowner, and a political operator who survived the fall of her husband and the turbulence of the Wars of the Roses. When she returned to Ewelme as a wealthy widow, she set about reshaping the village into a legacy project that her father had originally conceived:

- rebuilding the church,
- founding the cloistered almshouses,
- and establishing the school that still teaches children today — the oldest continuously used maintained school building in England.

This wasn't piety alone. It was status, charity, and dynastic pride carved into stone.

William de la Pole: not just "some duke"

Alice's third husband, William de la Pole, 1st Duke of Suffolk, was effectively the King Henry VI's chief minister — a man whose decisions shaped the kingdom and whose

downfall helped ignite the Wars of the Roses. His assassination in 1450 was a national scandal. His tomb in Ewelme is not a local curiosity; it is the resting place of a man who stood at the centre of English politics.

The tombs that stop you in your tracks

Inside the church, the monuments to Alice and William are extraordinary:

- Alice's alabaster tomb, with its serene effigy above and cadaver sculpture below, is one of the finest in England.
- William's tomb, richly carved, anchors the chancel with the weight of a life lived at the heart of power.

These are not village memorials. They are statements — of wealth, influence, mortality and legacy.

A medieval power centre hiding in a Chiltern valley

That's the magic of Ewelme. Outside: chalk stream, watercress beds, red kites, a village that looks almost too perfect. Inside the church: the ambitions of a dynasty that shaped the politics of 15th-century England. And above it all today: the thrum of Chinooks from RAF Benson, the modern world reminding you that this valley has never been as sleepy as it looks.

Ewelme is a place where centuries sit on top of each other lightly — but once you know the story, the whole landscape changes shape.

You can read more at <https://www.ewelmevillagehistory.uk/>