PUBS WORTH THE WALK

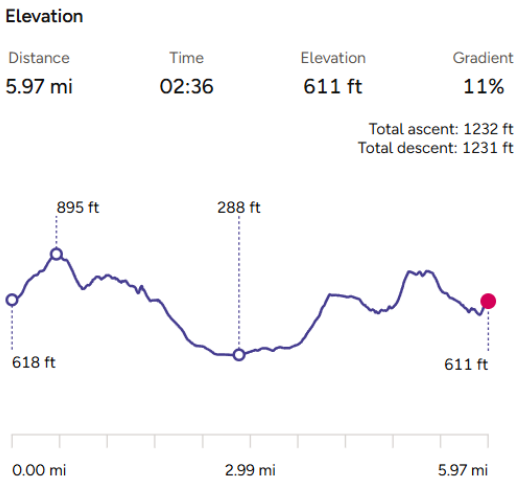
The Black Horse Cranham Pub Walk

From Holst to Cheese Rolling: A Cotswolds Circuit, 6 miles

OVERVIEW

This circular walk from Cranham is a showcase of the Cotswolds at their most varied. It begins in the beechwoods of **Buckholt**, a woodland of national significance, before joining a high section of the **Cotswold Way** with long views across Gloucester & the Severn Vale.

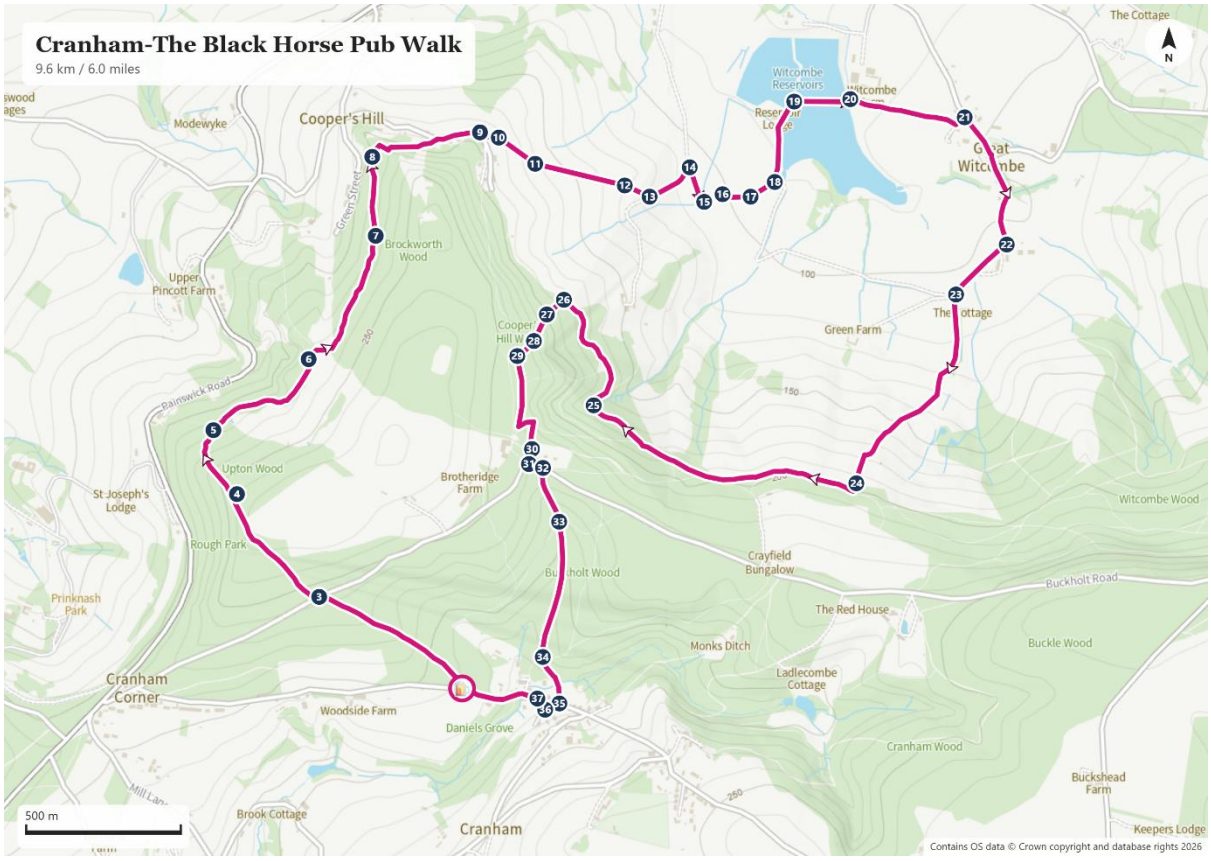
From here the route drops to the foot of **Cooper's Hill**, whose infamous cheese-rolling slope is far steeper in person than its annual news footage suggests, then crosses the landscaped parkland & reservoirs of the **Hick-Beeches' Witcombe Estate**.



The final stretch follows part of the **Gustav Holst Way** back into Cranham, returning you to the valley that inspired one of England's most beloved composers.

Start/Finish	**The walk starts at Buckholt Wood Car Park, just outside Cranham.**
Parking	Parking at Buckholt Wood Car Park is via the RingGo app. I opted for 4 hours, to take account of the pub visit too.
Grid Reference	SO 893 131
What3Words	///swimsuits.blackbird.video for the car park.
Distance	6 miles / 9.6 km **Time** 3 hours **Ascent** 1200 ft / 380 m
Paths/Terrain	Forest tracks for half the walk; sometimes steep, stony and muddy. Grassland walking for part of the walk too. Some quiet country lanes. Quite a few gates and stiles.
Difficulty	Moderate. Some steep sections.
Public Transport	Bus services run along the A46 Stroud to Brockworth road. Cranham is a mile from the main road.
Toilets	At the Black Horse
Other Pubs Nearby	**Butchers Arms,** Sheepscombe; **Foston's Ash**, The Camp**; The Woolpack**, Slad; and **The Oak** at Painswick is a few miles down the A46, and featured as a Gloucestershire 'Pubs Worth The Walk' entry.

DIRECTIONS



1. Cranham is signposted off the A46. It's about a mile down the lanes. As you approach the village, downhill, you'll spot a small car parking area on your left at the entrance to Buckholt Woods, enough for a dozen cars at a squeeze and on rough, uneven ground. A small sign explains that you need to pay to park, using the RingGo app.
2. Enter the beech woods - a national nature reserve - and bear left uphill. You'll immediately see a couple of broad paths, the one closest to the wooden fence is a bridlepath, and walkers should take the one slightly to the right of it. They both go to the same place - uphill to eventually break out onto a lane called Buckholt Road.
3. Almost straight across is the continuation of the path, into more woodland, continuing uphill and straight ahead, before levelling off for a short section before joining the Cotswolds Way. Way markers galore from here, and likely some people!
4. There's immediately a steep descent before more gentle walking through woodland, which becomes Upton Wood, then Coopers Hill Wood.
5. After 1.4 miles from the start of the walk, you'll see that a Cotswold Way signposts strangely points directly up a steep bank. Ignore this, to continue on the lesser used path that runs straight ahead. (The CW way marker seems to be taking walkers to the top of Coopers Hill, whereas we're going to skirt around the side of it.)
6. The path starts to curl around to the right, and soon emerges at the foot of Coopers Hill. A bench commemorates Steve Brain who won the cheese rolling race on this hill eighteen times!

7. Continue onto the lane, called Green Street, and after a few hundred metres, where the road starts to bend right in front of a house, look for a farm gate into what feels like land belonging to the house on the lane. You can see another farm gate into a field diagonally across this narrow piece of land - that's the path. Views of the reservoirs in the distance - which is where we're heading.
8. Once in the field, follow the field boundary on your right downhill to a kiss gate into the next field. From here, make a diagonal route to the bottom of this annoyingly undulating field. You'll eventually see a lane/driveway (to Coopers Hill Farm I believe), but the kiss gate onto it takes some time to reveal itself. There was plenty of evidence that livestock had recently enjoyed a very good feed in this field, but no sign of the cows themselves.
9. Head to the left when you join the lane. There is a marked footpath (on the OS Map) straight across the field towards the hedge, but I couldn't see it. So I simply followed this lane for a short distance and turned right down a tractor path to the entrance into the next field, where a footpath marker I was looking for pointed straight across a lovely field of wheat. To the left-hand side of the field was the continuation of the tractor track, so as a good walking citizen I took this to land at the right place at the end of the field.
10. Turn left on a track towards a derelict property, now with the first of the reservoirs on your right through the trees.
11. These are called Witcombe Reservoirs, managed by Severn Trent, and open to the public for Trout fly fishing.
12. Follow the path across the causeway between two of the reservoirs. The path takes you over a stile into a field and follows along the side of a fence on the left to a stile into the next field. The path is clear from here, across the field to the left-hand corner in front of a large red brick barn of Church Farm. Cross the stile, turn immediately left and after a few large strides, turn right onto the lane towards the Grade I Listed The Church of St Mary, Great Witcombe.
13. *The Church of St Mary's is more than a village church. It serves as the family chapel of the Hicks-Beach dynasty, owners of the Witcombe Estate for around 400 years. Their memorials inside the church chart generations of local landowners, MPs and statesmen, including Michael Hicks Beach, Chancellor of the Exchequer under Queen Victoria. It's a fascinating glimpse into the people who helped shape both Gloucestershire and national politics.*
14. Continue straight ahead along the lane, passing the characterful old School House 'The Villa' on your right. The lane passes a house called Churchill Cottage then winds up towards the gates of Witcombe House. Turn right here to follow a lane, with cottages and barns on your left-hand side and open fields to the right.
15. At a house imaginatively called 'The Cottage', way markers point you through a gate into a field between the house and a barn. Follow the way markers from here - it's the start of the uphill journey away from the valley floor of the Witcombe Estate and back towards Buckholt Woods. You might meet some livestock in these fields, but they seem docile and have their attention focused on other matters.

16. The uphill journey continues through 2 or 3 fields, sometimes steeply, before eventually rejoining the woodland footpath and the Cotswold Way. But this is now also the Gustav Holst Way too. Turn right for gentle, easy walking through the woods.
17. After 0.5 miles, look for a path to the left. It takes you uphill, steeply at first, before a gentler uphill towards Buckholt Sawmills. (I passed a number of paths uphill off the Gustav Holst Way, some looked under used and over grown, so I recommend finding one that looks to be the most popular route of the day - they all head to the same place, the sawmills and then Buckholt Road).
18. At the sawmills, follow the track to the left towards Buckholt House (where Holst's mother lived as a child) and turn left on Buckholt Road. There's a footpath on the other side of the road, opposite Woodland House, the neighbour of Buckholt House.
19. It's easy downhill walking from here, with Holst way markers guiding the way the closer you get to Cranham. Emerge from woods onto Main Street in the village, and look for signs to The Black Horse, which will be no more than 50 metres away. If returning to your car, it'll be to the right on Main Street, leaving the village past the Old Post Office, with a short burst uphill to the car park.

NOTES

Gustav Holst & Cranham

Gustav Holst's name sounds as if it belongs to a Central European composer. In reality, he was born in **Cheltenham** in 1874, the son of a Gloucestershire musical family whose roots ran deep into these hills. His father, Adolph, was Latvian.

His mother, Clara, grew up at **Buckholt House**, which still stands above Cranham on the ridge you cross on Buckholt Road on the way back to Cranham. Holst spent time in the village as a young man, staying at **Midwinter Cottage** — the house directly opposite the Black Horse — and no doubt absorbing the quiet, wooded landscape of the valley and a couple of pints at the pub.

It was during one of these stays that he composed the tune (not the words) to *In the Bleak Midwinter*, now one of the nation's most favourite hymns and sung by congregations everywhere. The music was set to a poem by the English poet Christina Rossetti, first published in 1872. Once you've walked Cranham in winter fog, or watched rain sweep across the beechwoods, the melody makes perfect sense: it feels as if it was written *for this valley*.

The **Gustav Holst Way**, a 35-mile waymarked trail from Cranham to Wych Rissington, traces the landscapes that shaped him. Much of it follows the **Cotswold Way**, which is why it doesn't appear separately on OS maps — a kind of "ghost route" hiding in plain sight. Its official start is at **Cranham Church**, a mile from the village.

Cheese Rolling at Cooper's Hill

If you're reading this from outside the UK you may assume that cheese rolling is something we invented recently to amuse tourists. It isn't.

It's an **ancient, pagan-tinged, gloriously unregulated** tradition in which grown adults hurl themselves down a near-vertical slope in pursuit of a runaway wheel of Double Gloucester cheese.

The slope in question is **Cooper's Hill**, which you pass on this walk. On television it looks steep. In person it looks like the sort of incline you'd only descend if your brakes failed. The cheese is given a one-second head start and reaches the bottom long before the humans do. The humans, for their part, reach the bottom in a variety of creative shapes.

There is even a memorial at the foot of the hill to **Steve Brain**, an 18-time champion whose ashes were scattered on the slope at his request — a detail that tells you everything you need to know about the seriousness with which this "lunacy" is taken locally.

The event is technically unofficial, occasionally discouraged, and entirely unstoppable. It is English eccentricity at its most distilled: ancient, communal, mildly dangerous, and carried out with complete sincerity.