

# Houghton Conquest Circular Walk 1

## Introduction

Placed centrally in Bedfordshire and lying at the foot of the Greensand Ridge at the crossing of two ancient roads, the village takes its name from the coupling of the old English "hoh" and "tun" (meaning a farmstead on or near a ridge or hill-spur) with the name of an important local family in the c13th - the Conquests. This attractive circular route crosses meadows and woodland and passes near Houghton House., thought to be "The House Beautiful" in John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress." Detours may be taken to Kings Wood, an ancient woodland, and Glebe Meadows, a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Houghton Conquest can be reached by road from the A6 (Bedford –Luton) or from the B530 (Bedford – Ampthill) roads. Parking is available in the Village Hall car park but may be limited if other functions or events are taking place there. On-street parking is available elsewhere in the village. Please park thoughtfully. There is an hourly bus service from Bedford (Route 42).

## Start/Finish Point

The walk starts from the Knife and Cleaver public house opposite the Village Church. (OS Grid TL043414)

## Access and General Information

**Length:** 3 miles (4.8km) **Time:** 2 hours

**Surface Types:** The walk goes across varied surfaces ranging from a hard, firm surface to grass or uncultivated earth paths. Please note that this route can become very muddy in winter or in wet weather.

**Refreshments:** There are two pubs in Houghton Conquest - The Knife and Cleaver and The Anchor. There is a shop near to the village hall.

## Route Description

1. Starting from the Knife and Cleaver (opposite the Village Church) follow the alleyway at the side of the pub to Rectory Lane and turn right. Proceed along the lane to the footpath sign on the right. Follow this path & through the 1st gate and turn left. Continue along hedgerow and the footpath joins a track. Follow this to the end.
2. You are now at an entrance to the Kings Wood and Glebe Meadows Nature Reserve. At this point turn right along footpath on outside of Round Close. Follow this and over a stile, along hedgerow to the corner of Kings Wood.
3. Turn right and then left across the bridge to follow path on the outside of the wood. At the top of the slope leave the wood edge and bear right along the hedgerow carrying on following the footpath signs.
4. A bridge takes you left through the hedge. Carry straight on along the hedgerow in the direction of Houghton House. Cross another bridge and continue uphill across a field and a paddock & then past farm & house gates to join a concrete road (Houghton House is on your right).
5. Carry on along this road and shortly after passing the entrance to Houghton House on your right turn sharp left (before the houses) and follow the unmade up road to Kings Wood.
6. On approaching the wood, cross a small field and you are at the top entrance to Kings Wood. The route now follows the path along the outside of the wood although there are permissive paths within the wood should you wish to take them. Follow down to the bottom of the wood. Turn sharp right and continue to gate on left -
7. through into Cowslip Meadow. Keeping the hedgerow on your right until you come to the gate. Through the gate & left alongside the Old Rectory garden and the houses in Rectory Lane, turning left along a short section between the houses before entering Rectory Lane. Turn right and retrace your steps to the Knife and Cleaver and the Church

## Features on the Route

### **HOUGHTON HOUSE**

Built in 1615 for the Countess of Pembroke's hunting parties, the house was highly ornamented and originally three storeys high. Bought in 1738 by John, Duke of Bedford, the house fell into disrepair following his son's death in a hunting accident in 1767. The house stood un-roofed, gutted and abandoned until the 1930s when Prof. A E Richardson of Ampthill instigated its preservation. It is thought to be "The House Beautiful" in John Bunyan's "Pilgrims Progress".

### **THE OLD RECTORY**

Built in 1724 in the time of Rev. Zachary Grey, probably on the site of an old moated farmhouse. As recently as the beginning of the 19th century, a bridge was needed to approach the house. There is an avenue of limes festooned with large bunches of mistletoe.

### **KINGS WOOD & GLEBE MEADOWS**

Little trace remains of this, the only recorded Decoy in Beds. Probably constructed in the early C 17th to serve Houghton House it stretched for some distance to the N & S of the present footpath. By the early C 18th it had fallen into disrepair and today the only trace is in the form of crop-marks. Local Nature Reserve & S.S.S.I. (Site of Special Scientific Interest). The wood is an ancient broad-leaved woodland on a north facing slope of the Greensand Ridge. Both Ampthill Park and the adjacent Houghton Park were used by a number of monarchs in the 16th century as a hunting preserve and it is likely that the name Kings Wood dates from this period. The meadows are "unimproved" pasture and have a wealth of wild flowers. Cowslip Meadow shows the "Ridge and furrow" remains of cultivation and in spring has a fine display of cowslips and Kings Wood of bluebells.

### **ALL SAINTS CHURCH**

The general appearance of the Church as it now stands dates to the latter part of the 15th century, but the structure dates to the second half of the 14th century when a Norman church on the site was rebuilt.

### **THE KNIFE & CLEAVER**

Earliest record 1796 but probably older. Owned at one time by the Earl of Upper Ossery & originally called "The Butchers Arms". The Jacobean panelling is thought to be from the dismantled Houghton House.

## Acknowledgements

The original leaflet was produced by members of the Houghton Conquest Parish Paths Partnership Group.

**KEY**

- Circular walk.
- Footpaths
- ..... Permissive paths
- Waymarker
- ⊕ Gate
- ⌋ Footbridge
- ≡ Stile
- ⚡ Hedgerow

