

Cuxton, Ranscombe and Cobham

Cuxton station - Ranscombe - Cobham Park - Cobham - Sole Street station

Length: 5 ¾ miles (9.4 km)

Underfoot: Most of this walk is on well-made paths or tracks, with a few short stretches of road walking. You may encounter a little mud after wet weather, but the route should generally be easy going.

Terrain: This is rolling countryside, so expect a few steady climbs: these are almost entirely in the first couple of miles of the walk, in the Ranscombe area.

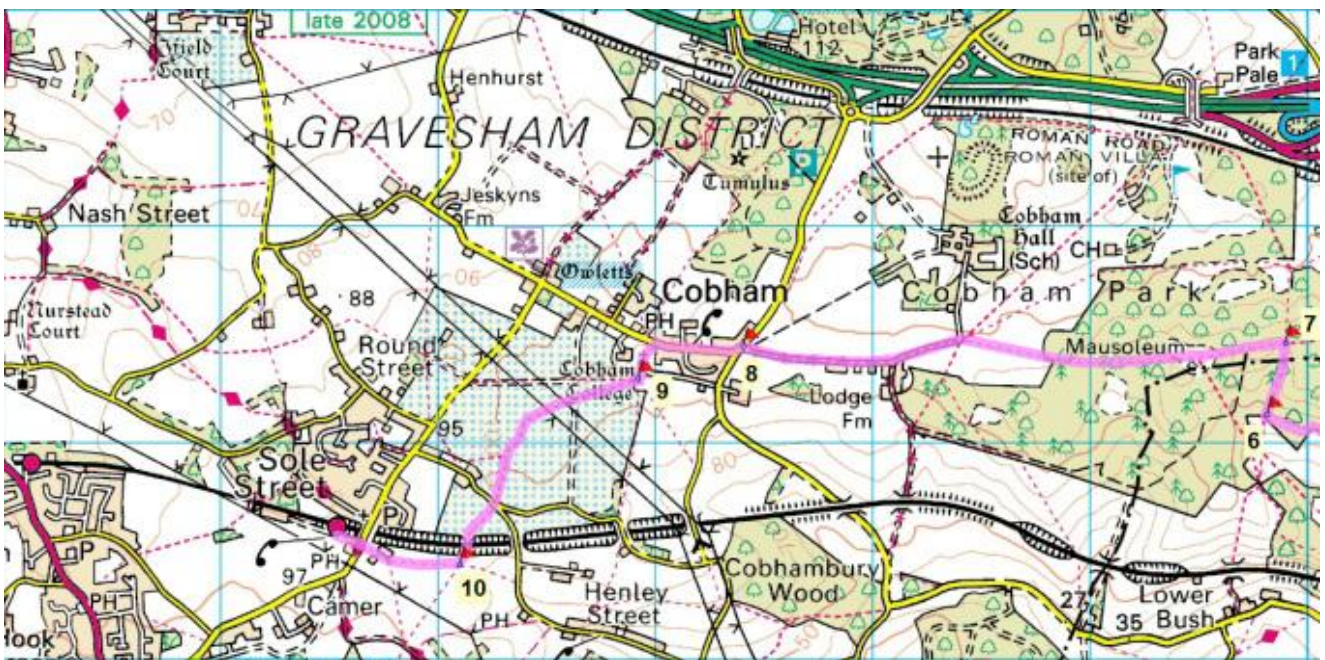
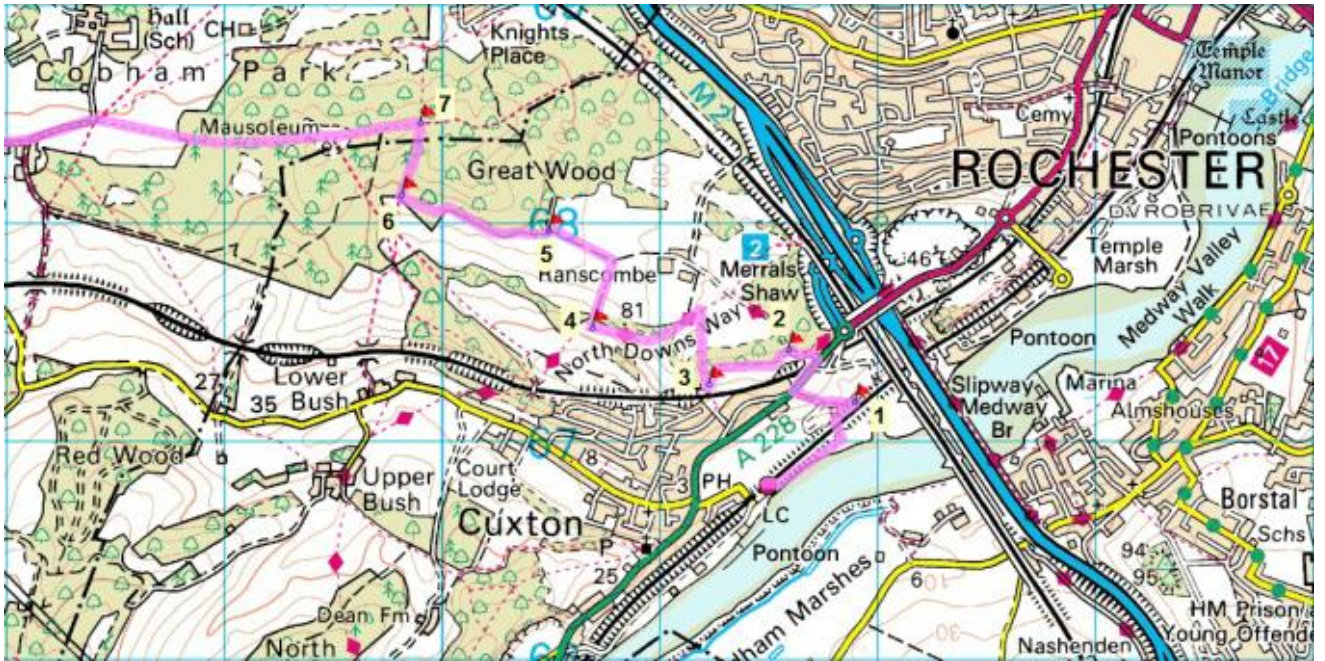
Maps: 1:50,000 Landranger 178 Thames Estuary; 1:25,000 Explorer 148 Maidstone & the Medway Towns.

Useful websites: The walk passes through the [Ranscombe nature reserve](#), through [Cobham Wood and the Darnley Mausoleum](#) and the historic village of [Cobham](#).

Getting there: Cuxton is situated on the Medway Valley line, which runs between Strood and Tonbridge, meaning it is always necessary to change trains to arrive from London. The fastest route is to take the high-speed service from London St Pancras, via Stratford International *for connections to the DLR* and change at Strood for the one-stop hop to Cuxton. Both the high-speed trains and the Medway Valley trains run every half hour (hourly on Sundays), with a total journey time from St Pancras of around 43 minutes. Alternatively, slower services run every half hour from London Charing Cross, Waterloo (East) and London Bridge, via Lewisham and Woolwich Arsenal *both for connections to the DLR*. Total journey time from Charing Cross is around 1hr 29mins.

Getting home: Sole Street has an hourly direct service to London Victoria every day of the week, taking around 53mins, via Bromley South and Denmark Hill (not Sundays) *for London Overground connections*.

Fares: As the start and end points are on two separate lines, you need to buy two tickets to cover all the journeys. The cheapest combination is to buy a Super Off Peak Day Return to Rochester for £19.30 (child £9.65, railcard £12.75), which will cover you for the outward journey as far as Strood and all the return journey. Note that if you take the slower route from Charing Cross/Waterloo East/London Bridge to Strood, you can purchase a 'Not HS1' fare that is a couple of pounds cheaper. You will also need a Strood to Cuxton single for the last leg of the outward journey, for £2.80 (child £1.40, railcard £1.85)



Route description

- Alighting at Cuxton from the Strood direction, walk to the end of the platform by the level crossing (a rare survivor where the gates are still opened and closed manually by the signalman) and turn left towards the marina, then immediately left again onto a narrow footpath. The path runs between fences, squeezed between the railway line and the marina - the first ten minutes or so of this walk are not hugely inspiring, but persevere: the good stuff comes soon enough.
- After about 500 metres, the path swings left under a railway bridge. On the far side, bear immediately right to continue to shadow the railway line north-eastwards. Sadly, the nearby presence of a rubbish tip makes itself felt around here, but you soon pass through a green kissing gate onto a track **(1)**. Head left on the track, which quickly becomes a tarmaced road passing through a small park of mobile homes and then climbing steadily to reach the busy A228.
- Turn right along the verge of the main road, passing the entrance to Brickfields Farm. Having passed over a railway on a brick railway bridge, use the traffic island to cross the road with care to the entrance to Ranscombe Farm Reserve. Pass through the small car park and keep ahead on the minor road past the information signs for the reserve.

Ranscombe Farm is a 620-acre reserve of woodland, farmland and grassland, spreading along the slopes above the Medway, a broad ledge of fields, and then densely wooded hills above them. It is managed by the charity Plantlife with particular emphasis on conserving the wide range of wildflowers and other plants that thrive here, with the farmed portions of the reserve incorporating hedgerows and broad field margins. Ranscombe provides habitats for a wide range of orchids, and less romantically but no less importantly, for as much as 95% of Britain's population of broad-leaved cudweed. As you walk through the reserve, you'll find plenty of information boards pointing out key habitats and land management techniques.

- Follow the road round the bend and begin to climb, with views opening up over the Medway valley, including the viaducts carrying the M2 and the high-speed railway to the Channel Tunnel over the estuary. At a waymark sign **(2)**, turn left, leaving the road, on a fine chalk track along the foot of Longhoses Wood.
- The path eventually swings leftwards to descend steps to a path junction by the railway line **(3)**. Turn right on a clear path climbing through the woodland.
- The path eventually exits the wood onto a ridge with an open field beyond. Keep straight ahead on the clear path over the field, in the direction of the buildings of Ranscombe Farm. On reaching a track by a waymark post, turn left (this is the North Downs Way). The track cuts through a narrow belt of woodland, on the other side once again giving views down the wide valley towards Maidstone. The track descends as it steadily heads west away from the Medway valley.
- At a waymark post **(4)**, head right, leaving the North Downs Way on a nature reserve track, climbing again, into open fields, popular with soaring skylarks. At the top of the hill you get a panorama over the oast house roofs at Ranscombe to the towers of Rochester castle and cathedral and onwards to the container cranes at Thames Gateway port on the opposite side of the Thames estuary.

- At a track junction, follow the waymark left on a hedge side track towards the large expanse of Birch Wood and Great Wood ahead.
- At the corner of the wood **(5)**, head left on a waymarked path following the southern edge of the trees, running between wooden fences. At a path junction by a bench and information board, keep ahead along the forest edge. Passing a dogleg in the path, keep straight ahead again past two kissing gates on the left hand side and a path off to the right.
- A short distance further on you reach a path junction **(6)** by a third kissing gate - here head right on a path climbing steadily through the trees.
- At the top of the hill, you reach a broad path running along the ridge line at a waymark post **(7)**. Head left along the ridge, immediately passing through a gate to enter the National Trust land at Cobham Wood. You are quickly in a very different landscape of scattered large trees among the grazed bracken of the former deer park of Cobham House. After about 400m, you come to the clearing housing the Darnley mausoleum.

It is something of a surprise to find this Grade 1-listed pyramid-roofed, classical temple on this grassy hilltop. Built in 1786, to a design by fashionable architect James Wyatt, it was meant to be the internment place for future generations of Earls of Darnley, owners of Cobham Hall - they had previously been buried in Westminster Abbey, but space had run out. However, the mausoleum was never consecrated and the crypt underneath the temple (and its 32 coffin shelves) remained unused. With the redesign of the parkland, the mausoleum became a landscape feature, and after the sale of Cobham Hall went into decline, subject to vandalism. From 2001, the mausoleum and park were restored, with a Lottery grant and funding from the builders of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link - the mausoleum is now in the hands of the National Trust, who open it to visitors on the first Sunday of each month. The 190 acres of parkland around the mausoleum comprise mainly of 'wood pasture', non-intensively grazed woodland - now a very rare landscape type, but which would have been very typical of prehistoric lowland southern England: a mixture of open grassland and mature trees. As you descend, you will find many historic oak trees, leaving behind the sweet chestnuts and hornbeams of the upper slopes.

- Past the mausoleum continue on the broad path descending gently through the woodland. Eventually the route, now a broad track, leaves the trees at a gateway, and runs alongside a fine hawthorn hedgerow. Ignore paths signed off to either side and continue ahead to reach Lodge Farm. Just before you reach its thatched lodge house, you get glimpses of Cobham Hall through trees to the right.

There has been a manor house on the site since the 12th century, but Cobham Hall was much expanded in both the 17th and 18th centuries. Originally home to the Barons of Cobham, it became the family seat of the Earls of Darnley and remained in this use until the 1950s. It subsequently became a private girls' school, and remains in this use today.

- On reaching Lodge Farm, and passing through a kissing gate by a tiny orchard, continue ahead on the minor road in the same direction of travel (west). Follow this byway for around 600m to reach Cobham's war memorial **(8)**. Just to the right, as you approach the memorial, is the end of a fine avenue of trees leading from Cobham Hall. At the mini roundabout by the memorial, take the road ahead (The Street) signed to Cobham and Sole Street.

- The Street leads into the village of Cobham, past the Ship Inn, the fine 19th century village school, the village store, the Darnley Arms and finally the church, with the Leather Bottle inn opposite.

Cobham is a picturesque little village, still containing many weatherboarded and half-timbered buildings - in total, the village has over 450 listed buildings. The thirteenth century church of St Mary Magdalen has one of the country's best collections of medieval brasses, fifteen of which form the floor of the chancel. Remarkably, this little village still contains three operational pubs, the oldest of which - the Darnley Arms - dates from 1196 - and allegedly has one end of a bolt hole for priests from the ecclesiastical college behind the church. The Leather Bottle inn, opposite the churchyard, is a fine medieval half-timbered building which trades on its associations with Charles Dickens. The author was a frequent patron of the Leather Bottle and would often stay here before he purchased Gads Hill in nearby Higham. Cobham features in The Pickwick Papers and the Leather Bottle itself is where Tracy Tupman flees to after being jilted by his sweetheart Rachel Wardle - described as 'a clean and commodious ale house'.

- Head left along the diagonal path through the churchyard (following Public Footpath signs to Luddesdown and Gold Street). Passing the front door of the church, keep ahead on the earth path around the side, with Cobham College just behind the church.
- Leave the churchyard on a broad, descending path. At the bottom of the slope **(9)**, turn right, along the edge of a graveyard extension, to a kissing gate.
- Beyond the gate, take the lefthand of the two waymarked paths, heading diagonally across the field towards a large orchard ahead. This leads to a clear path cutting through the apple trellises.
- Continue ahead across a track, through a windbreak line of trees and across what is currently a grubbed-up orchard, passing under a pair of electricity lines. Another orchard follows.
- The path curves leftwards across a broad track and continues through the trellises. Ignore a path waymarked to the right and keep ahead along the angled path, passing through a further windbreak to reach a kissing gate out onto a small road.
- Cross straight over the lane and onto a path through a further orchard. At the bottom of this orchard a metal footbridge leads you over the railway.
- Beyond the bridge, keep ahead on the clear path heading over the field ahead towards an electricity line. Just before the brow of the slight hill **(10)**, head right on a path (no sign) which comes across the field at a right angle (note: find what is clearly a footpath, rather than any tractor routes through the crops). The path runs straight across the field towards the outlying houses of Sole Street and a waymark post on the hedgeline ahead.
- At the post, keep straight ahead through the gap in the hedge onto a fenced path. This emerges on a road opposite the Railway Inn. For Sole Street station, cross and take the road ahead down to the entrance. London trains depart from the platform on this side of the line.