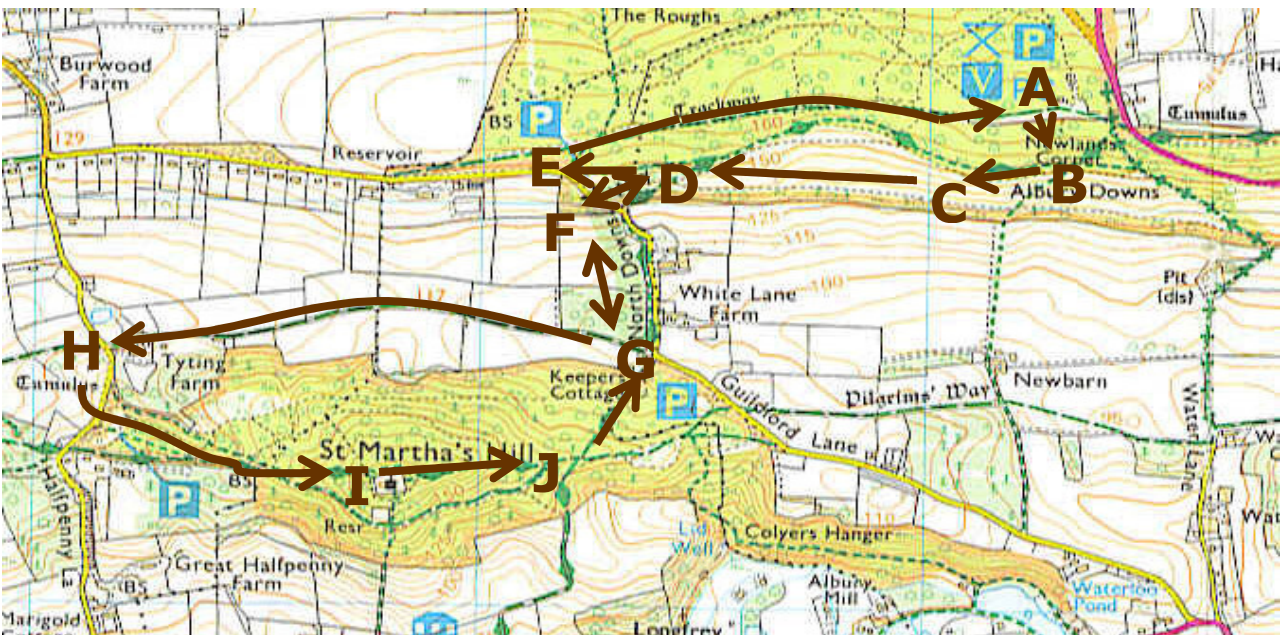


A walk near Godalming to view plants and habitats



Chalk down walk at Newlands Corner

Greening Godalming is a local community group campaigning to make Godalming a greener town by helping people reduce their carbon footprints.



Location: The starting point is outside the Visitor Centre of Surrey Wildlife Trust in the car park at Newlands Corner. To travel by road, take the A246 from Guildford towards Leatherhead, turning right onto the A25. Newlands Corner Car Park is at the crest of this hill on the right, just before the road descends the slope of the downs. Map reference: TQ043492.

Choice of Walks: A short walk (see map) is A, B, C, D, E and then back to A. A long walk includes a visit to St Martha's Hill. The short walk will take about one hour and the longer an extra hour and a half. The longer walk is worth making to see the marked contrast between the plants found on chalky and sandy soils.

FROM A TO B: From the Visitor Centre (A), cross the car park and descend the grassy slope to a gravel path. Turn right along the gravel path and through a small patch of woodland.

FROM B TO C: Walk along the path by the side of the woodland (on your right) until you get to an expansive area of grassy chalk down. This stretch of woodland is an excellent place to get to know some of our common shrubs and trees, as well as various herbs (growing well between the path and the wood). The following is a list of trees and shrubs which you can see on the walk as a whole. Many are present in the stretch B to C:

Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). A common, widely distributed native tree, which yields many valuable wood products - timber, poles, firewood.

Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). A common large native species.

Silver birch (*Betula pendula*). This is a fast-growing species which prefers acidic soils. It is most conspicuous on St Martha's Hill.

Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. A small thorny tree with beautiful snowy blossom in early spring. The fruits are used to make sloe gin.

Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*). The berries are a fierce purgative.

Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*). This shrub was introduced into the UK from China in the 1890s. It is an invasive species of open rocky places, such as along railway lines, where it is a major nuisance undermining brickwork.

Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*). A large shrub or small tree common on the chalk. 'Dog' in this name may derive from 'dags', a word used in some places for butchers' skewers.

Elder (*Sambucus ebulus*). A shrub whose flowers and berries are both used in drink-making.

Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). This is our mostly commonly planted hedge species.

Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). This is one of our commonest small trees. It is useful for providing poles and firewood, and has edible nuts.

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*). This tree, symbolic of Christmas, has male and female flowers on separate plants. The number of spines on the leaves is very variable.

Cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*). This is a smallish tree introduced from southeast Europe and today widely naturalized.

Apples (*Malus*). Two types can be found in the wild, often garden escapes. One is crabapple (*Malus sylvestris*, with glabrous leaves when mature) and the other the domestic apple (*Malus domestica*, with hairs on the leaves below).

Maple (*Acer campestre*). This is the only native maple in our flora. It has smaller leaves than the introduced sycamore and Norway Maple (which is common in Godalming).

Oak (*Quercus*). Two species can be seen on this walk. One is the English or pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*) which has stalked acorns and sessile or shortly stalked leaves. The other is the Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*), which was introduced into the UK from southern Europe in 1735. The Turkey oak typically has relatively long and thin leaves compared with English oak and the cups carrying the acorns have bristles (rather than being rather smooth). Turkey oak is a serious invasive species in southwest Surrey. There is another native species of oak in the Godalming area (but possibly not at Newlands Corner). This is the sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*), similar-looking to English oak, but with sessile acorns and stalked leaves.

Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*). This tree likes acidic soils. It is common on the Lower Greensand, but much less frequent on the chalk.

Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*). This native species, with poisonous berries, is common on woodland edges on the chalk. The species usually used for hedges is from Japan (*Ligustrum ovalifolium*).

Rowan (*Sorbus acuparia*). This small tree is well known for its red berries. Unlike other species of native *Sorbus*, the leaves are compound (pinnate) with several leaflets.

Spindle tree (*Euonymus europaeus*). This small tree has beautiful pink fruits opening to reveal seeds covered by orange arils (outer seed coats). The name was probably imported from the Netherlands in the 16th Century. The wood is ideal for skewers and knitting needles, and an arrow shaft of this species was found with the ‘ice-man’ in Italy.

Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*). Introduced from Europe in the 15th or 16th century.

Wayfaring tree (*Viburnum lantana*). A small tree common on the chalk.

Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*). This is the small tree with whitish leaves below. The genus *Sorbus* is remarkable within Britain for having a number of local endemic species, often confined to one or a few rock gorges (such as Avon Gorge in Bristol). However, the whitebeam itself is more widely distributed.

Yew (*Taxus baccata*). This is one of three native coniferous plants in the British flora. It is common on the chalk.

FROM C TO E: This is where you can see an example of chalk grassland (the richest habitat in Britain in numbers of plant species). The types of species seen will depend greatly on the time of year. Watch out for places where dogwood or hawthorn is invading. Chalk grassland will revert to scrub and then woodland if seedlings of trees and shrubs are left to grow unhindered, which is why the managers of chalk grassland must either encourage grazing (typically by sheep or rabbits) or else mow the vegetation.

FROM D TO F then G: Forking left at the end of the grassy stretch, you enter a small woodland patch. The path leads down to a road, which you cross (carefully!), then turn left onto a footpath, proceeding to the bottom of the hill. A good example of hedge-laying can be seen on your right. At the bottom of the hill, the path goes through a small patch of woodland on wet clayey soil developed over Gault Clay. Note the structure of this wood, with large trees over a shrub layer mostly of hazel, showing evidence of past coppicing.

FROM G to H: Turn right at the bottom of the hill and walk along the valley. This valley broadly follows the line of the Gault Clay, which is exposed only in a narrow belt here, mostly just to the right of the track. The large pine trees seen at one point along the track belonging to a European species, black pine (*Pinus nigra*). Note the butterfly bushes (*Buddleia davidii*) invading the abandoned farm near the end of this track.

FROM H to I: Turn left at the road and soon thereafter left again into a wood up a path signposted ‘Public Footpath’. You now walk up to St Martha’s Church at the top of the hill. This is a good time to have a look at ferns. At least three species are growing here, bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) and buckler fern (*Dryopteris dilatata*). Note that there are many fewer species of trees in this woodland (on Lower Greensand soils) than present on the chalk. Enter the churchyard of St Martha’s Church and have a look at the very short vegetation found in open places. Most of the species in this vegetation are quite different from those present on the chalk.

FROM I to J and back to G (then up to E): Go through the churchyard and out of the gate at the other end. Go down the main track (very sandy) until you get to a footpath to the left labelled ‘North Downs Way’. Turn left here and the path will take you down to Point G, from where you make your way back to D and then to E. The trees you see down the slope are typical of acidic sandy soils, including Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), silver birch (*Betula*

pendula), rowan (*Sorbus acuparia*) and whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) - the latter also common on the chalk.

FROM E to A: Go into the small car park and immediately turn right along a path leading into the wood. This path eventually joins a track (the North Downs Way), which runs into the car park at Newlands Corner. An interesting feature near the start of this stretch is a patch of yew trees (*Taxus baccata*) looking ancient and gnarled - no wonder this species has attracted so much folklore. The woodland through which you are walking is not particularly rich in species, probably because it is largely on a geological deposit called Clay with Flints, thinly present on top of the North Downs in many places and making the soils more acidic than would otherwise be the case.

A note on the chalkland habitat

The chalk was once forest covered, but chalk soils were favoured for settlement by early agriculturalists and so much of the forest has long been cleared for farmland and pasture. Chalk grassland is ecologically unstable and will revert to scrub and forest unless actively managed. Chalk downs have traditionally been maintained by the grazing of sheep (from Neolithic times) and rabbits (a species introduced by the Romans). However, myxomatosis, a rabbit disease arriving in the UK in 1953, has decimated the rabbit population, which has still not yet recovered to its former levels. Nowadays, managers of nature reserves sometimes revert to mowing to control invasion by scrub and loss of the rich grassland flora.

One of the main botanical interests of chalkland is chalk grassland, the most species-rich habitat in the British Isles in terms of plants. There are also many types of shrubs and small trees. More level areas of the North Downs are often capped by a thin clay-rich deposit known geologically as Clay-with-Flints. The soils developed on this substratum are rather acidic and the resulting flora is not particularly distinctive.

The chalk is home to two of Britain's native species of conifers, yew and juniper. Yew, which is common on the North Downs, is longer lived than any other tree in the British flora, estimates for the oldest specimens being 3000-5000 years. Juniper, the other conifer, has become rather rare and is not reproducing much from seed, so may die out, a cause of conservation concern.