

# A walk near Godalming to view plants and habitats



## Woodland walk at Hydon's Ball

*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 the car park at Hydon's Ball. Take the Hambleton Road from Godalming and turn left at Hydestile up Salt Lane. Hydon's Ball car park is opposite the junction with Clock Barn Lane to the left. Map reference: SU979402.

**Short and Long Walks:** The short walk (see map) is A, B, C, D, then back to B and A. The long walk includes the circuit D, E, F and back to D. The short walk will take about one hour and the longer about two hours. The longer walk is worth taking to view the impressive yew trees in the churchyard of Hambleton Church.

**FROM A TO B:** Walk up the main track to the side of the car park up to the point where the track levels off. This is an opportunity to see a variety of trees typical of the floras of sandy acidic soils around Godalming. Going through the green barrier on the track, note the three large trees on the right. Two are English (or pedunculate) oak (*Quercus robur*) and the other, with smooth bark, a beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). Small trees to the left of the track near this point include snowberry (*Amelanchier lamarkii*) and rowan (*Sorbus acuparia*), followed soon

after by two medium-sized trees of Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) and a sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*). The Turkey oak has longer and thinner leaves with more jagged margins, compared with the English oak. Keep an eye out for the frequency of English and Turkey oaks on the rest of the walk. On the other side of the track, there is a patch of small, partly dead, English elms (*Ulmus procera*), probably killed by Dutch Elm Disease. Other tree

species visible as you walk up to Point B include Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), silver birch (*Betula pendula*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) and laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*).

Take a look at the smaller plants. There are rather few species of herbs and shrubs present, which is typical of the undergrowth of woods developed on acidic sandy soils in the Godalming area. The small shrub forming dense thickets is shallon (*Gaultheria shallon*), a North American species introduced here by the landscape gardener Gertrude Jekyll. Also visible, including on some track-side banks, is bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), belonging to the same plant family as shallon (Ericaceae). The two common ferns are bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), which has fronds emerging singly from the ground springing from an underground stem, and male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), with fronds arranged in shuttlecock-form growing from a short upright stem.

**FROM B TO C:** The track you are following curves a little to the right at the top of the slope. Just after this and after a large pine standing close to the track, turn right up a path and ascend to the top of the hill. Keep to the right at the fork by the green painted box. You will see a red oak (*Quercus rubra*) from North America on your left as you ascend the hill.

**POINT C:** You are now on top of Hydon's Ball. The stone seat is a memorial to Octavia Hill (1838-1912), one of the founders of the National Trust (1895) and a pioneer of the social housing movement and the concept of modern social work. The view to the south extends over the Lower Weald towards the South Downs. Notice how wooded is this part of the world, partly a consequence of the poor sandy or clayey soils, historically creating problems for agriculture. There is a plantation of Scots pine at the base of the slope, abundant silver birch regenerating in open places and a little ling heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) close to the summit. The short grassland on top of the hill includes a number of low-growing species, such as sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), buckshorn plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) and early hair-grass (*Aira praecox*).

**FROM C TO D:** Take the path opposite that on which you arrived, that is to the right of the green-painted cover (an entrance to a buried water reservoir). The path is marked 'Octavia Hill Trail'. Very soon you will come to a fork in the path (close to another green-painted cover). Take the left-hand branch, proceeding to the bottom of the hill ignoring all side-paths (including one to a memorial on the right).

**FROM D TO E:** Turn right through a sweet chestnut plantation, then into and across two fields until you reach Hambledon Church. The plantation, which is a good example of an actively managed plantation of this type, is at various stages of re-growth from past coppicing. Sweet chestnut was introduced into the British Isles from southern Europe by the Romans.

**POINT E:** Hambledon Churchyard. With the spread of modern agriculture and large parts of our countryside being turned into biological deserts, so churchyards have assumed an ever-growing importance for the preservation of our native plants. Particular features of this churchyard are the two large yew trees (*Taxus baccata*). The age of these trees is not known, but they could be more than 1000 years old and may possibly even predate the establishment

of the church. Yew is our longest living indigenous tree, with a very variable growth rate depending on site conditions. The maximum recorded trunk diameter of any yew in Britain is 4 metres and the oldest examples are believed to be perhaps 4000 years old. People have a long association with yew. A spear shaft of yew found at Clacton-on-Sea is estimated to be 450,000 years old. Yew was the favoured species for longbow making during the Middle Ages, when a shortage of suitable trees became of political concern. The association of yew with churchyards has attracted various explanations –sources of wood for bow-making, places where yew trees could be isolated from browsing animals (because of poison in the leaves), a source of fronds for Palm Sunday and the religious symbolism of the red ‘berries’ (botanically actually seeds surrounded by red arils). A local legend at Hambledon records that the spirit of an old witch resides in one of the trees and if you circle the interior three times she is sure to appear.

**FROM E TO F:** Most of the trees along this track are oaks, either English or Turkey. Some small trees of the wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*) can be seen on the right just before the dip in the track. The wych elm is mainly a westerly species in the British Isles and only occasionally seen in Surrey. Many types of flowers and grasses grow along this track, the types which you will see depending on the season of the year. Spring or early summer flowers include red campion (*Silene dioica*), rosebay willowherb (*Chamerion angustifolium*) and greater stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*). The flat rosette leaves of greater plantain (*Plantago major*) can be seen on the path itself. This is a plant very resistant to trampling and has spread all over the world inadvertently aided by people. It was known to some North American indigenous peoples as white man’s footprint, since it seemed to spring up wherever the white man went.

**FROM F TO D:** Turn left at ‘F’ along a path labelled ‘Public Bridleway’. A number of tree species not mentioned above can be seen here, including hazel (*Corylus avellana*), spindle tree (*Euonymus europaeus*), elder (*Sambucus nigra*), ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and maple (*Acer campestre*). The fern polypody (*Polypodium* sp.) is present on a stretch of bank to the right.

**FROM D TO B, THEN BACK TO A:** Turn right onto the main track and walk around Hydon’s Ball hill and so down back to the car park. Soon after D, notice another type of fern on the right, opposite the sweet chestnut coppice. This is buckler-fern (*Dryopteris dilatata*), similar to male fern in having a shuttlecock form, but with more crinkly leaves.

## A note on the woodland habitat

This is a special habitat for Godalming because Godalming lies in the most wooded county (Surrey) and most wooded borough (Waverley) in the UK, as well as at the heart of the wider western end of the Surrey Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which is about 40 percent wooded. Woodland occurs on all soils types, with birch and pine being more characteristic of sandy soils, alder and willow of wet sites, and yew and beech sometimes being conspicuous on the chalk. Plantations of conifers, all of species not native to the Godalming area, are common around Godalming, sometimes as blocks within broadleaved

woodland or as plantations on former heathland sites. These conifer plantations were probably originally planted mainly with timber production in mind.

Many of the woodlands around Godalming belong to one of two structural types, related to present or (more usually) past management practices. These are coppice-with-standards and block coppice. Coppice-with-standards consists of large well-spaced trees (known as standards – typically oak) spread over an understory of smaller trees (typically hazel). Block coppice around Godalming typically consists of plantations of sweet chestnut with few other types of trees. These structural types of woodland reflect traditional management systems, involving rotational cutting of hazel at 6-8 year intervals and sweet chestnut every 15-20 years. The standard trees present in coppice-with-standards have traditionally been managed on much longer cycles.

Woodland culture was once alive and well around Godalming. Local wood was used in house construction, wood (or its derivative charcoal) was the only fuel available until the arrival of coal, and a wide range of products used locally were constructed from wood, including furniture and fencing. However, during the last 50-100 years much of this culture has gone and probably around 70 per cent of the woodlands are no longer actively managed. This is unfortunate from the points of view of the national economy, local employment and using local wood fuel to replace fossil fuel to help impede climate change. Factors contributing to the decline of woodland management include the enclosure of woodlands by landowners (often more interested in shooting pheasants than in timber and wood fuel) and the cheapness and ease of use of fossil fuel.