



Chocolate box country

Discover the secret ingredients to the
Cotswolds' charm

Time: 120 mins

Distance: 3 ½ miles

Landscape: rural

A backdrop of honey-coloured buildings and dry stone walls wrapped up in swathes of lush green hillsides and delectable country pubs – the Cotswolds are a quintessentially English landscape.

Starting in Bibury, which William Morris gushingly described as “surely the most beautiful village in England”, this trail follows rolling hills, pastures and ancient route-ways to discover the ingredients that make the perfect recipe for Cotswold chocolate box charm.

Location:

Bibury, Gloucestershire

Start:

St Mary's Church, Church Road, Bibury GL7 5NR

Finish:

Arlington Row, GL7 5NP

Grid reference:

SP 11780 06544

Practical information: Park for free along the main road next to the river or outside the church on Church Road. There are public toilets on the B4425, next to the Post Office. Food and drinks available in various cafe's and pubs in both Bibury and Arlington at the start and finish of the trail.

Directions



Follow Church Road uphill with the Church on your right. At the top of the road turn right along the pavement for 80 metres then fork right on a lane signed to Coln St. Aldwyns for 40 metres. Here turn right downhill on a private road alongside the Bibury Court Hotel until you reach the bridge over the river Coln.



Route and stopping points



- 01 The millstones, Bibury
- 02 Ash Copse
- 03 Roman road
- 04 Dry stone walls
- 05 Arlington Row

01 The millstones, Bibury

Standing above the babbling brook of the River Coln, soak up the sounds of the river and the rustle of the trees that line its course. It is with this river that we begin our story of Cotswold life.

Many Cotswold towns and villages have grown up at bridging points across rivers, at spring heads or in the valleys around shallow wells. Starting 14 miles north just outside Cheltenham, this river travels all the way through Gloucestershire to join the River Thames further south in Lechlade.

We are standing on one of the crossing points, enabling early settlers to start building the settlement of Bibury. The village was recorded as Becheberie in the Domesday Book of 1086, so we know it's been here for close to 1,000 years in one form or another.

The river provided water, not only for drinking, cooking and cleaning, but also as a vital source of power.

Looking ahead over the bridge, you will see two large circular stones nestled below a rambling old building. These are millstones and are likely to have originally been used for milling corn. Perched above the river here you can hear its flow, hinting to the power it would have provided the mill for grinding the grain between these hefty stones.

In turn, the villagers would have benefited from both daily sustenance and a tradeable product.

So not only do the Cotswolds' rivers and valleys shape the lie of the land, but also affect where its settlements have built up, shaping the lives of its people and culture.

Directions

Bear right uphill past the old mill stones following the tarmac road past a big house on your left. After a wide gate take the track ahead, soon climbing into Oxhill Wood. At the top bear left for about 600 metres (muddy at times) and drop down to a gate and stone stile into a meadow. Now head uphill to go through a gate into Ash Copse.

02 Ash Copse

Catch your breath from the gentle climb and from beneath the branches of this woody haven you can start to appreciate the beautiful landscapes that have made the Cotswolds an Area of Outstanding Beauty (AONB). This means it is deemed an outstanding landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so precious that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them.

Think about the route you have walked so far – bright green pastures, babbling brooks, and now a quaint wood on top of a rolling hillside.

This helps explain how it got its name – "Cotswolds" comes from the word "cots" meaning stone sheep shelters and "wold" meaning rolling hills.

Although you may think of this as all one 'Cotswolds' landscape, the region actually has 19 distinct 'landscape character types'!

You have passed through one of these already. The village of Bibury is within what is called the High Wold – a gently rolling series of hills dissected by dry valleys.

It is here that we can see a further landscape type, and mix in another ingredient to our recipe for the Cotswolds – woodlands. They account for over 9% of the region and therefore form a striking feature on the landscape.

Although people's use of land across the Cotswolds' has changed over time, a lot of the semi-natural or man-made habitats these changes have created, like this tranquil copse, are now integral to supporting an exceptional diversity of animal and plant life.

As you leave, look at the hedgerows that surround your pathway.

These too provide invaluable safe-havens for biodiversity - insects, birds, bats, reptiles and amphibians use them as their homes and refuges. Farming practices across Britain over recent decades often meant swathes of hedgerows were removed to make way for larger fields and machinery in a process called extensive farming.

Although these practices are now changing, these leafy additions to the landscape still act as essential 'wildlife corridors', allowing species to move between habitats - a wildlife superhighway through the countryside!

Directions

Leaving the wood turn right onto a track between the high hedges. Stop after a few hundred metres where there's a gap in the fields on the left.

03 The Roman road

You may be wondering why we are stopped at a muddy track crossing through a field? What can there possibly be to see here?

For more than 6,000 years this grassy landscape has been occupied and shaped by people, and this track is no exception.

The Romans carved out a road right across the path you are now standing on - Akeman Street. It links London to Cirencester, connecting the Fosse Way and Ermin Way - two of the major Roman roads criss-crossing the ancient British landscape.

It might not look like much now, but in 100AD this muddy track would have been alive with horses, carts and traders moving between the major Roman cities of the time. It is estimated that the Romans constructed about 2,000 miles of paved roads throughout the country during their occupation between 43 and 410 AD, of which Akeman Street is a part.

You are standing on a piece of ancient history!

You will probably also have noticed sheep grazing on your walk so far.

For over 500 years, the Cotswolds have profited from the wool trade that developed in this region. The Middle Ages (the 10 centuries after the Roman's departed) saw the industry boom.

These roads, laid down centuries before, really came into their own paving the way for national and international trade, enabling the region to prosper. It is now one of the wealthiest regions in the UK, a desirable destination for wealthy city goers wishing to escape the bustle of urban life for rolling hills and countryside-chic.

Bringing their pocket money with them, they help to maintain the prosperity originally founded on the backs of sheep and their woolly coats.

Directions

Continue on the main track between hedges you have been following. At the road turn right past Coneygar Cottages. After 200 metres, turn right again on a footpath gently downhill.

After a gate at 200 metres walk across to your left to a mound that hides a small pond (it may be dry). Many years ago it was scooped out to provide water for the sheep grazing on the high pasture.

Follow the track straight ahead gently down and up for about 2km. Stop anywhere on this path where you notice the stone wall peeping out of the hedgerow to your left.

04 Dry stone wall

A quintessential ingredient of the Cotswolds' landscape must surely be the seemingly endless honey-coloured dry-stone walls.

Although not unique to this region alone, there are over 3,700 miles of them in the Cotswolds. That equals the length of the Great Wall of China!

Used throughout Britain for centuries, these walls give us a secret snapshot into the local history of each region if you know what to look for...

We have already discovered the importance of sheep in the Cotswolds. Most of the walls we can see today, probably including the section you are looking at now, date from the 18th or 19th centuries. At this time large areas of open countryside were divided up and enclosed for livestock. This made dry-stone walls very important for keeping sheep both in and out of each other's plots!

We have also walked through undulating hills and valleys. The rocks that lie beneath our feet and shape this beautiful terrain are part of the story of the walls we can see above ground.

These rocks are Jurassic limestone and were formed around 210 to 140 million years ago. More than a hundred million years later these rocks shifted as continents moved.

This in turn caused the Cotswolds rocks to tilt upwards and shape the rolling hills around us.

The abundance of local limestone made it easy to quarry. It became the building material of choice for setting out the boundaries between fields and pens.

Finally, the walls themselves often contain unusual features - holes for livestock to pass through (aptly called sheep creeps), stone steps, water troughs, archways and even shelters where beehives were kept!

Today, preserving the walls also supports animal and plant life. The uncultivated strips just next to the walls help them blend into their surroundings and provide invaluable habitats for thousands of insects and small mammals. Wait quietly and you may even be lucky enough to see birds such as tits or wrens or even tiny field mice making their way into nests within the wall cavities.

Directions

Follow the stone wall until it ends.

Turn right on a grassy path and head for the gate ahead that leads between houses to a tiny triangular green (signposted from the grassy path as a national footpath with a yellow arrow on the gatepost).

Take the right fork downhill to reach Arlington Row - a row of terraced housing overlooking a meadow.

05 Arlington Row

Emerging from the leafy undergrowth of the countryside we are now drawn towards the warm glow of Arlington Row - reputedly the most photographed houses in the Cotswolds.

The same stone you saw lining the fields at the last stop is transformed here into the walls of these 14th century cottages. The cosy honey colours and haphazard roofs create the perfect image of Cotswold living. It is not hard to see why in 1890 William Morris called it "the most beautiful village in England"!

It is worth remembering that it's the limestone rock that seamlessly knits the landscape together. Forming the hillsides, valleys and buildings it creates a strong sense of visual unity throughout the region.

Its colour varies subtly from silvery and creamy white, through shades of grey, to a golden ochre, depending on

the stone's iron oxide content.

Arlington Row was originally built in 1380 as a monastic wool store, then converted into weavers' cottages in the 17th century as the wool trade continued to boom.

From such a functional beginning, it is funny to think that they are now seen as a quintessential symbol of leisurely pastoral life rather than one of toil and industry.

If you can get a photograph of the row without a horde of tourists strolling into shot you will be doing a good job! Since appearing on the pages of the British passport, this row of modest houses has come to epitomise the Cotswolds and indeed England.

They now draw in visitors from across the globe.

So although it was once sheep and wool that brought wealth to this region, its rolling hills, honey-coloured streets and protected habitats create the perfect recipe for a landscape now revered by tourists and locals alike.

Directions

To return to your start point, walk along the front of Arlington Row until you reach the B2245.

From here turn right and follow the road along the river bank to reach St Mary's Church, Church Road

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**