

Spring Fashions – Dressing Bisley's Wells

From beautiful Bisley, this ramble follows undulating field paths taking in small villages and hamlets along the way.

DISTANCE 5.5 miles (8.8km) **MINIMUM TIME** 2hrs 30min

ASCENT/GRADIENT 150ft (46m) ▲▲▲ **LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY** + + +

PATHS Tracks, fields, lanes, 19 stiles

LANDSCAPE Secluded valleys, villages, open wold

SUGGESTED MAP OS Explorer 168 Stroud, Tetbury & Malmesbury

START / FINISH Grid reference: SO 903060

DOG FRIENDLINESS Quite good – little livestock

PARKING In Bisley village near The Bear Inn

PUBLIC TOILETS None en route

There are many beautiful villages in the Cotswolds and this walk takes you to one of the loveliest. Bisley is well known in the area for its well-dressing ceremony which takes place on Ascension Day – a Thursday 40 days after Easter. This tradition, usually associated with the Peak District where wells have been dressed for centuries, was originally a pagan ceremony. But in the 14th century it became a thanksgiving for wells that remained uncontaminated during the Black Death. In Bisley village the tradition dates from the restoration of the wells in Wells Street in 1863 by the Revd Thomas Keble – the vicar of Bisley at the time and the younger brother of John Keble (1792–1866) the poet, theologian and founder of Keble College in Oxford.

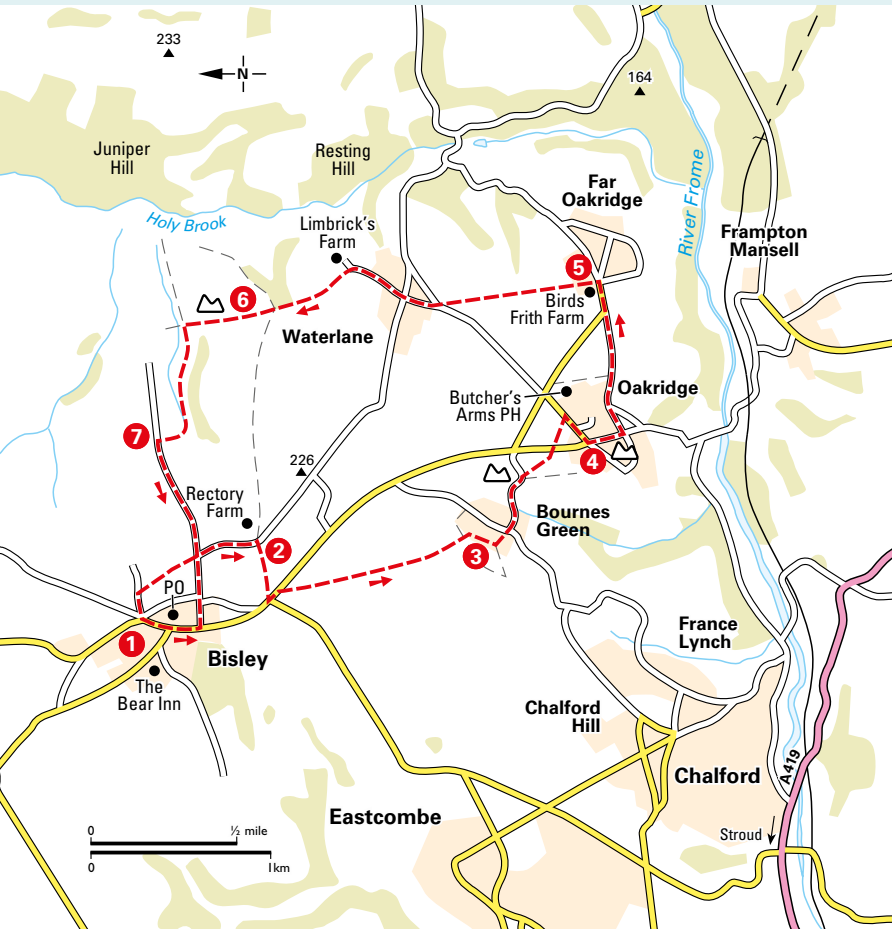
Keeping Traditions Alive

The problem of keeping such traditions alive are twofold – fostering local enthusiasm and, in this case, obtaining the necessary funds for the children's refreshments and for paying the brass band. Moss and flowers are collected to cover the frames and hoops carried by 22 children from the local Bluecoat school in the procession to the wells. In the past all of this was done in great secrecy, in the spirit of competition, while these days most of the decorative work is done in school. Another problem is finding enough flowers at this time of year and keeping them fresh enough to use in the ceremony.

On Ascension Day itself, a service is held in the parish church, then the children's procession forms; the oldest children have the privilege of carrying the largest floral stars at the front. The procession, preceded by the band and the vicar, marches through the village down to the wells where the vicar performs a short blessing. The flowers are arranged by the children to spell 'Ascension' and 'AD' and the current year, while garlands, floral hoops, and Stars of David are laid about the wells. A hymn is sung and the children sit down to a tea. Finally, in the late afternoon, there are village sports, such as egg and spoon and sack races.

Remarkable Village

Bisley is remarkable in a number of ways. In the churchyard is a 13th-century Poor Soul's Light, the only outdoor example in the country. It was used to light Mass candles on behalf of those who were too poor to buy their own. And then there is the Bisley Boy. Legend says that the real Queen Elizabeth I is buried in Bisley churchyard. During a visit here as a girl, apparently, she fell ill and died. A local boy who closely resembled her took her place and went on to become Queen...

**WALK 33 DIRECTIONS**

1 From your parking spot in Bisley village walk down to the main street, opposite the post office. Turn right and take the first turn left up a street to a junction. Go straight on, signposted 'Waterlane', and then follow this as it goes sharply to the right.

2 After 400yds (366m), opposite Rectory Farm, turn right through a gate and walk through a gate and two fields to a road. Through a gate, cross to a stile to the left of a stone stable and then a paddock to another stile. Go half right across two fields via two stiles and then half right to a gap in the hedge and along the field margin to a hedge

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Cirencester is a town of great interest. Cirencester Park, partly designed by the poet Alexander Pope for the first Lord Bathurst, is a frequent venue for polo tournaments. The Corinium Museum is excellent and on the main square is the largest parish church in England.

gap in the corner. Turn half left across the field to a stile in the corner and head for the stile at the tree edge. Descend a path through the trees to a small field. Go half right to cross a track and a stile. Cross to a path beside houses and descend left into Bournes Green via a stile, turning left soon after.

3 Turn right to reach a junction and turn left. At the next junction, descend straight across to a lane via a grassy bank, passing a seat. Follow this lane steeply down across a stream and uphill to a hairpin bend opposite a cottage with a conservatory. Turn right over a stile and go immediately left through a bank of trees to a double stile. Continue half right across the field to a stile on to a road. Cross the road to enter another field via a stile. Across the field, go over a stile and turn right on to a road.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

In Oakridge the Butcher's Arms is on the walk while there are two pubs in Bisley, both of which are good, comfortable locals. The Bear Inn on George Street has its origins as a building in the 16th century and has been a pub since 1766. It serves traditional British food and dogs and children are welcome. The Stirrup Cup also serves food along with Hook Norton and Wadworth's ales.

4 Take the second lane on the left which descends steeply (signposted 'Frampton Marshall') and turn left beyond the stone water pump and war memorial, signed 'Oakridge'. Follow this lane as it bears right at 'Whitespring' house and up and out of the village.

5 After about 0.5 mile (800m), at a crossroads at Fair Oakridge, turn left on to a track to the right of Birds Frith Farm. At the end continue down to a junction at Waterlane. Take the leftmost of the two lanes here and drop to a crossroads. Go straight on (signed 'No Through Road'). At a farm bear left on to a track and follow this to a gate, past a spinney.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In Bisley look for the impressive semi-circular building which houses the famous well.

6 Through this go straight on uphill to the crest of the field and on to a stile in woodland. Follow a steep footpath down to a stile. Descend a field, turning left before you reach the bottom. Walk through fields alongside a stream and ponds, crossing two stiles, and then bear right well before a gate. At a guide post. Cross the stream (no bridge) and walk uphill along the edge of a wood to a stile at the crest.

7 Turn left and walk all the way to a junction. Turn right along a track and enter a field via a kissing gate. Go half left to the other side through a kissing gate and then left along a footpath to a road. Cross the road (watch out for traffic here as it can be busy) and descend some steps to central Bisley, and the start.