

If you started your walk in Pirton in the 19th century, you would have noticed that many of the women sitting at their cottage doors or walking around the village were plaiting straw for the Luton hat trade.

The Straw Plaiters Walk

Less visible were the children, some as young as three, who attended the village plait schools. Here they would spend long, uncomfortable hours plaiting and no doubt rather less time learning to read and write.

This cottage industry was an important part of village life from the 17th century until the 20th century and provided extra income for poor families. Straw dealers purchased wheat stacks from the farmers and sold the stripped and bleached straw to the plaiters, who took the finished plaits to Hitchin Market.

The chalk-sprinkled fields you see as you climb up Wood Lane, may help explain why straw plaiting developed here. The thin Chilterns soil provided ideal conditions for growing the soft pliable wheat needed for straw hats.

While women plaited, many of the men and older boys worked as agricultural labourers, growing wheat, barley, hay crops and turnips. By the early 19th century large open fields, made up of blocks of strips, had been 'enclosed', creating smaller, regular fields, bounded by hawthorn hedges. Farming methods have certainly changed, and some hedges have been grubbed out, but the pattern of fields remains much the same today.

These days there are very few men in the village who make a living from farming, and there are no straw plaiters left. Pirton has seen many changes, but it is still a working village, as well as somewhere to enjoy for its quiet beauty. And in its cottages and lanes, hedges and fields, it is rich with reminders of the past.

This is one of a series of walks through the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It follows rights of way most of which are waymarked as follows:



Footpath (walkers only)



Bridleway (horse riders, cyclists and walkers)



Byway (open to all traffic)



Please be considerate in the countryside - keep to footpaths, especially through crops, and leave farm gates as you find them.

The Motte and Bailey pub has a childrens play area and gardens. Home-cooked food is served all day, seven days a week. Call 01462 712641 to place an order before you walk.



The Countryside Management Service works with communities in Hertfordshire and north London to care for and enjoy the countryside. For more information contact us at:

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Supported by the Chilterns Conference and Pirton Parish Council

Chilterns Country

Pub Walk: The Straw Plaiters Walk, Pirton



Walk Description:
6 km walk (about 3 1/2 m) across open, rolling farmland. No stiles

Start and Finish:
The Motte and Bailey Pub, Pirton

Walking time:
Average 1 1/2 to 2 hours

How to get to Pirton

The nearest train station is Hitchin, from where the 89 bus runs every day except Sundays, stopping outside the Motte and Bailey pub. For details call the Hertfordshire Traveline on 0845 724 4344. Pirton can be reached by bike along the Hambridge Way cycle path. If you need to come by car, please park in the Motte and Bailey car park.

Notes on the walk



The Motte and Bailey pub. Turn left and cross the green, passing the village sign which depicts hands plaiting straw. Behind it once stood a small thatched cottage, which housed one of the plaiting schools.



The Icknield Way Path covers 120 miles of chalk ridge, closely following the historical route of the Icknield Way.



Before veering left here, go ahead for about 100 metres for a good view of Knocking Knoll, the Iron Age Long Barrow, and the Bedfordshire plains.



Pause here to admire the views of Letchworth and Hitchin, and beyond to the hills around Weston.



Fast traffic - take care crossing.



Highdown House, which you pass on your right, was built in the early 17th century and was a cavalier stronghold during the civil war.



Coming back into Pirton, cross the Bury to Toot Hill, the grassy mound where a twelfth century Motte and Bailey castle once stood.

