



The Hundred Parishes

Circular Walks – number 185

Debden and Widdington – 5.4 miles (8 kms)

This hilly and varied walk, mainly in the parish of Debden plus some of rural Widdington, is mostly on footpaths with some quiet lanes. Some paths may be muddy. We cross over two stiles. There are no seats along the way except at the start/finish and Debden Church. The route does not pass anywhere to eat or drink; the nearest facilities are The Plough, nearby at CB11 3LE, which in 2025 opened for lunch only on Sundays and Elder Street Café at Debden Barns, CB11 3JY, about a mile northeast of the finish and which opened 7 days a week in 2025. You are advised to pre-book if you want certainty: Plough 01799 541899, Elder Street Café 01799 543598. If you hope to stop for refreshment or to visit the church, please be prepared to either remove muddy boots or wear boot covers or plastic bags.

Start and finish: The route starts and finishes at the car park for Debden's village store and recreation ground. (Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: TL555334 - Postcode: CB11 3LB, which covers a large area – what3words: shade.nowadays.highbrow). The route can be followed on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 195. A diagram of the route is provided at the end of this description.

Before leaving the car park, please note that this serves the village store (closed in 2025) and post office (limited hours), the village hall and the recreation ground. The store was opened in 1982 as a community venture, staffed by volunteers. The front of the building displays an award for Best Kept village in Essex in 2013. The village hall was built in 1922 on land donated by Lady Strathcona of Debden Hall. There are plans to replace the village hall with a new one.

We leave the car park on the path which runs to the left of the notice board, joining the pavement to pass the village pond on our left. We are now on the High Street.

On the right is Debden Church of England Primary Academy. The school's exterior has hardly changed since it was built in 1852, although a large clock was added to the right gable in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. The school's construction was funded entirely by the rector, Henry Hodgson. His initials are displayed high up on the left gable.

With care, we cross the road to the school and turn left for just a few yards to the end of the school where we will turn right, but before doing so we should pause . . .

The former Yuva restaurant stands on the opposite side of the High Street – it closed in 2025. For many years this 17th-century timber-framed and plastered building operated as the White Hart Inn. The inn survived the accidental "Great Fire of Debden" in 1907 when 12 nearby houses burnt to the ground.

Just beyond the former pub, the Debden village sign stands beside a 19th-century village pump. Just beyond the sign, the thatched house dates from the 18th century and was once the Old Ship Inn.

Now, immediately after the school, we turn right onto a public footpath. The path soon becomes narrow and for a short distance it can be muddy as it passes beside the school grounds on the right.

At the end of the narrow section, the path emerges into a field. We go straight ahead along a field-edge path, descending gently with hedgerow on the left. Over to the right, beyond the houses, we can see Debden parish church down in the valley. We will pass it later on this walk.

The hedge on the left ends as we reach the corner of a wood; we go straight ahead, keeping the wood on our right.

When the wood ends, we continue ahead, now with hedgerow on the left. On a clear day, we may be able to see the microwave tower about 2 miles ahead on the horizon. This is still within the parish of Debden. It was erected as part of an international communications network during the Cold War with the USSR in the second half of the 20th century.

At the bottom of the hill, we walk alongside a pipe on our right and then continue beside a very tall leylandii hedge on the right – this marks the perimeter of the local sewage works.

At the end of the hedge, we turn sharp right along a narrow path with a wire fence on the right and a deep ditch on the left. Beware of low-hanging tree branches!

At the end of the narrow path we reach the entrance to the sewage works. Here we turn left over the stream and immediately go right onto a lane, descending for a short distance. This is Rook End Lane which we will use for the next half mile.

We pass the buildings of Rook End Farm on the left and then cottages on the right including Rook End Farmhouse which dates from the 17th century. A little further along, a footpath comes in from the right.

On the right, we pass 17th-century Rook End Cottage - timber-framed and plaster construction with thatched roof.

A little further along, the tarmac surface ends as we come into the tiny Debden hamlet of Rook End. We turn right onto a byway, passing number 20 on the left, 18th-century with thatched roof.

The byway is clearly defined and soon starts to climb.

Further on, a rotating radar scanner comes into view, over to the right. This installation is 1.5 miles away, on what was once Debden airfield, now Carver Barracks. The radar station now primarily serves Stansted Airport.

When we reach what appears to be the top of the hill, our track turns sharply left and then right. The track continues to climb, but more gently, with woodland on the right. The wood is called Cabbage Wood.

Shortly before the end of the wood, a public footpath emerges from the right to join our track. Immediately on the right we pass what at one time was a small tea room. Stonework above the door gives the date as 1905.

Our track, now quite wide, continues on level high ground, here marking the boundary between Debden parish to the right and Widdington to the left. We will switch between parishes several times over the next couple of miles. Over to the left, it may be possible to see the electricity pylons as they converge on Pelham substation about 5 miles away on the Essex / Hertfordshire border.

As we approach farm buildings, the woodland to our right is called Pig's Parlour.

We pass close to the buildings on our right, part of Waldegraves Farm, a popular stables and livery yard. Just here, we leave the parish of Debden and will be entirely in Widdington for a short distance.

We pass house number 40 on the right just before reaching a lane. Here we need to turn left but for only a hundred yards. When safe, we cross the lane and turn left, facing any traffic.

In about 100 yards, we leave the lane and turn right onto another byway. We follow this byway for about a quarter of a mile.

Ahead and to our left, we are likely to see traffic moving along the M11 motorway.

After about a quarter of a mile, our route bears left, then right and, just as it bears left again, we should leave the byway and fork right onto a footpath. In 2025 there was no visible footpath sign, but the start of the path is marked by short concrete bollards to discourage motor traffic.

For the first few yards, this path can be somewhat muddy where water has leached from a heap of soil and stable muck. The footpath heads north in a straight line towards farm buildings. For the next half mile or so, our route follows the parish boundary between Widdington on the right and Newport on the left.

About 150 yards after leaving the byway, we pass a triangulation pillar. It stands 105 metres above sea level, one of many installed at high points by Ordnance Survey in the years before they adopted satellite navigation and GPS to plot maps. The surveyor's instrument would have been positioned in the grooves at the top of the pillar to measure angles and distances to other triangulation pillars.

To the left, the land drops down into the Cam valley and the village of Newport.

We continue ahead to Ringers Farm, passing metal barns on the left before turning right to meet a lane. When safe, we should cross the road and turn left, descending.

We pass Ringers Farmyard on the right and follow the lane round to the left, passing another entrance to Ringers Farmyard and ignoring a track on the right.

Soon, beside a telegraph pole, we fork right onto a public footpath that runs beside the lane for about 30 yards before turning sharp right onto a footpath. The path has hedgerow on each side and descends steeply. It is sometimes slippery so take care – short steps, knees bend!

Sometimes, one short stretch can be especially boggy – it may be possible to avoid this by scrambling up the bank on the left into the field for 10 yards before scrambling down again.

Almost at the bottom of the descent, the woodland on each side ends. The path goes straight ahead across a field but we do not go that way. We turn right immediately after entering the field, now entirely in Widdington parish for a while.

A long valley stretches ahead of us and we will follow this for about a mile, heading East, keeping to the right of the field, initially with woodland on our right.

After about a hundred yards, we pass a World War II pillbox on the right, presumably installed to enhance the natural defensive barrier provided by Debden Water, the stream that flows along the bottom of the valley to our left.

We continue along the right of the field, often with fence or woodland on the right.

After about 300 yards, at the end of the field, we follow the field edge round to the left, downhill for about 20 yards before turning right through a gap in the fence. We continue along the footpath with the hedgerow a few yards away to our right.

We keep straight ahead, ignoring the occasional path that veers left towards the valley bottom. This field gradually gets narrower and narrower.

Towards the end of the long field, our path bears left and then right, crossing over Debden Water and thereby leaving Widdington and returning to Debden parish for the rest of this walk. We continue in an easterly direction, soon with hedgerow on our left.

At the end of this field we pass through a gate and continue ahead, keeping to the left of the field, close to the hedgerow or fencing. On our right, on the other side of Debden Water, we pass another World War II pillbox.

At the end of this field we pass through a five-bar gate and turn sharp right, keeping fencing on our right.

Just before we reach a house on the right, we cross over a rather rickety stile. We pass the house on the right and join their driveway. At the end of the drive, we climb over a second stile and continue ahead.

In just a few yards, before we reach a road, we turn sharp left up a drive, ascending past a 15mph speed limit sign.

When the drive forks, we go right, heading towards Brick House Farm and Drovers Barn, etc. After this short, sharp climb, we might pause for breath and look back over the Debden Water valley.

Now we continue towards Brick House Farm but, shortly before reaching a gateway, we turn right, passing a pond immediately on our left. After the pond, we bear round to the left along a short tree-lined path.

The path comes into a field where it bears right, continuing to climb. On the left there is an unusual building, either a house or office.

The climb continues, heading towards the rotating radar station near Carver Barracks.

At the top of the climb, we reach woodland on the left. Here, our path turns right – but if you would like a short diversion there is an unusual feature within Howe Woods to our left, described in the next paragraph.

A clear bridleway leads northwards into the wood and after about 400 yards there is an unusual milestone beside the path on the left. Although some distance from a road, the milestone appears (marked “MS”) on the Ordnance Survey map. In 2025, it was not possible to read the inscription. It is assumed that it was installed privately. It has the same design as one beside Debden crossroads, a picture of which appears on www.hundredparishes.org.uk within the Milestones article. Retrace southwards along the bridleway through the wood to rejoin the route . . .

Our route turns right, away from Howe Wood and heading downhill on a field-edge path.

We pass two small farm buildings, Howe Barn, on the right and then pass through a gate to reach a road.

When safe, we cross the road and go straight ahead – past Newport Lodge on the left – onto a public footpath.

Our path descends gently through woodland and then passes through a pedestrian gate to cross over a stream.

After the stream, we again climb, passing between mature trees along what would once have been a driveway on the Debden estate.

At the top of the climb, we meet a beech hedge on the left. Behind it is Debden Hall Farm. The main building dates mostly from the 20th century but it is surrounded by 18th-century single-storey outbuildings and a 17th or 18th-century barn.

We might pause, just beyond the beech hedge, to consider a little history in the next three paragraphs . . .

The Debden estate once encompassed around 5,000 acres, about 8 square miles; much of today’s walk has been on the former estate and we are now near the centre. The estate was purchased in 1715 by a wealthy London merchant, Richard Chiswell, who later served as a director of the Bank of England. The Chiswell family owned the estate for several generations, building the most recent Debden Hall in 1791. It was a handsome mansion in Grecian style with pillars, surrounded by landscaped parkland. It stood behind where we are standing, some distance beyond the woodland and overlooking a lake.

Debden Hall was sold in 1882 to William Fuller-Maitland of Stansted Mountfitchet, and then sold again before the First World War to a wealthy Canadian, the unusually-titled Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal. He served as Canadian High Commissioner to the UK until his death in 1914. His daughter succeeded to the title – and it was she, Lady Strathcona, who donated the land on which Debden’s village hall was built in 1922.

Following the First World War, Debden Hall became too expensive to run – it had 18 principal bedrooms and 8 servants’ bedrooms. It was purchased by Captain Montagu of Shortgrove in Newport and, like so many grand houses, it was demolished in the 1930s and the estate broken up.

Debden Hall is shown in this 1833 drawing . . .



Now, let's continue . . .

Our track descends, later passing a substantial, now abandoned, 18th-century red-brick building on the left. This was once the stable block for Debden Hall.

Immediately after the stable block, our route goes left – but first, let's keep straight ahead for just a few yards. This brings us to a view of the magnificent lake which was once viewed from Debden Hall. The Hall stood further along the lake, out of sight from here. Today, we might be lucky and see a heron standing beside the water.

Now, let's retrace a few yards and turn right along the footpath, passing the former stable block on our left.

As the path climbs, we pass a large puddingstone on the left – a conglomerate of pebbles formed 50 million years ago and deposited nearby by a retreating glacier, perhaps in the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago.

After a while, we leave the footpath which is signposted to the left, skirting round Debden churchyard. We bear right, through the metal gateway, into the churchyard and continue gently upwards to the church. The building dates from the 13th century but was largely rebuilt after a central tower collapsed in 1698. It was updated and extended by the Chiswell family in the late 18th century, which is probably when the castellated parapet all around the roof was added. A tower added in 1786 was itself taken down and replaced in 1930 by the one we see today.

The grass path, in places augmented with stone slabs, passes to the right of the church. If the church is open, you are encouraged to visit – but first please remove or cover muddy boots.

Inside, there are several monuments to the Chiswell family who owned the Debden estate for almost 200 years. Because the estate sometimes passed down the female line, the descendants' surnames included Muilman, Vincent and Trevilian and we may see some of these names on memorials within the church. The family often bore the bulk of the expenditure required from time to time to maintain the fabric of the church.

The church has a very large 14th-century parish chest which is in fine condition. It is made of oak and iron.

On leaving the church, we turn left from the porch, continuing gently uphill through the churchyard. To our right, beyond the churchyard wall, is the high wall of a former walled garden.

On the left, we pass the octagonal chapel which was added by the Chiswell family.

We leave the churchyard through the gateway and continue straight ahead up a lane, the final ascent of this walk.

On the right, there are signs to Debden Hall Gardens: East, West and South. These direct visitors to the houses that now sit within the 4-acre, former walled garden of Debden Hall.

On the left we pass Park House which has a good view over the countryside to our right.

Further on, we pass Old Cottage on the right, built around 1800 AD to serve two estate workers' families.

Then (surprise, surprise) we go past New Cottage and some even newer dwellings.

On the left, we pass thatched Treelands.

School Cottages on the right may have been built around the same time as the adjacent primary school.

Eventually, we reach the top of the climb, emerging onto Debden's High Street opposite the pond and with the school on our right.

When safe, we cross the road and turn left along the pavement, passing the pond and turning right into the car park where we started this walk.

You can read more about the parish of Debden on www.hundredparishes.org.uk. There, you will also find many more walk routes.

This route description, last updated 25 March 2025, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk. Please email any suggestions for improving the route or the route description to hundredparishes@btinternet.com.

A diagram of this route, based on the Ordnance Survey map, is shown below. It is published under © Crown copyright 2020 OS 100062498.

