



Compton, Surrey: The Withies Inn (pub walk)

Distance 4½ km=2¾ miles (including 5 small excursions) easy walking

Region: Surrey

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Map: 145 (Guildford) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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Village, woodland, art gallery, historic places, surprises

In Brief

This walk is like a five-point treasure hunt but *The Withies Inn* should count as an extra treasure: a 16th-century pub/restaurant off the beaten track in the picturesque village of Compton. In good weather, you can sit at a table at the front, or in the privacy of a pergola in the long bowers, with the sound of chickens and rustle of wind in the trees. *The Withies* has turned out a high-class menu including halibut which is unpriced like a Mayfair objet d'art. There are bar snacks too, but remember this is southwest Surrey. Drinkers should note this is a fine watering hole but it is *not* a mecca for real ales, welcome though Adnams and Greene King may be. *The Withies Inn* is open every day. By the way, a "withy" is a willow, in case you were wondering; hence the pub sign.



There are no nettles on the walk and no rough ground so any sensible footwear and clothing are fine. Dogs are welcome but not in the Gallery or churches of course.



The walk begins outside the *Withies Inn* in Compton, near Guildford, postcode GU3 1JA. Park on the roadside. Another possible starting point is the Watts Gallery (or its overflow) car park, **postcode GU3 1DQ**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1 With your back to the pub, turn **right** along the lane. At a road junction, turn sharp **left** and in 10m turn **right** at a signpost on a footpath. Where the wire fence on your right ends, your path enters a woodland of tall oak trees. Immediately fork **right** here between two oak trees into Bummoor Copse. You are on a narrow but very clear path through this beautiful wood. Keep to the main winding path avoiding all minor turnings off. As you go over a bank, the path widens and bends first left, then right. Eventually you have a green meadow on your left, with the official footpath running beside it. At the end of the wood, you reach a T-junction with a footpath beside wire fence and grazing for horses. Turn **right** on this path.
- 2 Just before a corner, ignore a footpath on the right, go through a small wooden gate and turn **left** on a concrete path towards the farm. Just before some farm sheds, turn **right** as indicated and veer **left** through a small wooden gate. This narrow fenced path eventually takes you out, next to a cottage, to a road. For the Watts Gallery, turn **right** on the road for 50m

George Frederic Watts was a Victorian painter, famous now for his allegorical works (such as "Hope" and "Fata Morgana") but also hugely successful in his time for his luminous portraits of the rich and famous and their families. He moved to Compton later in his life and built the gallery to house his paintings and sculpture. The Gallery was refurbished thanks to the Lottery Fund and the BBC "Restoration" programme. It is open 11am - 5pm (from 1pm on Sunday and Bank Holidays), closed Monday (except Bank Holidays). The site also houses a photo studio, an "artist in residence", a shop and a café.

- 3 Return to the point where the footpath met the road. Here there is a short excursion. Turn **right** on a tarmac drive, signposted as the North Downs Way and ignore a private right turn for *The Great Studio*. Take the second, turning **right**, a track leading through a metal gate to an overflow car park used for the Watts Gallery which is a field on your left. In only 50m, turn **right** up some makeshift wooden steps into the trees and rhododendrons. In a short distance, you come to a Celtic Cross and a carved seat, near the house where the Watts lived. *The cross was built at Watts' request, depicting pilgrims, rich and poor. The seat was donated to Mrs Watts in 1934 by the Potters Arts Guild.* You need to retrace your steps back to the road.
- 4 Continue along the road passing a round knoll on the left. Soon you reach a spreading cedar and a gate on the left leading to the Watts Chapel and Cemetery. The chapel is unique and different from anything you may have seen before and absolutely worth the small climb.

The Watts Chapel and Cemetery were designed by G.F. Watts' wife Mary. The interior of the Chapel was moulded and painted in gesso (felt dipped in a mixture of plaster and glue) in Mary's Studio by a team of craftsmen. The cemetery contains the graves of the Watts and several local artists who assisted with the building. The writer Aldous Huxley, of "Brave New World" fame, is also buried here (see the "Puttenham and the Welcome Woods" walk in this series).



Continue along the road, finally reaching the main road, and turn **left** through the village of Compton.

Compton goes back to Saxon times, the name indicating a farmstead ("tun") in a hollow between hills ("cwm"). As you walk through, you have a strong feeling of soul and community stretching back the four hundred or so years of many of these venerable houses. Compton and its church were one of the places that the pilgrims visited on their way to Canterbury. Perhaps the only thing that mars the peace is the busy road running through the village.

Among the notable houses, you pass *Moors Cottage* (on the right) then *South Cottage* (on the left). Soon on your right is the driveway to the Church of St Nicholas. This is *not* just another village church: it is unique.

St Nicholas church is 500 years older than any of the other buildings in Compton. Inside the church you see Norman pillars and arches carved from chalk found on the nearby Hogs Back. The square tower dates from Norman times and the clock from 1688. In 1929 a tiny cell was discovered in the north wall which would have been home to an "Anchorite" or hermit who would have lived there voluntarily, from the date of incarceration until death, being fed via a small gap and eventually buried (often underneath the cell itself). In the same year the Sundial was also found, having been hidden for many centuries. It shows time in relation to church services. The two-storey chancel is extremely rare and the second altar was probably made by passing pilgrims, as was the

cubic painting on the walls. There are “graffiti” too: a Norman knight in the chancel arch. The stained glass trefoil window in the lower chapel also dates from the 1200s.

- 5 Continue along the road passing *White Hart Cottage* (on the right). Soon after, on the right is a small parking area and a hut. This is *Puck’s Oak Barn* and, behind it, the Orchard, another secret of this area. *This traditional orchard was restored by volunteers of the McAlmont Trust and is managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust. Pathways have been cut to give you a little circular walk through the grounds which are permanently open to the public.* Next on your right is *The Harrow* pub which recently re-launched itself (April 2011) as a gastropub. On reaching a side road on the left called *Spiceall*, go straight across the grass, veering a fraction away from the main road and aiming just to the right of the last of the modern houses. You come out to a lane.
- 6 Turn **left** on the lane and, in only 50m, turn **right** on a marked footpath. After a short distance in the woods, keep ahead across the tarmac in front of a house and continue on a narrow path through trees. Cross the drive to *Poplar Cottage* and continue straight ahead through more woodland. *This area is heavily infested with himalayan balsam (known as the “pink peril” by the “balsam bashers”) so please be careful not to pick up any of the seeds from the exploding pods on your shoes or clothing.* The path goes over a plank bridge and soon comes out to the lane opposite *The Withies* where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: from the A3, 5 km=3 miles south of Guildford, take the exit signposted *B3000 Godalming, Farnham*. Follow signs for Compton till you pass the sign for the village. (The Watts Gallery – alternative starting point – is signed almost immediately down a lane on the left. The overflow car park is on the left just before the Gallery.) Continue through the village, eventually passing a green with new houses on the left. The *Withies Inn* is signed down a lane on the left ½km (a third of a mile) further.

By bus/train: bus 46 from Guildford, not Sunday . Check the timetables.

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