

Cleeve Common Self-Guided Walk 3 – History and Archaeology

Start point: Quarry Car Park

Nearest postcode: GL52 3PW

Suitable for: Adults with a reasonable level of fitness

Approx. Length: Short route 4.5km (2.7 miles). Long route 6.5km (4miles). If walked at a steady adult pace the longer route can be completed in under two hours.

Terrain: One steep but short incline to the trig point, several gentle inclines and declines throughout the walk.

Dogs: Well behaved dogs are welcome on Cleeve Common. Between April – November sheep graze the common so dogs must be kept on leads or under close control. A herd of Belted Galloway Cattle graze the common year-round. Please pick up after your dog anywhere on Cleeve Common. There are poo bins at the car park and at three other points along this walk.

Refreshments: Cleeve Hill Golf Club is open to members of the public year-round. For more information, please visit <https://www.cotswoldhub.co.uk/>

What to take with you:

- Dress for the weather and be prepared, the weather on Cleeve Common can change quickly and it is usually a few degrees cooler and much windier up here than on lower ground.
- Drinks and snacks
- Binoculars if you have them
- Camera
- Phone – Rangers Phone number: 07756 828 458
- Dog walkers make sure you have poo bags and a lead

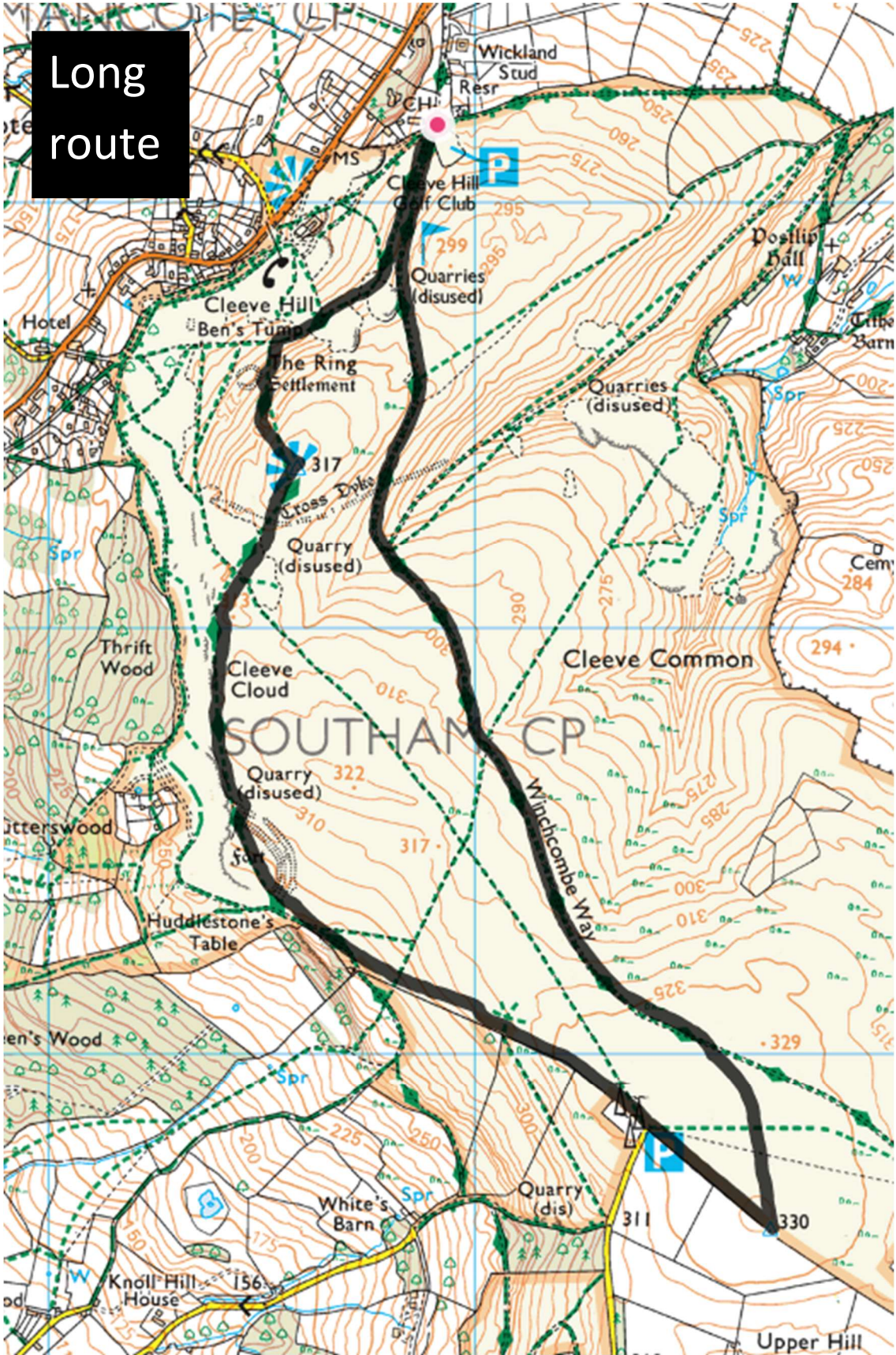
Evidence of human activity on or near Cleeve Common can be traced back some 6000 years. There are also traces of Bronze Age (2450-650 BCE) occupation. The bulk of the evidence of prehistoric occupation dates to the Iron Age (650BCE-43AD) with sites atop the hill and below the escarpment. In addition, Cleeve Common shows archaeological evidence of Medieval and post-Medieval industry, farming and recreation.

This walk takes you around many of the key sites on Cleeve Common as well as some less known, and more open to interpretation.

Short
Route



Long
route



1. *From Quarry car park, turn left at the entrance past the Cleeve Common map board.*
2. *Then bear half left on the main stone track leading up the hill and almost immediately bear right on to a parallel and more grassy track. You can see a Cotswold Way marker post up ahead.*

Looking down from the Cotswold Way you may notice a roughly circular mound where the metal fence joins the stone wall. This may be the last of a group of Bronze Age round barrows recorded in antiquarian literature, the others having been lost into the quarry below. However, a recent geophysical survey showed no evidence of internal structure in the mound, so its nature remains unproven.



3. *Bear right again, still on the Cotswold Way. The path levels and views to your right open up.*

You can see Woodmancote and Bishops Cleeve first and behind them the Malvern Hills. But closer than that, by the 2nd Cotswold Way post you should be able to detect some shallow U-shaped trenches running down the slope. These lumps and bumps are not related to the nearby golf course. We think they are WWI or WWII home guard shooting practice ranges. They are a good example of archaeology where we have no in situ evidence, so we are basing this conclusion on examples found elsewhere.

4. *Continue along the Cotswold Way to the third marker post.*

After the 3rd post, take another look over the slope on your right and you can clearly see the distinct U-shaped gullies. Beyond, and behind the golf club building you can see Nottingham Hill. Look how the houses are along a line, they are following the spring line. Though no Roman archaeology is found up on Cleeve Common, plenty is found in Bishops Cleeve, with Roman burial sites along the spring line of surrounding hillsides.

5. *Continue along the main track, ignoring any paths up to your left. The track starts to descend slightly.*

Spot the long grey building below you, to the right of a tall stone house. This was once used as a golf clubhouse in the early 19th century. The golf course on Cleeve Common opened in 1891 with a 'shed' as a clubhouse behind the Malvern View Hotel further along the slope. This building later became a youth hostel, and now it is privately owned.

6. *Pass the first patch of gorse on the left and you'll see another Cotswold Way post. Follow the yellow arrow slightly uphill and left (not straight up). Keeping the gorse ahead to your left you will see a narrow desire path to its right. Take this path and look right to see two circular depressions, a small one next to you and a larger one just ahead.*



The Ring

The larger is our first scheduled monument of the walk, The Ring. It is 67m in diameter and has an area of 0.2ha, with an outer ditch, banks and a central platform. The smaller ringwork is only 21m in diameter and has a central platform and banks but no ditch. These are thought to be the remains of an Iron Age settlement, or possibly animal pens, but they have not been excavated and so their exact nature remains a mystery.

You may notice that the centre of The Ring is very flat. This is because when the golf course was first laid out, The Ring was used for the 18th green and explains why it is full of sand at the bottom. We do not believe the smaller one was used for golf, so hope to find some archaeology there in a future study. It may help us understand The Ring.

Below The Ring, at the bottom of the escarpment, out of sight, a long mound, Ben's Tump, is possibly a Neolithic long barrow, and at nearby King's Beeches, excavation in the 1920s found Iron Age burials and artefacts.

The line of houses along the main road below you are part of the settlement of Cleeve Hill. In the early years of the 20th century, this flourished as a fashionable health resort. In 1901 a tramway was opened to bring visitors up the hill from Cheltenham to enjoy the fresh clean air and fine views.

7. From the Ring, follow the desire path straight ahead to regain the Cotswold Way - a marker can be clearly seen up and to the left on the wide, steep path heading straight up. On reaching the marker, catch your breath and look back down the slope to get a good view of the Ring below to the right. Continue upwards on the path to the toposcope and trig point on the summit.

The path is here purely for accessing the viewpoint. The Common would have formed part of a Drove way moving cattle down into the Thames Valley from the Cotswolds. This would have followed the contours of the hill rather than coming up and over it like this.

At the summit there is a trig point, but this is not quite the highest point in the Cotswolds, as there is a second trig point, 13m higher, away in the distance beyond the Radio Masts.

The toposcope table points out a number of notable features visible from here, as far away as the mountains of South Wales and the Shropshire Hills.

In fact, at least seven hillforts are visible from this vantage point. To the north in the distance is Bredon Hill (5) with Conderton Camp on its southern flank and Kemerton Camp on the western end. In the foreground, the flat-topped promontory is Nottingham Hill (6). The eastern end of the promontory is transected by a pair of banks and ditches, creating a large (28ha) enclosure. This is probably a Late Bronze Age or very early Iron Age hilltop enclosure. In the 1970s a chance find led to excavation of a Late Bronze Age metal hoard as well as evidence of settlement. To the north-west, on The Malvern Hills (4), there are forts on Midsummer Hill at the southern end and on the

Herefordshire Beacon. British Camp is one of the finest hillforts in the country and is well worth a visit. South along the escarpment, Leckhampton (1) and Crickley Hill (2) hillforts are visible on promontories to the south of Cheltenham, whilst Kimsbury Camp on Painswick Beacon may just be visible in the distance. Also note the hill to the southwest across the valley, topped with a clump of trees; May Hill (3), the source of many querns, used for grinding corn, found in the region. This was clearly an important landscape in the Iron Age.



8. Now turn round, so you are looking towards the lone beech tree and pylons on the horizon.



You should be able to detect a criss-crossing of trackways across the flat plateau of Cleeve Common. This is where people have worn desire lines in the grassland. When cattle were being driven over there would have been one main track, called a Whiteway as heavy hooves would have worn the grass away exposing the pale stone underneath, much like the one you can see to your left. There is not much water for cattle (or indeed people) on Cleeve Common, however there is some down at Padcombe, where there is some archaeological evidence of holding pens. Drovers would then have then continued down through Wontley and on to the Thames Valley.

9. *From the trig point, follow the direction arrow for the Cotswold Way, heading south until the next post through some areas of quarrying. These were either trial pits or pits for a very specific type of stone found in small deposits. Continue down the grassy slope, keeping off the golf course, to a banked ditch running across the path from the escarpment edge eastwards, just before the next Cotswold Way marker post.*



If you look left and then right you are now looking along the Crossdyke, the second scheduled monument on this walk.

We believe that in Medieval times this was a manorial boundary, but it is probably much older, constructed in either the Bronze Age or Iron Age. In those times, there was no writing or mapping, so this was a clear way to define territories. It starts near the Rising Sun Hotel down to your right, then runs over the hill top before petering out in Dry Bottom, though it is likely to have continued on to a well in the Postlip area. Similar boundaries are found elsewhere on the Cotswolds and the Shire Ditch on the Malvern Hills which was also used as manorial boundary, was similarly likely dug in the Bronze Age.

10. *Cross the main track and continue on the Cotswold Way following the way markers through some small areas of quarrying. As you climb out of these, carry on uphill along the escarpment.*

Look out for metal pegs on exposed rock at the top of the rise. These are at the top of a cliff face known by local climbers as Castle Rock. The pegs are for securing their ropes. If you glance over the top you can appreciate the level of quarrying that has taken place here, with exposed stone cliffs and spoil heaps below. This is mostly post-Medieval industrial exploitation of the Cotswold limestone for buildings in nearby towns and for road construction, which continued into the late 19th century.

11. *Follow the escarpment, slightly downhill then back uphill; as you come down the second slope, look ahead of you the banks and ditches of the Cleeve Cloud hillfort. Continue to the outer ditch of the hillfort. Follow the Cotswold Way across the fortifications and enter the fort.*

The fort is enclosed by two lines of substantial ditches and banks. The outer bank is cut by a golf green, but elsewhere the banks are largely intact, although crossed by several paths, and likely to have lost some of their height over time. The original entrance, which we think would have been to your right if you were sat on the bench, is long gone, having been quarried away in the 19th century.



The interior of the fort today is around 160m end to end with an area of 1.2ha. The fort was probably constructed in the Early Iron Age, between 600-400BC, based on a single find of pottery and a very limited excavation of an area of rampart damaged by erosion.

Recent work by Gloucestershire Archaeology suggests that the fort was at least half as large again with around one third of the fort having been lost to quarrying. The interior slopes downwards and is largely featureless apart from the footpaths. A rectangular platform by the bank to your left, near to the bench was probably part of the original golf course, which had a green and tee inside the fort. 50m along the path to the right along the cliff edge, another tree ring is just visible to your left, in the long grass.

Recent geophysical surveying has suggested the presence of settlement within the fort, but more work is needed. It is very unlikely that it was a 'fort' in the truest sense of the word as it would have been indefensible on several sides. We also do not think anyone would have chosen to live here permanently with it being so far from fresh water (the spring line is down at Nutter's Wood) and extremely exposed. The views from here are, of course incredible, so it may have been that whatever was here, needed to be seen from all around, including the valley below. It could have been used seasonally for fairs and markets, or to display status.

It would not have suddenly appeared, but is likely to have taken several, perhaps even 20 years to build seasonally, at times when people were not busy working the fields.

12. *Continue round the outside edge of the hill fort to the southern end, heading towards prominent trees.*

Look down the escarpment where you can see a square block of stone by a path. This is Huddlestone's table. Local myth tells that it is connected to King Kenulf of Mercia in the 9th century, but in reality, this is probably a romantic Victorian fiction as a result of a quarryman's folly.

13. *Leave the hillfort over the southern ramparts and follow the Cotswold way to The Three Sisters trees.*

Why three? There were 3 large beech trees here until the 1970s, when one was lost. It was replaced by the small silver birch tree, but this is not thriving on the thin soil in this exposed and windy location. The two remaining iconic beech trees appear in our logo.



ROUTE SPLIT

SHORTER ROUTE

14. Turn left round the outside of the ramparts. After a short distance, take a broad grassy track on your right to head up the slope towards the Lone Beech tree at the top of the hill.

We believe the Lone Beech is the one remaining tree from a copse that was planted here and is apparent on a 1914 map of the area. This would make the tree over 100 years old. The harsh conditions it must withstand explain its stunted growth and shape as it is battered from the prevailing winds.

15. After enjoying the views from here, carry on past the tree down the slope towards the gorse bushes and you can see Winchcombe beyond, nestling in the valley ahead of you. Skirt the golf course and soon you will hit the main (Whiteway) stone track ahead and below. Turn left on to the track to where the golf course crosses the track.

SKIP TO STEP 20

Following the path towards the main track



LONGER ROUTE

15. Carry straight on and at the second waymarker the Cotswold Way branches down to the right to a gate, but instead carry on along the track towards the distant radio masts. You will be walking parallel to the southern boundary of the Common. Head down the dip and up the rise.

At the top of the rise, after 500m, the ground levels out. This area is the site of the original Cheltenham Racecourse in the mid-19th century, before it moved to its current location at Prestbury Park. No trace of the course remains, but an area of slightly elevated ground to the left of the path may be all that is left of the grandstand.

16. Carry on along the boundary wall until you reach the Radio Masts.

You are close to the possible site of a WWII RAF direction finding station. Similar to that in the below image, a sketch on a photo of an intact base on Ibsley in Hampshire (courtesy of Richard Drew). Structures had an octagonal brick blast wall surrounding a wooden tower containing the operator and equipment at ground level and, at the top, a rotatable VHF antenna. These 'fixer' stations were used to locate aircraft lost or in an emergency.

The evidence for such a site on Cleeve Common comes from a study of Google Earth images. In the second image below, you can clearly make out ground marks from a near-circular structure of some sort, with a line which may have been a power cable link to a stand-off generator. The buildings shown in the bottom left are in today's radio mast compound and the road is the end of the Radio Masts access to the Common.



17. Continue along the boundary past the Radio Masts entrance.

You will soon come to another trig point, and this really is the highest point of the Cotswolds at 330m – but the view is not as spectacular as that from the trig point on the front of the hill!

18. With your back to the trig point and Cleeve Common fence line walk out across the flat hilltop heading half left (due North))towards the Dewpond which is at the left-hand end of the stand of gorse you will see ahead of you and is encircled by a fence.

The Dewpond is a historic watering hole which was restored in 2000 as an experiment in a traditional way of providing drinking water for grazing stock. The pond is some 20 metres across and 2 metres deep (although the maximum water depth is only about 1 metre). It collects rainwater and run-off from the surrounding land. The dewpond has provided a source of water not only for sheep, but also for wildlife on the Hill and is visited by a wide range of birds. So far, it has never dried up, even in the driest of summers.

19. Pass the Dewpond on your right-hand side and continue straight until you hit a main track crossing in front of the next stand of gorse. Turn left to pick up this track, heading towards the Lone Beech on the skyline. The track descends a gentle slope, where it becomes more established. There are fine views on the right towards Winchcombe. At the bottom of the slope it bears to the right. Carry on along this main track to the point where the golf course crosses the track.

ROUTES REJOIN

20. Cross the golf course carefully, looking down to your right to see if any golfers are about to tee off. Go down the slope and swing right up the hill, passing first a golf green and then a tee on your left.

Look up ahead of you on the slope above the path. You should be able to see the double ditch of the cross dyke which follows the top of the bowl of the tee before dropping down into dry bottom.

View of the Cross Dyke crossing the path ahead



As you continue on the track you will actually pass through the Cross Dyke but it is quite difficult to detect on the ground but can be seen clearly on the walk map taken from Google.

21. Follow this main track up the hill, past an old storage shed and then all the way back down to the Golf Club and Quarry Car Park.

The golf club is open to the public for refreshments including hot and cold lunches, cakes and snacks. Pop inside or enjoy a seat in the garden!

We hope you enjoyed this walk, the third in our self-guided walks series. If you have any feedback or amendments, please get in touch at hello@clevecommon.org.uk

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To find out more about Cleeve Common, including our events programme please visit our website: www.cleevecommon.org.uk

Written by Nicole Daw, Tim Copeland and Phil Cox

Further reading:

- Tim Copeland. Archaeological Walking Guides: The Cotswold Way. 2013. Stroud. The History Press.
- David H Aldred. Cleeve Hill: The History of the Hill and its People. 1990. Stroud. Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd.

