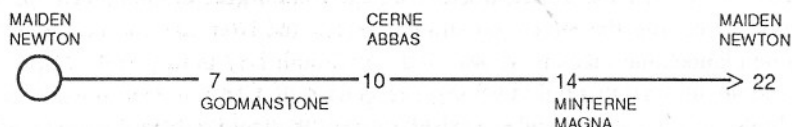


# A Ridge Too Far

*Put together the stunning contrast of some fine ridge walking with some of Dorset's most spectacular views and you have the recipe for a truly remarkable walk.. Take time to to have a drink in Britain's smallest pub—the Smiths Arms — then cross the crystal clear waters of the River Cerne and discover clandestine lakes in the Cerne Valley before entering the picturesque chocolate box village of Cerne Abbas.*



MAIDEN NEWTON Rail Station is an unmanned halt and I have it on good authority that walkers can park their vehicles in the roomy car park provided. As you kit up and prepare yourself for the day you can't help but notice the first ridge immediately ahead of you.

Walk down the Station Approach and turn right at the bottom to follow the track up under the bridge and shortly after bearing right follow the track that leads off to the left on a NE bearing. Continue on this track passing New Barn and eventually reach your first ridge which is the old Roman road. Cross the main A37. From here you begin to look down into sleepy Sydling St. Nicholas and across towards your second ridge.

Begin your descent into Church Bottom by following the well marked path still on a NE bearing. On reaching a main junction at GF630994 turn right and look for a style after a short while on the left that will take you into the village by meandering around an allotment-type garden. As you exit onto the village High Street turn left and take time out to examine a pre-war petrol pump standing guard outside one of Sydling's outstanding stone cottages.

Sydling St. Nicholas is in a valley high on the downs with water that flows from springs at Up Sydling. Because the stream divides into three when passing through the village, many of the flint and stone cottages have their own stone bridge. Continue on through this passage of time to a fork in the road where a Congregational Chapel stands, double back south on yourself walking alongside the stream before taking the first track on the left, passing another cottage. Be careful to follow this lane round at a right angle and after approx. 100yds look for the path that will take you up Cowdown Hill and towards the second ridge. Go through this gate, up the side of the hedge and your exit is in the top right-hand corner. Climb over this hidden style and make for high ground and the gate at the top. Pause here to view Sydling surrounded by hills all around. Quite idyllic.

Continue on towards the next style (has this been repaired yet?) and exit through gate opposite still heading NE. On reaching a bungalow turn right. Look out for sudden

appearance of an Alsatian guard dog protesting your intrusion on his land. I was pleased to see he was fenced in! You are now on the super highway of the second ridge walking south. Enjoy it. In the distance you should be able to make out Hardy's Monument.

Continue along this clear track. At one point two gates confront you. Take the left and keep the hedge to your right. Leaving this field exit the corner of the next and after approx. 150yds turn left by a monument hidden amongst trees. This track on a SE bearing will bring you pleasantly down into Godmanstone.

As you enter the village turn left and take time out at the Smiths Arms. Britain's smallest pub was granted its licence when Charles II stopped here and asked for a drink when what is now the bar was the smithy. The smith had no licence, so Charles granted him one on the spot.

After refreshment, retrace your steps a few yards and cross the Cerne by taking the path down the side of a house. Cross a small field and turn left over a style on the far side. You are now entering one of the prettiest valley walks in Dorset. Continue northwards to Nether Cerne. Just beyond the church the track swings left - continue straight ahead through a small wood. Leaving the wood, go straight across the next field — one of Cerne's picturesque clandestine lakes is to your left. Everything is so peaceful. Capture this hallowed moment. Exit this field by a style keeping right of a couple of houses, skirting the farm buildings. Swing left and enter the farmyard, then turn right and pass close to two houses as you continue north through this delightful valley.

Shortly you will enter a large field with a steep slope on your right. Cross this and enter a smaller field. Continuing north you exit this through a gap in the hedge in the top right-hand corner. Go through the hedge and climb up out on to a well trodden path — keeping the hill to your right. Continue on a NW bearing until you eventually reach a style among the trees overlooking allotments. Cross this field and enter a gate to the right of these allotments. On reaching the road turn right at the main junction and after a few yards look for a narrow path on the left by the side of a house. This meanders its way down and will bring you out opposite the Royal Oak — a very recommendable hostelry! At 10 miles this makes it a good place for a break and it is well worth spending a little time in the village, that got its name from a Benedictine Abbey founded here in 987. Remains of this include a beautiful 15th-century guesthouse, and the tithe barn has been converted into a house. Early examples of heraldic stained glass can be seen in the windows of the church. Opposite half-timbered Tudor houses back on to stone cottages. The 180ft. chalk giant, which is thought to be a pagan fertility symbol, is over 1500 years old and looks down from the hill above the village.

Retrace your steps to Royal Oak and continue out of the village. After approx. 400yds turn left along a track leading towards Giant Hill. Follow the bridleway as it curves up the side of Giant Hill and head NE to link up with the road. You have now conquered your third ridge! Turn left and follow the road for approx. 800yds turning left through a small gate that is opposite a bridleway on the right. Turn immediately right and head towards larger gate seen ahead. As you cross this ridge take in the view of Minterne House and Park in the valley below before going through the gate and continuing ahead with hedge on your left. Exit onto an ancient track, turning left then bearing right. Look carefully for an old iron gate. Enter this field here and walk on a NW bearing passing a small wood on your left. Commence to walk down the hill and towards the corner of the next wood. *It is*

*important not to miss this.* You immediately go through another gate on a SW bearing, walking down to join a well-defined track that will bring you out on the road by Minterne House and church. This section was probably the hardest to navigate — but well worth the time and effort!

Turn left at the road, climbing up round the bend. Continue to a left bend and take the track between an avenue of trees. At the top of this ornamental drive turn left. Climb diagonally towards gate in the top corner. Through gate bear left round field, exiting again by gate in top corner. Then immediate right turn and take the widening track NNW. This is your 4th ridge and I've labelled this the Cerne Horseshoe. Follow this for about a mile keeping the wood to your left. Begin to cross towards wood and follow it as path turns to SW, keeping nearer to the road. Proceed in line with the road, looking for the superb view down the valley. As the wood on the right approaches keep to the road. Look for a track opposite the signposted lane that goes down to the ancient Friary of St. Francis. Take this track left through the trees, eventually emerging out overlooking the Sydling valley. You are now on the last leg (or your last legs) and can catch sight of

## FACT FILE

### Distance

22 miles

### Time

Allow 8/9 hours

### Maps

OS Pathfinder SY69/79

OS Pathfinder 1299

OS Pathfinder SY49/59 (start only)

### Start/Finish Parking

Maiden Newton Rail Station

Grid Ref: 599979

### Terrain

A long but easy walk with five ridges to climb on good paths, tracks and roads

### Refreshments

Smiths Arms at Godmanstone

Pubs/Cafes at Cerne Abbas

Pubs at Maiden Newton

### Toilets

Smiths Arms, Godmanstone

Cerne Abbas

### Tourist Information

Dorchester (01305) 267992

the fifth and final ridge on your right, just a couple of miles away.

Continue along this well-defined track, making sure that you do not pass the radio mast but take the first turning on your right at GF639032. After approx. 350yds take another sharp right and then sharp left opposite a gate. This wide track will bring you down into Up Sydling. Joining the road continue left over a small ford and along to main crossroad. Go straight over towards Sydling St. Nicholas. Take lane on first right. Make sure you pass the turning first left — this leads to private property — but go on towards a gate then turn sharp left along a good track to rejoin the path you left earlier in the morning. Turn right here to retrace your steps up Sherrins Hill and to reach your fifth and final ridge. Cross the main A37 and continue down the well worn track into Maiden Newton — a village that seems to be in a timeless capsule that appears to have remained since it was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086.

The end of a good day. A superb walk to reminisce over a hard-earned pint. Well done.

