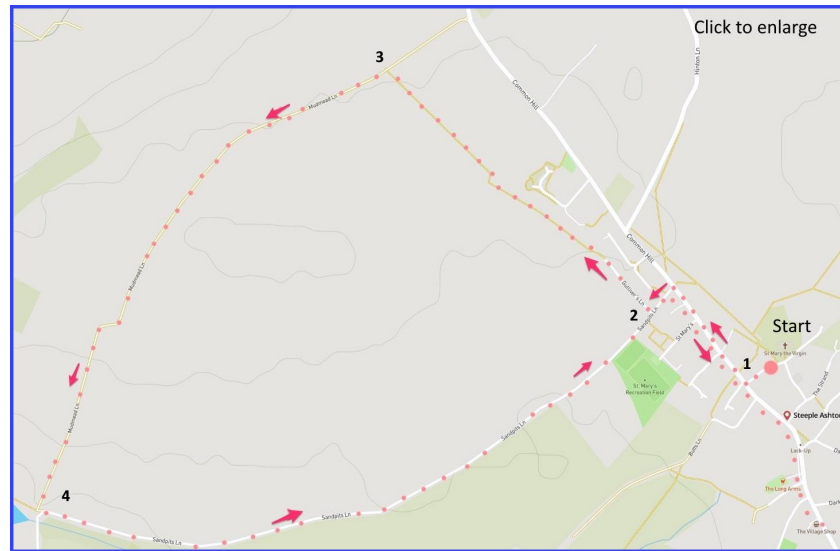




Steeple Ashton

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Head for [BA14 6EW](#). This is a 3 mile circular walk on relatively flat ground – focused on a fine Wiltshire village. ([Click map to enlarge](#). [Aerial view here](#)). [Click here](#) to download/print PDF



(Routes from map points + metres to next point)

Parking should be possible near Church, Then head for High Street

1: Turn right and walk. Turn left into Sandpits Lane after 400m

2: Take first right off this lane onto Gullivers Hill. And then right onto Gullivers Lane which becomes a field path. Walk forward, finally crossing open field. 820m

3: At T-junction turn left down Mudmead Lane. 1.1km

4: At end turn right into Sandpits Lane back to the village 1.6km. [Consider walking to 'Start' and village shop [11] for refreshment]

The pictures below are in the order things were seen on this walk. Clicking on any one will enlarge it (and the slideshow)



02



03

Observations

From the 13th until the 16th century this seems to have been a sizeable and prosperous town. That's partly visible now in its cluster of streets with their variety of dwellings covering five centuries of a community – and so illustrating an impressive range of styles and materials. For more details, see this suggested [walk around the village](#). In the centre there is a village green with market cross, but also an intriguing 1773 octagonal blind house – a Wiltshire term for a lockup where local offenders could be held until the time to deal with them.

Prosperity may have been affected by a decline in the woollen cloth trade. However, there also seems to have been a significant fire in the town in the early 16th century. Nevertheless, today this is a [lively, if smaller, community](#) (see them in full song [here](#)) and much of the village's former glory is well preserved in [architectural terms](#) (e.g. pictures 2 and 8). As ever in this area, the fine country houses are reflecting the residual wealth of local clothiers.

So now there is less commerce and industry. Just one shop (pic 11) – where you will get a warm welcome and some homemade refreshment. Although alternative refreshment is available at the [Longs Arms](#) further down the street: a 17th century pub with a good garden. The [ubiquitous Long family](#) of Wiltshire were prominent in the village. Richard Long purchased the Manor House in 1799 and was so delighted he treated the locals to “fine ox roasted whole” on a bonfire accompanied by bread and cheese and two hogsheads of strong beer.

Church!

[St Mary the Virgin](#) church (pic A) is well worth a visit with its abundance of pinnacles, buttresses, battlements and gargoyles: judged by [some](#) to be “one of the finest perpendicular churches in the country”. If you need convincing, have a look at this [drone video](#). It is a classic ‘wool trade church’. Which means its existence owes a lot to the largesse of wealthy clothiers. But, related point, the richness of the porch reflects the practice of informally conducting *business* there, as well as worship.

Two wealthy clothiers (Long and Lucas) paid for an aisle each between 1480 and 1500. More humble parishioners pitched in for the nave and its tower. That prominent tower formerly carried a steeple (hence the village name, previously just ‘Ashton’) reaching 186ft – thereby making it's height second only to Salisbury cathedral in the county (if not the country). Sadly, in July 1670 this spire was struck by lightning and *again* in October when it was being repaired. This was taken as divine omen, so the spire recovery project was abandoned. The [manor](#) (pic 9) is close by the church. It is a Grade II* Jacobean house (1647?) with extensive gardens; recently noticed on sale for £2m (*much* more information [here](#)).

The village (via the church) has an unusual connection with Magdalene College Cambridge. Drue Drury, an ex-student, bequeathed the vicarage and rights of vicar nomination along with a slice of the tithe income to the college in 1697. The will dictated that church vacancies should be offered to the three longest serving Fellows in turn (the actual succession of vicars is described [here](#)). The income also provided for the college's *Norfolk Travelling Fellowship*, whereby college members were supported in overseas travel. There is no evidence that this college good fortune brought any educational benefit to the people of this village. Moreover, these nominated Fellows contributed to the resented pattern of non-residence characteristic of such livings in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

In sum, the walk starts and ends on the village. The ground is flat with a slight incline at the end. Good views of pastured countryside.

Wool!


Steeple Ashton is one of many in this part of Wiltshire that flourished thanks to the mediaeval wool trade (coupled with ecclesiastical influence in this case). At least it flourished until the early seventeenth century when the Wiltshire trade rather collapsed. Robert Long and Walter Lucas were two of its particularly successful clothiers – they basically rebuilt the church between 1480 and 1500, making it the distinguished building it is today. It might be expected that a large village like this would have grown to rival one of the nearby market towns (Trowbridge, Melksham etc). Unfortunately, the lack of available water power from rivers meant that more advanced cloth making moved away from Steeple Ashton. Notably to the villages on the River Bybrook. Reference to the wool trade always surfaces in historical accounts of Wiltshire communities, including their rise and fall. A little useful background on this industry is set down [here](#). in simple and general terms

In the end, this place must rank as one of the most agreeable villages in the county – and thankfully for visitors, it doesn't attract the same crowds as the rather contrived cosiness of "most beautiful in England" nearby Castle Combe (that *did* have water power for the clothiers' fulling mills and thereby was once more industrial than its present 'pretty')

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