

Walks With Stiles

The Magic of the Rollright Stones



Cotswolds
Area of Outstanding
Natural Beauty

Geology

Golf
Club

330m

Cleeve C

After a valley walk you'll climb to discover a prehistoric mystery on the Jurassic ridgeway. Return through the hidden hamlet of Little Rollright.

Distance: 8.3km/5 ¼ miles with ups and downs of 140m/460ft including one short steep climb.

Time: 3 hours

Start: Salford village (SP290/282) off the A44 two miles W of Chipping Norton. To reach the start drive past the Black Horse pub and the village hall up Cooks Lane for 300m to a junction on a grassy area with swings and benches. Please park here with consideration.

Refreshments: The Black Horse, Salford; Wyatt's farm shop and tea room (1 mile NE).

Route:

Just past the swings, where Cooks Lane meets Rose Lane, take the level lane ahead past signs for Trout Lakes and Rectory Farm with a line of tall trees on the left. The tarmac soon becomes a farm track along the valley. Where the track turns right **1** go straight on following the blue bridledway sign with a hedge on your R.

At the next gate turn R alongside the hedge for 120m, then turn L **2** across the field on a marked path to a ditch on the other side. Here wiggle L and R and carry on along the valley with the hedge on your L, crossing a shallow stream and past a young plantation to cross a lane. **3**

Take the marked path across the field to a gate in the corner, then head up the hill

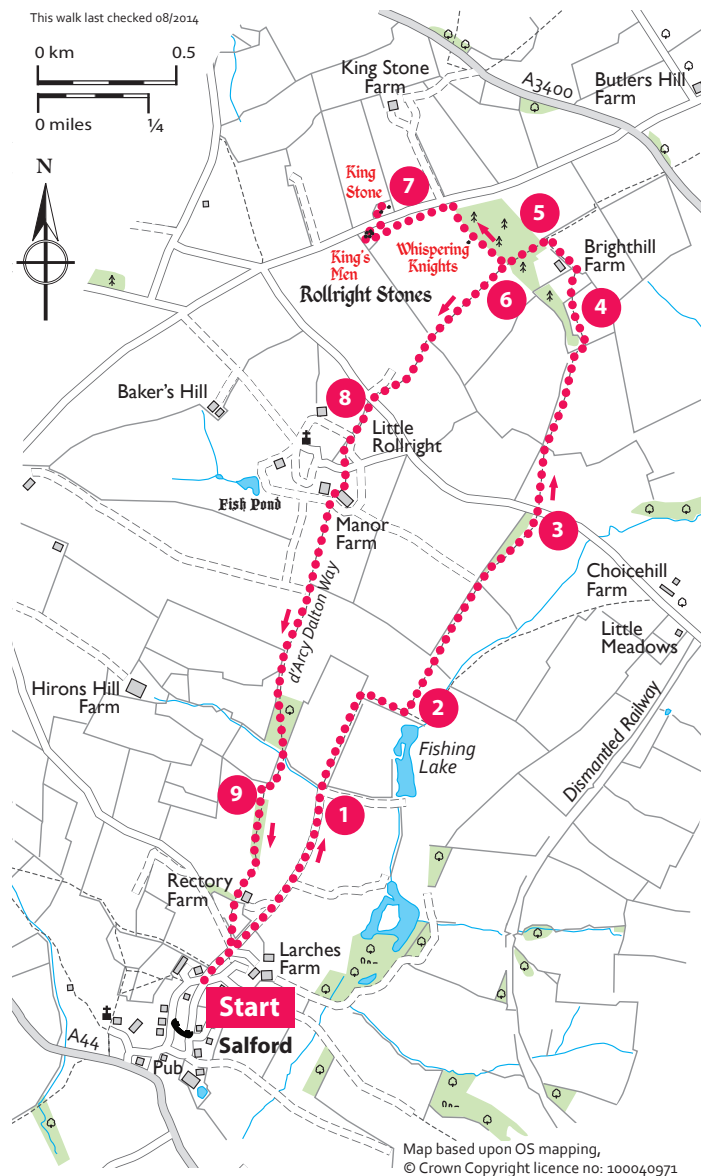
with the hedge on your left (there may be horses) and through two more gates. Just below Brighthill farm cut diagonally R to a wide gate and stile on the far R corner of the buildings. **4**

Take the track along the R side of the house and barns a short way into a young wood where you turn L (on the d'Arcy Dalton Way)* **5** along an avenue between the trees. Leaving the wood over a stile you'll see the Rollright Stones on your right. **6** Turn R to reach the first small group of Whispering Knights. Then take the all-weather path round the field to a big stone circle: the King's Men. **7**

But there's more to come. Cross the road into the field where the King Stone stands alone. This is a good picnic spot, with wonderful views. **7**

Now retrace your steps back to the Whispering Knights and the d'Arcy Dalton Way **6** where you turn R across two fields, dropping to cross a lane and a view of the gentrified hamlet of Little Rollright. **8**

Walk down between the hedges to cross a sandy drive, and the signs will take you round houses and farm buildings, then up to a fine viewpoint at two metal gates. Head straight on back to Salford over rolling farmland and through a string of small woods. The first ends at a tiny



stream which you cross on an easy stile.

Now walk 120m up the next field to a wide gateway in the hedge on you R. **9**

Turn R and go through and immediately turn L with the hedge now on your L to enter another wood. Leave it over a stile and press on along the left edge of a field to yet another copse with in-

and-out stiles. Walk across a paddock to the last stile and a track where you bear L and R onto the lane where you started.

* This long distance footpath is named in memory of Col WP d'Arcy Dalton, who campaigned for 50 years to open up the public rights of way in Oxfordshire.

Three prehistoric enigmas

Each of these groups of stones dates from a different century. Nobody knows what they represent, but the hilltop site suggests generations of prehistoric people honoured their dead here under the open sky.

First you'll pass the Whispering Knights (3000 BC), a tall group of stones, huddled together as if plotting against their king. This may have been the entrance to a burial chamber.



Disappearing stones

Follow the path round the field to the King's Men, a huge 2000 BC circle of stones encrusted by the Cotswold air with white, yellow and



gold lichen. Some have been stolen, but there are still 77 and people come to count them, even measure them.

Drovers' magic chips

Now cross the road that follows the ancient Jurassic ridgeway from Dorset to Lincolnshire and be astonished by vast views to the north.

The 8-foot-tall King Stone has stood here since 1800 BC, perhaps to mark a cemetery. And the magic of the stones lingered until at least 1800 AD, when drovers heading for Banbury market would chip bits of stone off the King to ward off the Devil.



Disappearing witch

But then in 2012 the King had company: one Mother Shipton, a witch created by environment artist David Gosling from twisted redwood branches. She loomed wickedly over the King and was very popular with young visitors. But Mother Shipton was not archaeologically correct, so one moonless night she vanished in a puff of smoke. And the children lost their playmate.



Once upon a time

Once upon a time a local warlord led his army to this high ridge when up popped a witch. She challenged him: "Seven long strides thou shalt take And if Long Compton thou can see King of England thou shalt be."

But as he strode forward a mound rose up to hide the view. She laughed:

"As Long Compton thou canst not see King of England thou shalt not be. Rise up, stick, and stand still, stone. King of England thou shalt be none! Thou and thy men Hoarstones shall be, And I myself an eldern tree."

And so the King became the King Stone, his men the King's Men in a Stone Circle, and his treacherous knights petrified as the Whispering Knights.

And the witch turned herself into an elder tree, to keep an eye on them.

(Can YOU see Long Compton from here?)

A hard night for a sweet knight?

As you walk back to Salford, the tiny church at Little Rollright deserves a visit. It's an unspoilt gem. One knightly figure has his helmet for a pillow. The other prays between his wives (but surely he was not a bigamist?).

