

Little Sodbury and the Ploughboy's bible

A short but fascinating walk taking you back to England in the Iron Age, the Roman era and the troubled times of Henry VIII. Plus wide views to Wales.

Distance: 4 km/2½ miles with a climb and descent of 80m/260ft

Time: 2 hours

Start: Old Sodbury (on A432 near Chipping Sodbury) at St John's Church. ST 756 817.

Limited parking nearby.

The Dog Inn on the A432.

Route:

Go through the lych gate and cross St John's churchyard for a wonderful view across the Vale of Berkeley.

Through the church kissing gate bear diagonally right on the grass downhill towards (but not through) a kissing gate **1** in the hedge at the bottom. Thirty metres before the kissing gate turn right to head north alongside a large depression on your left which was a medieval fishpond. Carry on through a series of gates until you see a lane ahead. The gate is a little to your right under a pylon **2**.

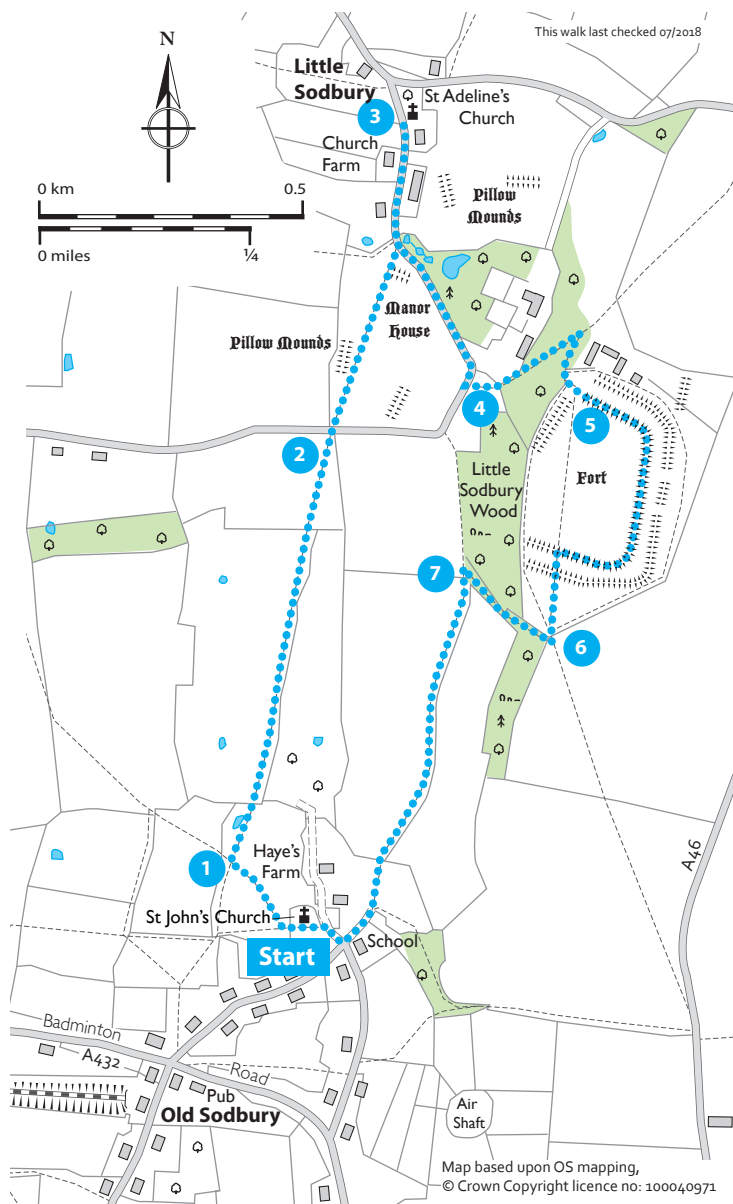
Cross the lane into a meadow and head to the right of a white house behind a hedge. Take the gate onto a lane ahead into Little Sodbury and St Adeline's Church **3**. It's only 150 years old, but is based on the medieval chapel of Little Sodbury Manor, where William Tyndale was chaplain and tutor while starting to translate the New Testament into English. (See page 2 for more of his story).

Don't leave the church without reading his letter from a Flemish prison cell (asking for a warm coat, a candle and his Hebrew bible) before he was burned at the stake. It hangs on a nail beside the lectern.

From the church go back along the lane (following Cotswold Way signs) as it bends left and climbs to two stone gateways on the left. Just past them **4** take a wooden gate on your left into a small orchard and follow the Cotswold Way into the woods and a short climb towards the fort above you. When the slope eases, turn right on an easy path below a stone building, through another gate and you are at the entrance to the fort **5** (See page 2 for more information).

The Cotswold Way goes straight across the fort but you can walk round the high ramparts on your left and rejoin the Cotswold Way on the far side **6** at a gate. The path drops quickly out of the wood and turns sharp left **7**.

From here it's an easy walk with views on your right. The next gate leads into a short muddy path between the school and the church back to the start.



See the next page for more details about the walk.

William Tyndale, Father of the English Bible

Scholar, linguist, a Christian but cussed, William Tyndale was born at Slimbridge around 1494. His life was dedicated to translating the Bible into English, defying fellow priests, bishops, two English monarchs, and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

His day job was tutor to the sons of Little Sodbury Manor. By night he studied Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) and Greek (of the New), determined to take the monopoly of reading the Bible out of the grip of Latin-learned ecclesiastics.

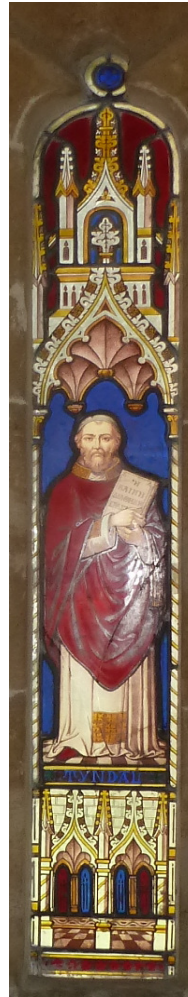
When one bigoted cleric told him, "We had better be without God's laws than the Pope's," Tyndale replied: "I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost."

When the church refused him permission to translate the bible, he went to Germany where his English New Testament was printed and smuggled into England. The book was banned and burnt.

After opposing Henry VIII's plan to divorce Queen Catherine, Tyndale was condemned as a traitor and heretic, betrayed and imprisoned in Flanders. In 1536 he was strangled and burnt at the stake.

It took another 75 years of bishops' nitpicking (for both scholarly and political reasons) and three changes of monarch for the King James English language Bible to be published.

Three quarters of the words in it are said to be Tyndale's.



A letter from prison

"I beg your Lordship that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap, for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell.

"And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark.

"But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency, to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew grammar and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study."



Fresh meat and furry boots

After point 2 of the walk the map shows some cigar-shaped black lines and the words "Pillow Mounds." They are very old man-made rabbit warrens, created to provide the local residents with a self-renewing source of fresh meat and fur.

How do I make one? First you throw down a jumble of stone or timber, cover the heap with soft earth, and offer it as a rabbits' rent-free residence for a buck and a doe to burrow into. Nature will take its course. Meanwhile dig a little moat to stop the bunnies breaking free. Rabbits can't swim, you see.



The Romans first brought rabbits to Britain from the Mediterranean. So these warrens might have fed the troops camped up on the fortified hill. But more probably they were made after 1066 by the Norman knight who built Little Sodbury Manor. After centuries of ploughing you'll be hard put to find any trace of the warrens here, but many can be found on moorland, hills and even in Epping Forest.