

# If you go down to the woods today...

Greta Pennington of the Mortimer Group of The Ramblers leads the way through the trees of Bircher Common to the top of Croft Ambrey

**T**his walk takes you through very varied woodland, with interesting specimens of beech, Spanish chestnut, oak, many of them very old, (there are 300 veteran trees on the Croft Castle estate) as well as many types of coniferous trees and birds, butterflies, and plants to be found in season. This is a very long settled part of Herefordshire, with indications of habitation dating back several thousand years.

1) On Bircher Common, walk directly uphill, by any of the small paths, for about 200 yards, at the same time slanting slightly to the left, until you come out above the vegetation, onto the open common land. Go left to contour

round to the woodland ahead, then walk uphill for about 300 feet, to the padlocked wooden gate and stile (2).

Archaeologists have found evidence of possibly prehistoric and Romano British settlements on the Common, as well as medieval and 18th century occupation.

Follow the well-defined track, through the woods, round the hillside to the notice board for the Forestry Commission – Croft Wood. (3) There are very large beech trees in this section. Cross to the other side of the valley and go down the right hand side of the valley on a good track (4). This is Fishpools Valley and you will see the pools just below you on the left. Look out for the old Lime Kiln on the right (5). The Fishpools date from the medieval period. In the 18th and 19th

century charcoal was produced to supply the forge at Bringewood, to the north.

6) Just after you pass the small stone building, at the lower end of one of the pools, take the track on the right that climbs up the side of the hill, until you come out on to the minor road to Croft Castle, passing the car park on the right. The building is an old pump house and there is a water wheel inside. In the late 18th and 19th century many carriage rides were constructed in the woods but most are now overgrown.

At the end of the car park follow the road round to the right and walk uphill to the bridle gate. Croft Castle tea rooms are to the left (7). Croft Castle is a National Trust property and for ►



West to the Black Mountains



Above Fishpools Valley

Right The skeleton of an ancient tree seen en route

non-members there is an entrance fee for castle grounds and parking. There has been a castle here for a thousand years and the Croft family has been associated with the history of this part of the Marchlands throughout this time. The main part of the castle dates from late 14th century and belonged to the Croft family. In 1746, the property passed to Richard Knight, the son of a Shropshire ironmaster, but was repurchased by the Croft family in 1923. St Michael's church dates from about 1300.

Follow the track round to the left and then uphill to the stile and the gate (8). The path now goes slightly left to a small clump of old chestnut and oak trees, before continuing uphill. Walk to the top of the field, keeping the hedge to the right. On this hillside there is a line of very old chestnut trees, some of which have died, but remain attractive in their skeletal shapes. Over to the left the views to the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons open up. At the top of the field go through the large gate on the left, cross the grass to the next gate, keeping the fence on your right and walk on to the next gate and stile. Follow the wide grass path that runs along the edge of the woodland. When the path forks, after about a third of a mile, take the right hand track, to continue straight on through the woods. Eventually the path bends to the right



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and then goes uphill. Follow this up until you reach the gravelled track. Turn right along this. After about 200 yards, take the grass track to the left. Ladyacre Plantation is to your right and Yatton Hill on the left. Follow the grass track until you reach the path that crosses at right angles. Turn left and go down, slightly, to the gate and stile (9). (To the left is a narrow track that runs back along the edge of Yatton Hill. There are seats along this track and it is possible to see peregrine falcons, buzzards and ravens, as they hunt along this edge.)

From the gate and stile, cross the stile on the right and follow the grass track, keeping to the left, leading up to the top of Croft Ambrey, an Iron Age hill fort. The path gradually winds its way

up, and round, passing through several of the ramparts and ditches that were once part of the defence system of the fort. Having twisted back on itself, the path comes out on the top of the fort, to give a 360° view (10).

The Iron Age hill fort, the oldest of the 30 hill forts in Herefordshire is thought to date from 1050 BC. It was extended in 450 BC and again in 390 BC. Occupation finally ended in 48 AD. The fort covers 32 acres and from the top you can see, below, some of the ramparts and ditches that encircled this triangular shape. Because the hill is so well wooded it is difficult to appreciate the nature of the hill fort from a distance. When the top five acres were

## THE WALK

**Start/Parking:** Bircher Common GR 466662. Leave the B4362 by the war memorial between Cock Gate and Bircher, and drive up Welshman's lane to the other side of the cattle grid onto Bircher Common  
**Maps:** OS Explorer 203

**Distance:** 6.5 miles

**Grade:** Moderate with a steady uphill walk to the top of Croft Ambrey at over 1000 feet above sea level

**Stiles:** Five

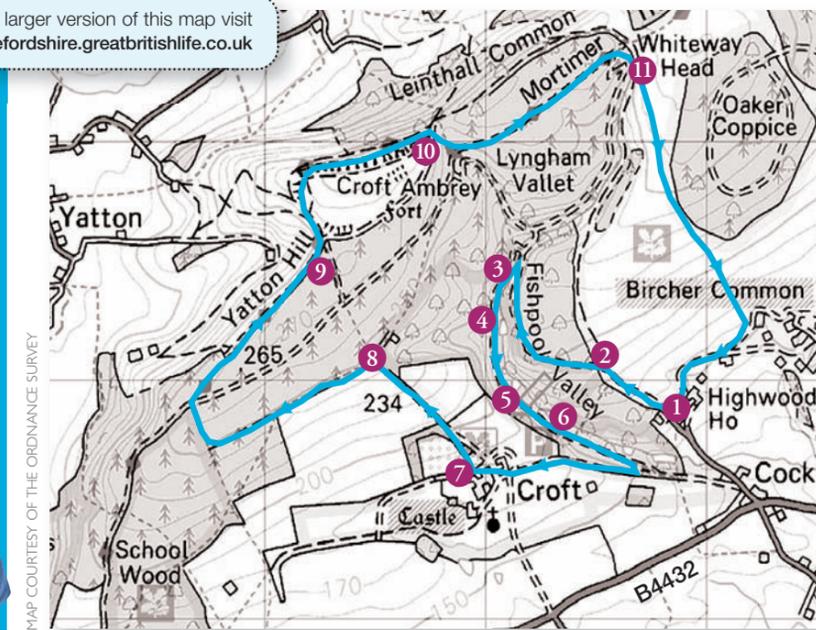
**Nearest town:** Leominster and Ludlow

**Refreshments:** Tea rooms at Croft Castle, tel: 01568 780246

**Toilets:** At Croft Castle

**Public transport:** None

To view a larger version of this map visit [www.herefordshire.greatbritishlife.co.uk](http://www.herefordshire.greatbritishlife.co.uk)



View over Croft Castle



### The Ramblers

The Ramblers is Britain's biggest charity working to promote walking and improve conditions for all walkers. In Herefordshire there are four groups: Hereford, Mortimer, Ross-on-Wye and Leaddon Vale.

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excavated in the 1960s, it was established that here, there had been a row of rectangular buildings. Some very fine metal work plus pottery was excavated. The population of Herefordshire at that time was engaged in farming and the size of this fort indicates that large number of people lived in the area.

Immediately to the north is the Leinthall Earls stone quarry. Beyond the quarry, you can see the Wigmore Rolls and the Shropshire Hills; Clee Hill lies further east; then round to the Malvern Hills. To the south, across the Herefordshire Plain, the Sugar Loaf and the Skirrid can be seen, while westwards are the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons. The Marchlands show up very

well from here. Continue along the top, going east, down to the stile, go right to the gate and then down the wide stretch of grass to the path below. Follow this to the left, up through the woods, of Langham Vallet to the next gate. Go through the gate, straight on to the next gate and go right on to the top of Bircher Common (11). This is Whiteway Head. This was one of the trade routes for transporting salt. Several of the manors in Herefordshire had salt pans in Droitwich

Go down and over to the left, to Oaker Coppice and follow down round the edge of the woodland to its lowest point, then continue down slightly left to where you parked. ■



View from Radnor Hills

