

Mickleham and Box Hill

Distance: 7.4km / 4.5 miles, moderate walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 2 The start: London to Guildford

Refreshments: The Running Horses, Old London Rd, Mickleham RH5 6DU,
The King William IV, Byttom Hill, Mickleham, Dorking RH5 6EL

Map: Explorer 146 (Dorking, Box Hill & Reigate)

The route is moderately steep in parts; downward paths are stepped unevenly

How to get there:

By car, take Headley Lane off the B2209 and park in Whitehill Car Park with its information board.

Coming from Leatherhead, Thomas says the road was *a good road, but a high and rather straight one through parks and cornland, and scarcely a village. The wide spaces on both hands, and the troops and clusters of elm trees, are best in fine weather, particularly in Autumn. I took the road through Mickleham and Dorking. Thus I wound along, having wooded hills, Leatherhead Downs, Mickleham Downs, Juniper Hill and Box Hill, always steep above on the left, and on the right the Mole almost continually in sight below.*

Box Hill stands at the south-eastern corner of the Mole Gap, the valley worn by the River Mole through the North Downs. The Mickleham valley lies on chalk, clay, sand and alluvial soil from the Mole which has eroded a pass through the Downs. Neolithic and Roman artefacts have been discovered locally. Mickleham was a Saxon settlement which grew near Roman Stone/Stane St and at Domesday was held by Odo of Bayeux.

1. Leave the CP by the exit at the opposite end from the entry. At the immediate fork, take the right-hand path along Juniper Valley, or, as signposted by the National trust, Happy Valley.

2. After 1 mile continue forward at the path junction among yews. Ignore the path off to the right signposted to the car park and take the left one. The route flattens out and comes to Upper Farm and Box Hill Road.

3. Cross the road and follow the footpath to the right for half a mile. This is the upper part of the Zig Zag Rd. On the left, East Car Park is reached (shop, café, information and toilets). Veer left of this and walk on to Salomon's viewpoint.

Initially this is a tree-lined green lane with meadows on either side and has a gently uphill trend, dotted with yew groves and clusters of may, rowan, ash, yew, glistening holly and slender beech columns.



Dedication of Salomons' viewpoint, 1920

Leopold Salomons (1841 – 1915) was a financier, who lived at nearby Norbury Park. In 1914 he bought up 230 acres of Box Hill for the nation and it became the country's first Country Park. The



The landscape from the viewpoint

4. Descend the steps to the right and follow the National Trust's 275-step Stepping Stones route.

5. There is a choice in crossing the River Mole – either the route ahead via the Stepping Stones path (after crossing the river, walk right along its bank to the bridge) or, trek to the right and cross the wooden bridge. At the end of either route, the bridge will be reached.

6. At the bridge continue to follow signposted Stepping Stones walk, which curves with the river under the scarred chalk slope to Burford Bridge.

7. Go right at the road, over Burford Bridge and on to Mickleham via the lane on which stands the Burford Bridge Hotel.

viewing platform looks over the Weald along the valley of the River Mole, with receding wooded hills ahead, and on a clear day gives sight of Chanctonbury Rings on the South Downs Way. (On a clear day, Edward Thomas could see the Rings from his study on the top of Ashford Hanger in Steep.) To the right in the valley below and shrouded in trees is Thomas's south-westward cycle route from Dorking below the Downs. At 564ft/172m, this is not Box Hill's highest point; that is at Betchworth Clumps (735ft/224m).

Jane Austen, in *Emma* (1815) mentions Mickleham and has Emma Woodhouse and her friends holding a picnic near this spot: *They had a very fine day for Box Hill... Nothing was wanting but to be happy when they got there. Seven miles were travelled in expectation of enjoyment, and everybody had a burst of admiration on first arriving.* In Regency times, high viewpoints with commanding vistas were calculated to inspire the viewer to romantic sensibility. Box Hill was an ideal venue for a fashionable social event. Emma's gathering turned out to be less than happy.

This is a downward route, frequently stepped (unevenly) in the steepest sections.



The hill was bare, except of trees, BM



Burford Bridge Hotel, 1900

The hill was bare, except of trees. It would take centuries to wipe away the scars of the footpaths up it. For it has a history of two hundred years as a pleasure resort. Ladies and gentlemen used to go on a Sunday from Epsom to take the air and walk in



William Hazlitt (1778 – 1830)



John Keats (1795 – 1821)



Endymion, Annibale Carracci

8. At the far end of Burford Bridge Hotel cross the road and walk on as far as Ryka's and the car park.

9. Cross back over the road and enter the Thames Down Link footpath, moving off left, parallel with the road. The path leads through a hazel coppice.

At the end of the path is the junction with the lower end of the Zig Zag road and the Old London -Mickleham road.

the woods... When I got to Burford Bridge, the only man at the entrance of the Box Hill footpath was a man selling fruit and drink and storing bicycles, or hoping to begin doing these things.

Many famous visitors used the Burford Bridge hotel, formerly known as The Hare and Hounds. Nelson was one, Hazlitt another and Keats yet another. In *A Literary Pilgrim in England*, Thomas says, the poet came here *to get 'a change of air' and 'a spur to wind up' his poem [Endymion] at Burford Bridge. There he read Shakespeare's Sonnets an 'Venus and Adonis', and finished "Endymion". He liked the place for its 'hill and dale and a little river,' and one of his letters from there tells how he went up Box Hill after the moon, came down again, and wrote some lines. I seem to see the influence of that late Autumn and of Box Hill in several parts of the fourth book of 'Endymion'...* Thomas's own biography of Keats was published in 1916.

This is the old London Road to Mickleham and this walk follows, in reverse, Thomas's route. He says of it, *The root-suckers and the trunk shoots of the elm trees were in tiny leaf beside the road, the horse chestnuts were in large but still rumpled leaf. The celandines on the steep banks found something like sunbeams to shine in. On the smooth slopes the grass was perfect, alternating with pale young corn, and with arable squares where the dung was waiting for a fine day before being spread. The small flints of the ploughland were as fresh and bright as flowers.*

Among the trees up on the far side of the Zig Zag can be seen the gabled front of the two-room writing chalet of the poet and novelist George Meredith (1828 – 1909). It is in the garden of Flint Cottage, his home nearby where he wrote many of his novels and poetry, was visited by literary luminaries such as Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and H G Wells and here he died.

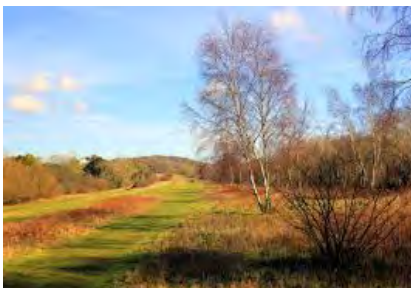
In *A Literary Pilgrim in England*, Thomas quotes Meredith writing to John Morley in 1877 of his view from here that was *'without match in Surrey'...* *'I work and sleep in my cottage at present, and anything grander than the days and nights at my porch you will not find away from the Alps; for the dark line of my hill runs up to the stars, the valley below is a soundless gulf. There I pace like a*



Meredith's writing chalet



George Meredith



Mickleham Common

10. The path leads to a gate; go through the gate and cross over to St Jude's Lodge. Cross the Mickleham Rd and follow the pavement to the right. Go up the steps beyond the side road and rejoin the pavement just beyond the Headley Lane.

11. Follow the flint and brick wall past Mickleham Hall and into Mickleham.

shipman before turning in. In the day, with the south-west blowing, I have a brilliant universe rolling up to me...' As he writes of Meredith in In Pursuit, others might have written of Thomas himself: Only a robust and happy man, or one in love, can be indifferent to this kind of March weather. Only a lover or a poet can enjoy it. The poet naturally thought of here and on such a day was Meredith of Box Hill. This man... was one of the manliest and deepest of earth's lovers who have written books. From first to last he wrote as an inhabitant of this earth... His earliest poems were all saturated with English sun and wind. He prayed that "this joy of woods and fields" would never cease... Love of earth meant to him more than is commonly meant by love of Nature. Men gained substance and stability by it; they became strong... Love of earth meant breadth, perspective, and proportion, and therefore humour... But what he thought matters little compared with what he succeeded in saying, and with that sensuousness and vigour, both bodily and intellectual, which at his best he mingled as few poets have done. He was not so much an admirer and lover of Nature, like other poets, as a part of her, one of her most splendid creatures, fit to be ranked with the whitebeam, the lark, and the south-west wind...

Pass the gates of Fredley Manor and the glimpses of parkland on the left, beyond the fringe of wych elms and horse chestnuts. Somewhere up on Mickleham Downs on the right (a Site of Special Scientific Interest), an early game of cricket was played in 1730, teams representing Surrey and Sussex of 3-a-side for a wager of £50; hardly a contender to be the originator of the game which goes back centuries from this date.

Thomas writes: *I was almost alone as I entered Mickleham, except for a horseman and his dog. This man was a thick, stiff man in clay-coloured rough clothes and a hard hat; his bandy, begaitered legs curled round the flanks of a piebald pony as thick and stiff as himself. He carried an ash-plant instead of a riding-whip, and in his mouth a pipe of strong, good tobacco. I had not seen such a country figure that day, though I daresay there were many among the nameless dead in Leatherhead churchyard, awaiting the resurrection of the just with characteristic patience. His dog was also clay-coloured, as shaggy and as large as a sheep, and exceedingly like a sheep... I rode behind him into Mickleham, and there lost him between*



Mickleham and the Running Horses, 1897



Juniper Hall, 1909 Hugh Thompson



St Michael's Church



The lych gate, 1909, Hugh Thompson

the Running Horse (or at least, an inn with two racing horses for a sign) and the [earlier] William the Fourth.... Mickleham is, apart from its gentlemen's residences, an old-fashioned place, accommodating itself in a picturesque manner to the hillside against which it has to cling in order to avoid rolling into the Mole.

Mickleham valley lies on chalk, clay, sand and alluvial soil from the Mole which has eroded a pass through the Downs. Neolithic and Roman artefacts have been discovered locally. Mickleham as a settlement originated in Saxon times.

The river, which gets its name because it goes underground (the map identifies various sinkholes or swallow holes) has been celebrated by 16th-18th century poets Spenser, Drayton, Milton and Pope. John Evelyn from nearby Wotton Hall, described the area in 1655: *'I went to Boxhill to see those rare natural bowers, cabinets, and shady walks in the box copses: hence we walked to Mickleham, and saw Sir F. Stidolph's seate environ'd with elme-trees and walnuts innumerable, and of which last he told us they receiv'd a considerable revenue. Here are such goodly walkes and hills shaded with yew and box as render the place extremely agreeable, it seeming from these evergreens to be summer all the winter.'*

Nearby Juniper Hall, currently a field study centre, became a refuge for French Revolution émigrés, including Talleyrand, Madame de Stael and General d'Arblay whose 1793 marriage to Fanny Burney, celebrated author of *Evelina* and *Camilla*, is commemorated in the church.

Protesting in vain against the building of a Mole Valley railway in 1836, John Stuart Mill, who lived in a house behind the pub, was championing the "beautiful valley of Mickleham". The 1930s A24 created a bypass that helped preserve Mickleham from urban development.

With its proximity to Box Hill, the village is associated not only with hiking but also with challenging cycling events and was involved in the 2012 Olympic Games.

On the right is St Michael's Church and, on the left, the Running Horses. The parish of Mickleham includes neighbouring Fredley and Westhumble and the church goes back to Saxon times and is mentioned in the Domesday Book. It underwent zealous "improvement and re-construction" in 1842 but retains a striking double chevron bead and dog tooth decoration fronting the sanctuary entrance. The church is typically cruciform but,

12. To the right of the church's lych gate, go over a stile and on to the footpath on the right of the entrance to Eastfield Cottage.

13. At a Y-junction, take the right-hand public byway path uphill, through the box, ash and yew trees.

14. Go over the Thames Down Link path and up to another, rather vague, Y-junction. Walk to the right between the trees and continue forward past the seat and downhill (again this is unevenly stepped).

15. Cross Headley Lane and return to the car park.

untypically, the chancel is offset to the right, a "weeping chancel" said to have suggested the inclined head of the crucified Jesus. Among the many memorials is a tablet to Salomons of Norbury Park who is buried in the churchyard, as is his wife beside him. George Meredith married Marie Vulliamy here in 1864.

A local history group reporting on the presence of lichens in 2018, recorded *A staggering 182 species (including six specialised fungi that only grow on lichens) were recorded as present in 2016-17 [in this churchyard]. It therefore still ranks as one of the richest recorded churchyards in the UK.*

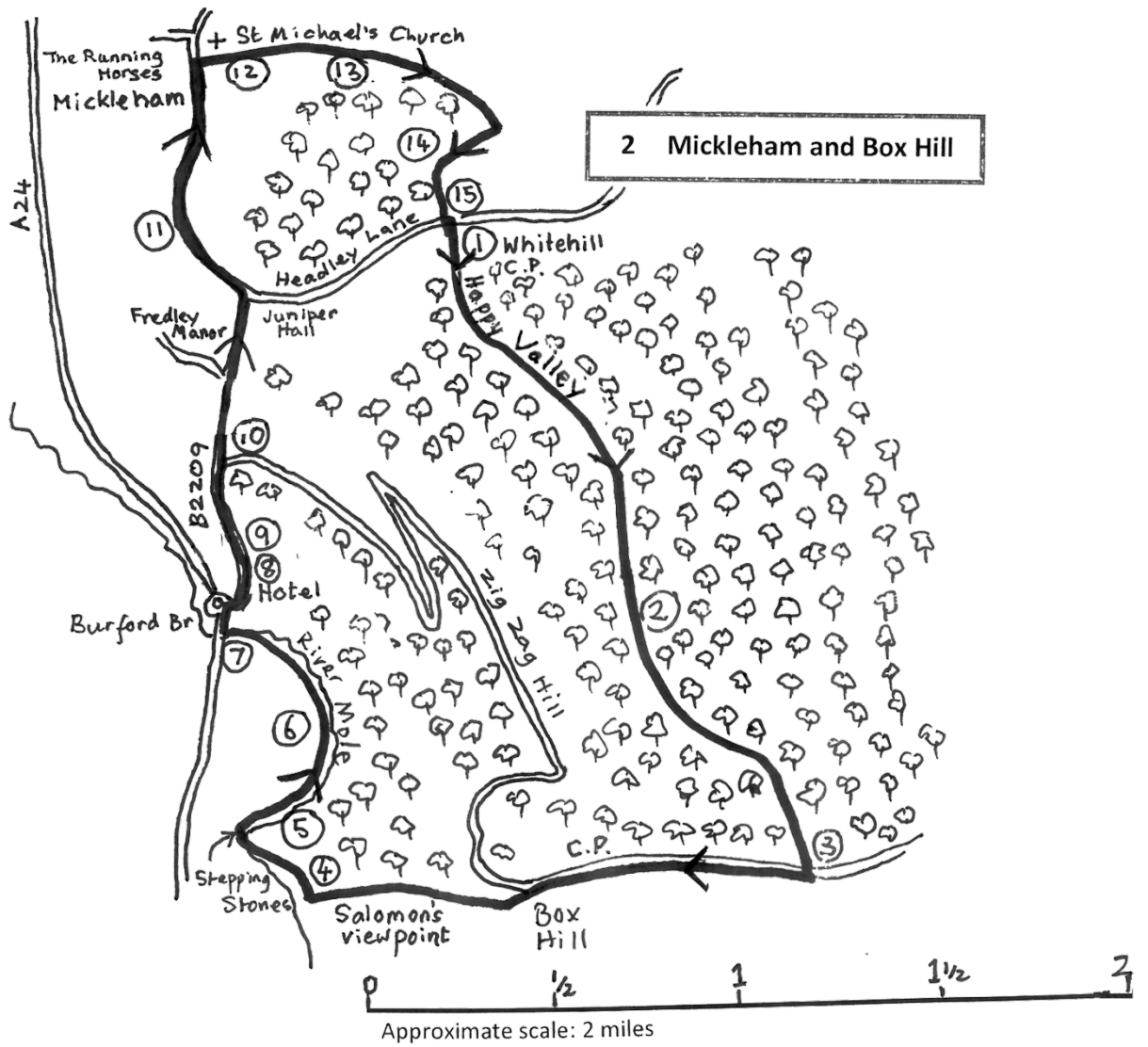
The 15th century Running Horses was a stabling place for horses bound for Epsom and it "acquired its distinctive equine name in 1828, when the Epsom Derby ended in a dead heat. Two nags – Colonel and Cadland – passed the post at the same moment, and their names are fondly remembered in the pub's two bars, which include a highwayman's hideaway and inglenook."¹ A visit to the pub for refreshments is recommended. When Thomas cycled this way in 1913 its population stood at 782.



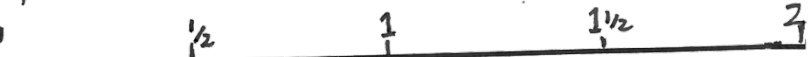
With thanks to Richard Shepherd, Sioned Williams and Saeko Yoshikawa for their help in finalising this walk

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¹ The Mobile Food Guide: <https://www.themobilefoodguide.com/restaurants/mickleham/running-horses>



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Approximate scale: 2 miles