

The Cotswolds

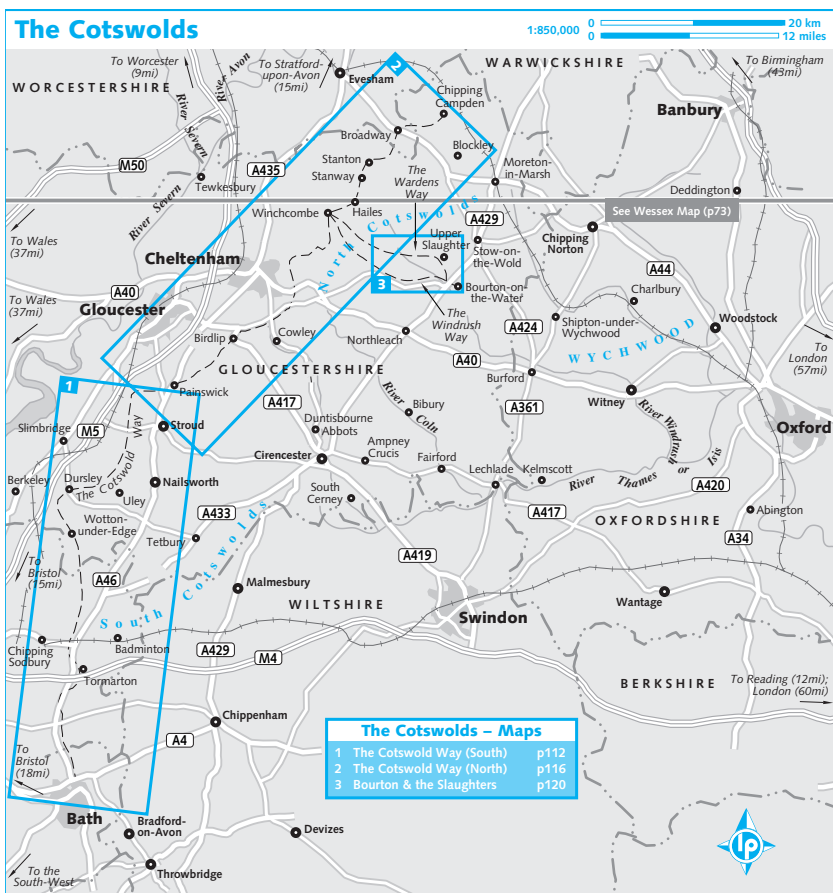
Intimate and benign, the Cotswold Hills beckon you, in a polite, English sort of way, to their central ribbon of rolling countryside. North of Bath, east of Gloucester and west of Oxford, this is the land of afternoon tea, warm beer and bicycling vicars – it is quintessentially English. Neat fields, lush woodland, clear rivers and narrow, hedge-lined lanes crisscross a network of pretty villages. In them the houses, churches, cottages and farms are built of the famous warm, honey-coloured Cotswold stone. Walking here is a delight.

The region is defined by that stone. It's the golden building blocks of the villages, but it's also the limestone bedrock of the hills, and peeps out beneath your feet where the topsoil has peeled away. The Cotswold Way traces the spine of these hills, often along the steep escarpment that slices down their western edge, offering exhilarating views over the River Severn and Wales beyond.

The human landscape of the Cotswolds is down to wool. Sheep here produced a large portion of medieval England's wealth, and some of that money was clearly spent locally, on still-fine buildings. In the 17th century the wool trade died but the massive physical changes of the Industrial Revolution bypassed the Cotswolds. Of course, the hills are not set in aspic and have, thankfully, engaged with the modern world, but today this is England at its most affluent. Villages exude a heady aroma of solid bank accounts and abound with expensive public schools, new cars and golf courses. But beneath the picture-postcard views, high property prices make it impossible for many locals to buy a home in their home town.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The better-than-bird's-eye view over Cheltenham and the River Severn, and towards the Brecon Beacons, from **Leckhampton Hill** (p116)
- Wandering the Windrush Way to cross tiny bridge after tiny bridge in the 'Venice of the Cotswolds' – **Bourton-on-the-Water** (p120)
- With only 30 miles of the Cotswold Way to go, being smoothed, stretched and soothed at a luxury spa in **Cheltenham** (p117)
- The gorgeous golden buildings of **Chipping Campden** (p111) – a fitting finish to a fantastic trail



INFORMATION

Maps

Useful maps for walking include Ordnance Survey (OS) Landranger 1:50,000 maps No 172 *Bristol & Bath*, 162 *Gloucester & Forest of Dean*, 163 *Cheltenham & Cirencester*, 150 *Worcester & the Malverns* and 151 *Stratford-upon-Avon*. The OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 45 *The Cotswolds* covers only the northern part of this area (north of Cirencester and east of Cheltenham).

For maps covering individual walks, see the Planning sections for each walk.

Books

There are shelves-full to choose from. Try *Cotswold Teashop Walks* by Jean Patefield,

and *Pub Walks in the Cotswolds* by Nigel Vile. For a quieter atmosphere, *Discovery Walks in the Cotswolds* by Julie Meech avoids the tourist honey pots. For a range of walks, with good maps and route descriptions, *The Cotswold Pathfinder Guide* (published by Jarrold) is ideal. The AA's *50 Walks in the Cotswolds* by Christopher Knowles provides an excellent variety of clear, concise routes, while Jarrold's *The Cotswolds* offers 20 routes of up to 5.5 miles.

For books specific to the Cotswold Way, see p110.

Guided Walks

The **Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** (☎ 01451-862000; www.cotswoldsaonb.com)