

# Get fit for free



While the chimes of Big Ben are still fresh in your mind, it's time to work off the festive excess. And if you love the outdoors, you won't need to pay for a gym membership, says **James Witts**

**I**f golf's a good walk spoiled, then soulless warehouses packed with weights and running machines that emit a debilitating metronomic din but carry you nowhere are the death knell of exercise.

Yes, it's that time of year where mince-pie gluttony leaves you looking down at your midriff in dismay. Six-pack Adonises or wafer-thin models on the covers of magazines sense your weakness, luring you to the newsstand, promising gym programmes that will transform you from beast to beauty in just 28 days. Don't believe a word of it...

Research reveals that we spend nearly £40m per year on wasted gym memberships, primarily down to forgotten monthly direct debits and 12-month contracts. But an invigorating Sunday walk costs nothing (minus the obligatory pub lunch, of course).

To maximise the great outdoors on a bike, in the garden or by the coast, there will be an initial outlay on gear and clothing, but that can be kept to a minimum. And what's fiscally rewarding is that ongoing costs can nestle at near zero.

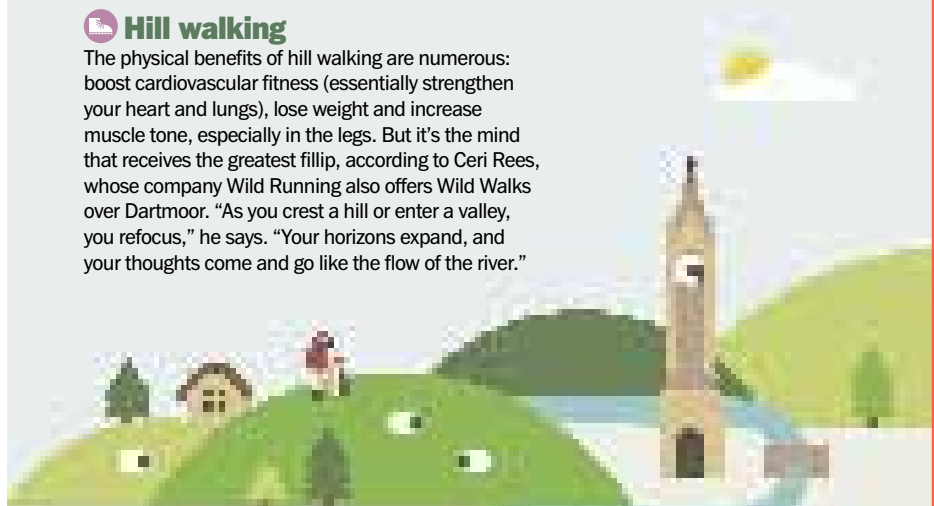
You'll also find that a greater variety of terrain or endeavours works a far greater range of muscle groups than gyms, whose range of torturous equipment focuses on one plane of movement – time and time again. And you're far more likely to disassociate exercise with pain if your mind is occupied by an activity that stimulates your senses as well as your synapses.

But the greatest bonus of heading outdoors over the gym? You don't need to discuss life, the universe and everything with your fellow man while standing stark naked in a musty changing room.

**There's nothing quite like heading outdoors, breathing in the fresh air and pumping oxygenated blood around your strengthening body. With that in mind, here are seven activities to get you started...**

## Hill walking

The physical benefits of hill walking are numerous: boost cardiovascular fitness (essentially strengthen your heart and lungs), lose weight and increase muscle tone, especially in the legs. But it's the mind that receives the greatest fillip, according to Ceri Rees, whose company Wild Running also offers Wild Walks over Dartmoor. "As you crest a hill or enter a valley, you refocus," he says. "Your horizons expand, and your thoughts come and go like the flow of the river."



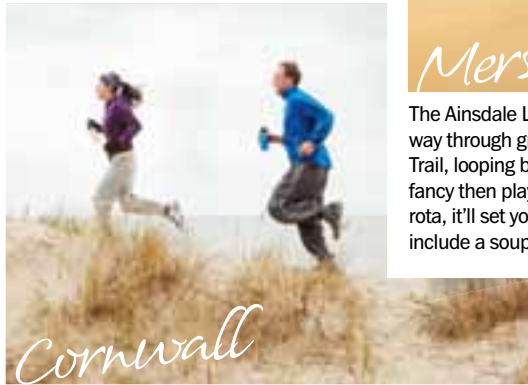
## Three hours of gardening

"My allotment provides a proper physical workout: pushing the wheelbarrow packed with tools up the hill, rescuing children from trees... but the real benefit is to my mental health," says garden writer Lia Leendertz. "I relish the space and always head there at least once a week to escape the demands of children." Of course, you don't need an allotment – there are myriad books out there showing you how to maximise small garden spaces – but remember the physical basics such as bending from the knees and keeping your back straight.



# Five perfect places for a run

The simplicity of running makes it one of the most appealing exercises around. Here are five of the finest easy country routes for beginners...



## Cornwall

Cornwall's north coast is blessed with rugged running spots. One of the most dramatic is from Porthtowan to Chapel Porth. It begins with a gentle incline before a cliff-side run. To your left is the Atlantic, to your right derelict tin mines. Once at Chapel Porth, if the tide's out, you can run back to Porthtowan on the beach. The loop measures about three miles.



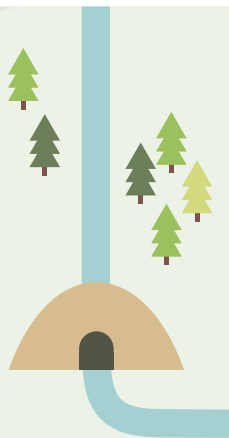
## Merseyside

The Ainsdale Loop is a whisker over 4½ miles and weaves its way through grassy sand dunes and follows the Trans Pennine Trail, looping back around the Royal Birkdale Golf Club. If you fancy then playing one of the finest courses on the British Open rota, it'll set you back £180 for a weekend 18-holer. That does include a soup and sandwich lunch for rapid refuelling!



## Gwynedd

The 3½-mile Harlech run begins at Upper Bron y Graig car park. The route flows across dunes and beaches but, for the most part, you'll be running on footpaths. Enjoy stunning views of Harlech Castle and the Irish Sea, and also look for the Maid of Harlech, a US Lockheed P-38 Lightning Second World War aircraft that was revealed by the shifting sands in 2007.



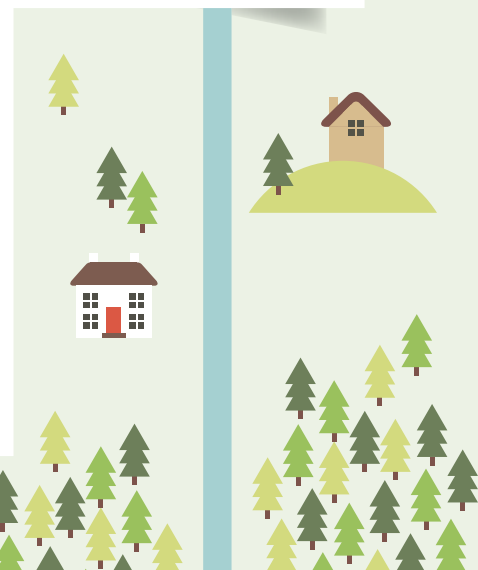
## Surrey

On the southern edge of Windsor Great Park lies Virginia Water Lake. The lake was dammed and flooded in 1753 and remained the UK's largest man-made lake until the creation of reservoirs. A circuit is just over four miles of paved and trail path, with points of beauty including the stunning Valley Gardens. It's mostly flat.



## Northumberland

Hadrian's Wall was built in AD122 by order of Emperor Hadrian. It took 15,000 men more than six years to construct and, at 73 miles long, links the North Sea on the east to the Irish Sea on the west (they certainly needed to be fit). We're not asking you to run the full route – maybe next year! – but a 4.8-mile primarily flat, beautiful route at Steel Rigg.



**James Witts** is a former editor of *220 Triathlon* magazine. He is now a freelance writer who specialises in running, cycling and outdoor pursuits. He also enjoys gardening, though is more adept at cycling for hours than cultivating flowers.