



A Way Through the Rocks: Groombridge

Distance: 14½ km=9 miles

easy walking

Region: East Sussex, Kent

Date written: 28-may-2011

Author: Stivaletti

Date revised: 30-oct-2013

Refreshments: Eridge Green, High Rocks, Groombridge

Last update: 19-nov-2020

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest) *maps in this guide should be sufficient*

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

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Forest, high rocks, views, streams, historic house, village

In Brief

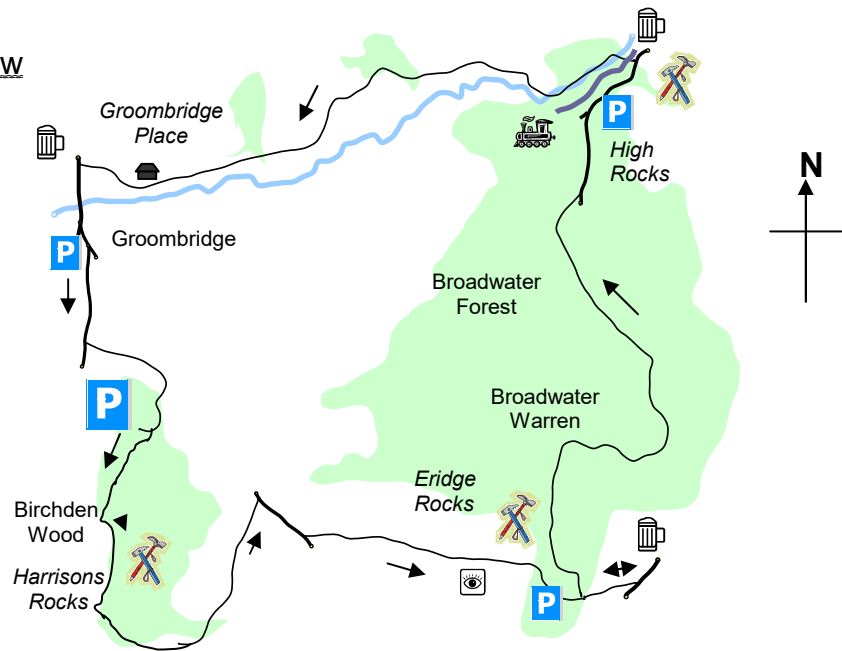
This walk is the essence of this series: a remarkable walk that you could never find just by looking at the map. It takes you through three great rock climbing zones near Tunbridge Wells (although the famous *High Rocks* are an unmissable optional extra at a small charge). Yet the paths here are all level and easy. You can observe the rock climbers as you go. *Never do any rock climbing on impulse: only do so with adequate equipment and supervision.* In between, there is forest, views of the Weald of Sussex, three pubs of great and contrasting character, a truly great country house and a chance to ride the Spa Valley Steam Railway.



There are some small patches of nettles during the last stretch so shorts are inadvisable unless you take the steam train from High Rocks. In winter or after rain, you will find some patches of mud, especially across the crop field in stage 1:3 and under the railway, and boots and a walking pole are advisable. In summer any solid footwear is adequate, preferably with a bit of grip in case the paths are slippery. In high summer you may need occasional long sleeves against the sprouting undergrowth. Your dog will thrive on this walk too.

The walk begins in the **Birchden Wood** car park near Groombridge in East Sussex, sometimes known as the **Harrisons Rocks** car park (**postcode TN3 9NJ** grid ref 533 364). Since this car park now charges (£4 for the day as 2016), a possible best option for parking is **Groombridge village**, postcode **TN3 9QY** (start in Leg 3 section [3](#).) The other car parks around the route are free. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

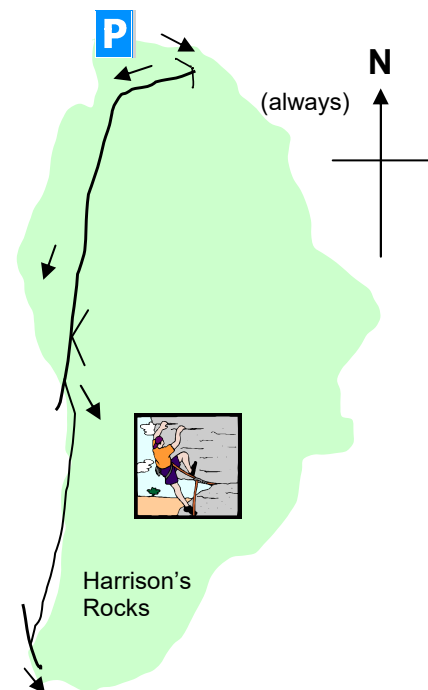
Bird's Eye View



The Walk

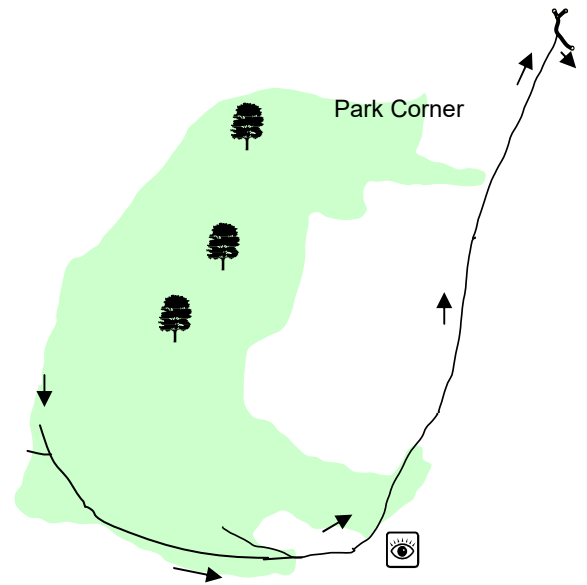
Leg 1: Harrison's Rocks to Eridge Rocks 5 km=3 miles

- This 2013 revision of the walk takes you **beneath** the Harrison's Rocks rather than above them as it did before. From the car park, make your way to the tarmac at the main entrance and locate an artistic fingerpost and a large hollow noticeboard. Turn **right** here in the direction of the *Forest Walk* on a gravel path immediately leading to a junction of tracks. Ignore the track ahead and turn sharp **right** between posts on a footpath marked with a yellow arrow, going beside the car park on your right. Your path crosses a ragged meadow, curves left through a muddy patch and soon runs beside a Spa Valley railway line. As you get close to the line, ignore a gap in the trees on your left but continue another 100m to go through a gate with a noticeboard indicating *Harrison's Rocks* and turn **right**. The path runs between two huge boulders and through trees, gradually approaching the line of rocks. The paths on your left would take you closer to the rocks to give you a view of the climbers but are all a dead end.



Harrison's Rocks are a series of limestone crags, publicly owned and managed by the British Mountaineering Council. Rock climbing is a complex science. Because of the fragility of the sandstone, the technique of "top-roping" is always used, with an anchor at the top, a carpet to protect the shell of the sandstone, a series of carabiners (metal loops) and a belayer (person at the bottom who gradually plays out the rope). The Rocks have been mapped out to an incredible degree over time and there are 379 routes, each with a grade and a name, such as "Groovy Graeme", "Breadknife Buttress" and "Rum and Ribena". See <http://www.ukclimbing.com/logbook/crag.php?id=57> for a full list. Several mountaineers first discovered their destiny here, including Julie Tullis, film-maker and conqueror, and ultimately victim, of K2.

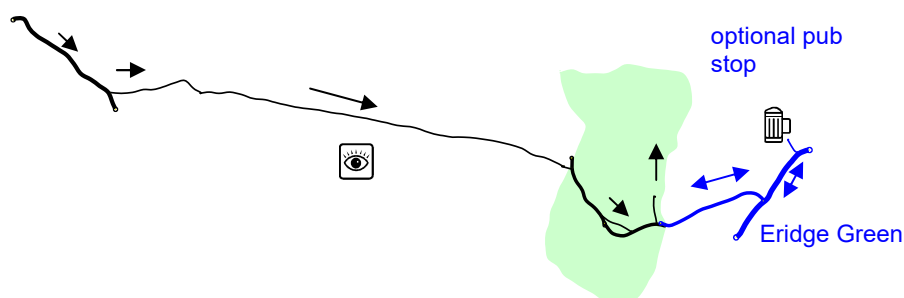
2 At the end, your path goes steeply down a bank on your right and rejoins the footpath with a gate just on your right. Turn **left** on the footpath, soon passing *Birchden Forge*. At a tarmac drive, keep ahead keeping a converted oasthouse on your right. The grassy path goes gently uphill under chestnuts, passes an unneeded gate and stile, and meets a path coming from your left. You are now on the High Weald Landscape Trail, a 90-mile=145-km long-distance path running from Rye to Horsham. The path curves left with great views right across the valley and, as you go, the path continues to curve until you are walking north. Go through a gate (or over a stile) at Pinstraw Farm and continue on the track, now rough tarmac. Finally, the track exits to a road at a junction at Park Corner. Turn sharp **right** onto Eridge Road.



3 In 200m, you pass a beautifully restored double Edwardian cottage. 80m after the cottage, turn **left** on a footpath, over a stile or through a metal gate. The path runs along the left-hand side of a rough meadow. It then runs over three bridges, one medium, one short, one long, and up into a very large field. Veer **right** along the edge. In 20m, at a post with a yellow arrow, turn **left** across the centre of the field, soon with great views behind you to Ashdown Forest.



(Sometimes there are illegal crops across the path: just cross the field, bearing slightly right, to pass to the right of the large house in the distance. 2019: Your path has been marked out by the farmer using a tractor, but crossing the crops can be briefly arduous. There is an alternative way on a farm track 100m to the north, going through Warren Farm.) Near the end, the path runs under large oak trees by a garden on your left. At the far side, you reach a drive. Turn **right** on the drive. In about 100m, turn **left** onto a signed footpath into woods (also part of the High Weald Way) downhill. The path rejoins the lane: turn **left**. Immediately on your left, you reach the Eridge Rocks car park.



A small diversion from here (1 km total) will take you to an extremely interesting pub for refreshments. Stay on the drive, passing some houses and reaching the main road, the A26, at Eridge Green, opposite the gates to Eridge Park, seat of the 6th Marquess of Abergavenny. Turn **left** on the main road, passing the tiny Holy Trinity Church, soon reaching the *Nevill Crest and Gun*.

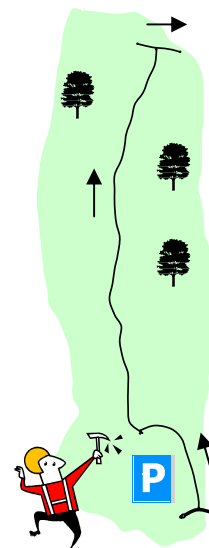


This 500-year old pub, originally a farm workers' dwelling house, gets its name from the Nevill family, whose monogram "A" for Abergavenny appears everywhere, and the cannons that were forged on the estate. The family motto, under the bull on the barn, "Ne Vile Velas" is a pun on the Nevill name and means "Wish nothing base". The pub has a most promising menu including a "Groombridge asparagus" starter and "slow roasted Chinese five spice belly pork", plus a selection of permanent and guest ales.

Leg 2: Eridge Rocks to High Rocks 4 km=2½ miles

- 1 Turn **left** through the car park (or right if you are coming back from the pub) and walk past the large eroded limestone rocks on your left.

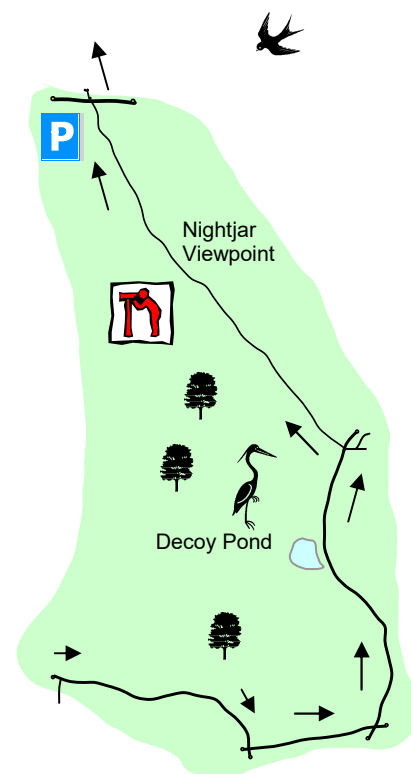
Eridge Rocks are not only another great climbing area but also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of the rare mosses, liverworts and ferns and woodland birds found there. The rocks are 135 million years old (i.e. early cretaceous) although beneath the visible part they belong to a single stony projection extending some 600 metres horizontally, the result of compacting the great sheets of sand that formed in the Wealden Lake. The popular climbing routes here also bear fanciful names, such as “Sandstorm”, “The Crunch” and “More Cake for Me”.



Keep to the main path at all times and when, in about 150m it curves sharp left by the last of the giant boulders, ignore a path which forks right downhill and proceed ahead as directed by a blue arrow on a post. Soon the path bends right again going past more rocks and possibly more climbers, both beginners and veterans. Stay on the main path avoiding all turnings off, however tempting. The sandy path finally leaves the rocks and goes past a junction: again keep straight ahead. It now runs through a wood of chestnut, probably an abandoned coppice. Eventually you reach a T-junction at a slanting information tablet under a huge veteran oak. Welcome to Broadwater Warren Nature Reserve, another surprise.

Broadwater Warren is run by the RSPB for this is one of the prime sites for observing “star species” such as the goldcrest, woodcock and especially the nightjar. The Warren has been extensively repaired, removing unwanted species such as rhododendrons, clearing the ponds and reproducing the physical features that earlier land dwellers would have known. Special events are held, including a night watch for the elusive nightjar.

- 2 The Nature Reserve has so many temptations: if at any time, you get lost, ask anyone for the main Broadwater Warren car park. Turn **right** on a wide track. In 180m, at a post, the path veers right a little. In 120m, at another post with a RSPB sign, turn **left**, avoiding narrower paths ahead and to the right. Stay on the main path, soon avoiding a lesser left fork. In 200m, at the next post, turn **left**, just as before avoiding narrower paths ahead and to the right. The path winds downhill and passes a pond on the left. This is the Decoy Pond, now restored, where you can watch dragonflies and other wildlife on the water. [2020: various information boards have disappeared: soon to be restored, we hope.] The path passes a wooden gate, rises in an open area and runs through sparse birch and alder. In about 200m, you reach a cross-tracks by a post, at a boundary of fields, known as the central crossroads. [Care! don't miss this turning.] Turn **left** here at an angle on another straight track. As usual, avoid turnings off.

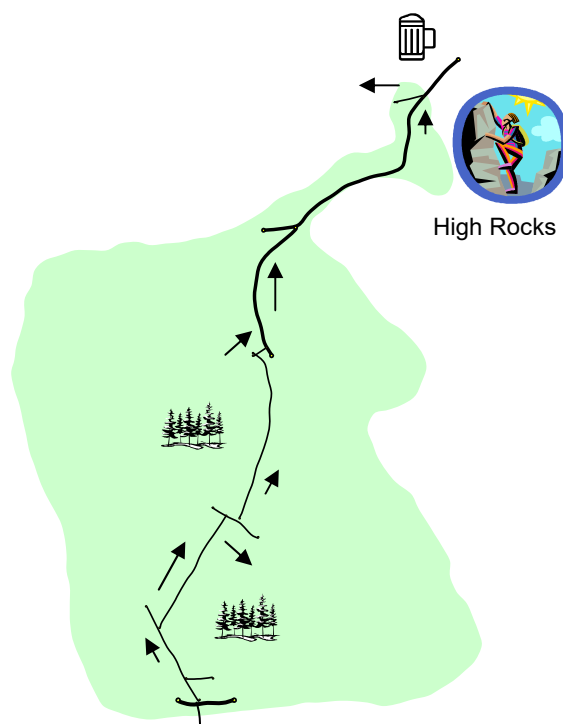


The fields on each side have been cleared of pines to allow the heather to re-generate. This is the Nightjar Viewpoint, important at the beginning of June when this elusive bird comes to life after dark and where woodcock and glow worms can also be seen. At the end of the path, go through a wooden swing-gate on the **left** into the car park and **right** again out to a lane, leaving the Warren.

- 3 Cross straight over the lane, beside a double wooden gate and through an untidy felled area into Broadwater Forest. Almost immediately, ignore a track on the right and stay on the main path ahead through the forest. In about 100m, take a wide straight path at an angle on the **right**. Follow this path to its end at a lane. Turn **right** on the lane for just 20m and then **left** through a fine wooden gate on a stony narrow path between beautiful but private Broadview Wood and Broad Bow Wood (a “permissive” path as distinct from a public footpath). In about 250m, you reach a fire warning notice where the path bends sharp left. **Leave** the path here by turning **right** to a lane and turn **left** it. At a road junction, veer **right** on a woodland lane Hillswood Road in the direction of *High Rocks* given by the signpost. You pass an exotic pine on the right and finally, at the top of a rise, reach High Rocks. Your route continues sharp **left** at a concealed footpath sign just before a stone building with some white shiplap cladding. However, first you will want to go a little further along the lane to the *High Rocks* pub and restaurant on the left and the entrance to the rocks on the right.

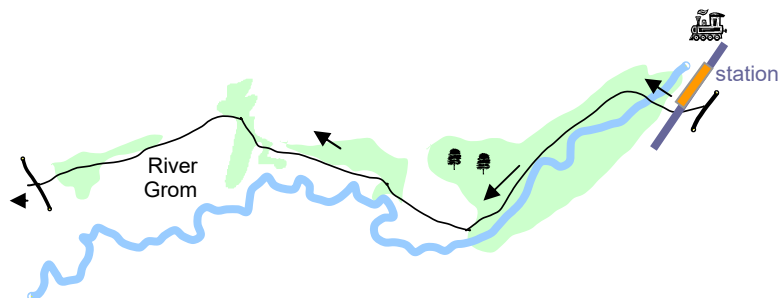


The High Rocks are another area of huge sandstone rocks but they form part of a visitors' centre comprising the hotel / restaurant, the High Rocks themselves and a station on the Spa Valley Steam Railway. Tickets for the High Rocks can be bought in the pub, currently £5.00 per adult. The rocks form some evocative natural shapes such as the “Giant Toad” and the “Wishing Well” and there are several linked walkways (built in the 1800s) named the Aerial Walk to give you a view from the highest points as you walk round. There is evidence of Stone Age settlements in the rocks and some of the shelters can be seen. For several centuries visitors have come here from Tunbridge Wells as part of the “rest cure” that made that town fashionable. The High Rocks restaurant has an international menu and the pub has a beautiful large stepped terrace. You should bear in mind though that the whole terrace is often reserved for a wedding party. Indeed this is a prime location for weddings, pictures being taken under the rocks (obviously not “on the rocks”).



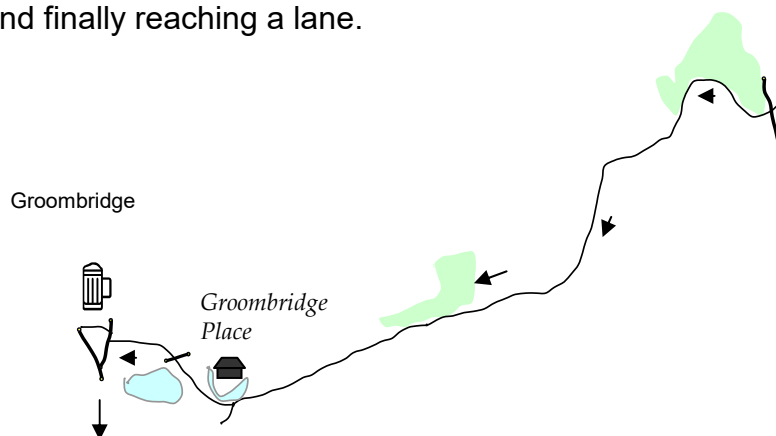
Leg 3: High Rocks to Groombridge 5½ km=3½ miles

- 1 Return to the footpath sign by the stone building mentioned at the end of the previous section, turn **right** and follow the path downhill. On your right is the High Rocks station of the Spa Valley (steam) Railway.



The Spa Valley Railway runs between Tunbridge Wells, High Rocks, Groombridge and Eridge. The schedule is rather complex but as a general rule the trains run April to October at weekends and holidays and some Thursdays and Fridays. Times are infrequent and you must have the timetable, which can be downloaded from: http://www.spavalleyrailway.co.uk/2011SpVR_Timetable.pdf. The last train is usually at 16:22 (15:37 in low season). The fare to Groombridge is reasonable at £2.50 per adult. Some other day, you can do a full return trip with fish and chips, real ales or a 3-course dinner.

If you will not be letting the train take the strain, continue downhill, go through an arch beneath the railway (look out for mud!), cross a bridge over the River Grom and veer **left** on a wide path through woodland. You are now in Kent. The stream on your left runs through an area rich in a variety of ferns and you may see deer cross your path. Keep on this well-defined path [now infested with balsam] till you go through a new metal kissing gate beneath a huge oak. Go ahead on a grassy path, ignoring a path uphill on the right. Stay on the right-hand side of the grassy space and, at a post with yellow arrows, go **right** through a new metal kissing gate and **left** along an enclosed path. Shortly, the winding path enters open woodland. You reach a junction with several arrows on a post: go through a metal gate ahead, avoiding the bridleway uphill to the right, and over a concrete bridge. Keep ahead across an area with several driveways, onto a rough track, going past a pond on the right and a farm shack [2014: burnt down] under a huge oak and finally reaching a lane.



- 2 Cross straight over the lane to the remains of a stile and follow an enclosed path with, on your left, a wastewater treatment works. The path, rather overgrown, runs beside a metal paling fence and another part of the works and eventually turns left by a wooden fence. Cross a stony drive, with some converted oasthouses on the right, part of a settlement called

Pokehill, to a footpath opposite. Go over a stile [Sep 2020: broken, you need to climb over the wooden fence] here and along the right-hand side of a large pasture. After some distance, the path crosses the River Grom by a wooden bridge, just before a large wooden children's Pirate ship. Continue ahead for 150m and then go over a stile beside a metal gate to traverse the grassy meadow. Ahead is Groombridge Place and sometimes you will see the instruments of jousting or archery in the field. Walk with a canal on your right into a pasture. Go through a small wooden gate into the grounds of the House and continue beside the ancient moat and red brick walls on your right.

Groombridge Place was built in 1662 by Philip Packer, with the aid of Christopher Wren. His father had bought the ancient estate from the Sackvilles who had gambling debts. His son, also Philip, was soon deep in debt and set about finding an heiress to marry. He married Ann, 21 years his senior, secretly but was thrown into the Fleet prison for kidnap. All for nothing, as Ann turned out to be incurably mad. The house lay empty during the early 1700s and was taken over by a violent gang of smugglers known as the Groombridge Gang who met in the Crown Inn. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle visited Groombridge Place often and based his Sherlock Holmes story "The Valley of Fear" there. He also witnessed the "ghost on the moat" a certain Dave Fletcher an ostler who had drowned in the moat and was eager to tell any passer-by his story. The house is still privately owned but the grounds are open to the public and are a huge tourist attraction. As well as the immaculate formal gardens, there is a celebrated enchanted forest, boasting a zeedonk and alpacas, and a centre for birds of prey. Peter Greenaway's film "The Draughtsman's Contract" was filmed here and several other dramas have made use of it as an authentic setting.

Cross the driveway and continue by a metal fence, veering left in the corner. If you look behind you now, you will get a fine view of the house with its avenue of trees. The footpath runs between ponds, up steps, right beside a big pond, over a tarmac drive and through a small metal gate. Veer **left** here across the meadow heading to the right of the church of St John the



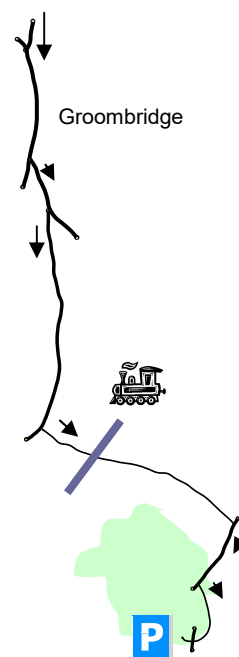
Evangelist. *This church was erected 1625 as a private chapel by John Packer, father of Philip.* Finally, you emerge at the beautiful little Green of Groombridge village. Close by on the other side, is the *Crown Inn*.



Dating from 1585, the Crown Inn is one of the oldest pubs in Britain (in contrast to many old houses later converted to pubs). It was the HQ of the Groombridge Gang (see above) and was rumoured to be connected to the House by a secret tunnel (though none has been found). Quite apart from its history, the Crown is one of the cosiest pubs imaginable with a dining room offering home-made pies and other things, adjacent to the oak-beamed bottle-hung bar that has a selection of local real ales. The Crown Inn is open all day at weekends. It is also a B&B with period rooms.

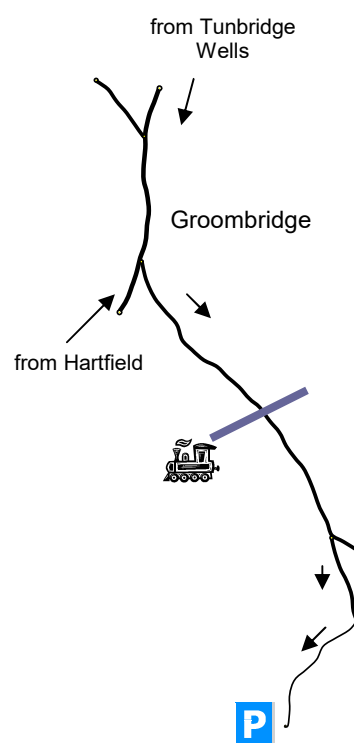
The diarist Thomas Turner was born in Groombridge (see the East Hoathly walk in this series).

- 3 Turn **left** on the main road through the village, past the church, going past the entrance to Groombridge Place, over a bridge and back into East Sussex. At a mini-roundabout, fork **left** on Station Road, going past a little catholic church (dedicated to Pius V, nemesis of Queen Elizabeth I) and, by the Post Office, fork **right** on Corseley Road. Follow the road gently uphill till you reach the white pillars of The Crossways. Keep straight on here, avoiding the left fork, taking the tarmac footpath on the right, parallel to the road, passing a white arrow for the High Weald Walk (HWW). Soon you pass the little church of St Thomas The Apostle on your left and a primary school. Immediately after the school, by the boundary fence of the playground, turn **left** on a tarmac footpath marked with a wooden post. Go through a wide swing-gate, down steps and across a bridge over the railway. Some old railway carriages, like an open-air museum, are parked here on a branch line. Go up some steps, through a metal swing-gate and between meadows, with fine views right. Go through another metal swing-gate and along an enclosed path. At the end, go through one more metal swing-gate and turn **right** on a lane. Continue along the lane soon reaching the Birchden Wood car park where the walk began.



Getting there

By car: If coming from Tunbridge Wells, take the A264 west and turn **left** the B2110 signposted *Groombridge*. Groombridge is also accessible via Edenbridge via Hartfield and Withyham. At the mini roundabout take the exit into Station Road (the first exit if coming from the north). 350m after crossing the railway, take the **right** fork into Eridge Road (signposted *Crowborough*). In 200m, take a narrow track on the right, just before the start of a long row of red-brick houses. The track not signposted but there is a large plaque at the entrance indicating *Harrisons Rocks*. Follow the track to the car park in about 300m.



By bus/train: take the Spa Valley Railway from Tunbridge Wells West or bus 291 from Tunbridge Wells or East Grinstead. Check the timetables.

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