



Hindleap and Vachery Ashdown Forest, Chelwood Gate, Forest Row

Distance: 15km (9½ miles), easy-to-moderate walking

Region: East Sussex

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Refreshments: Chelwood Gate, Forest Row

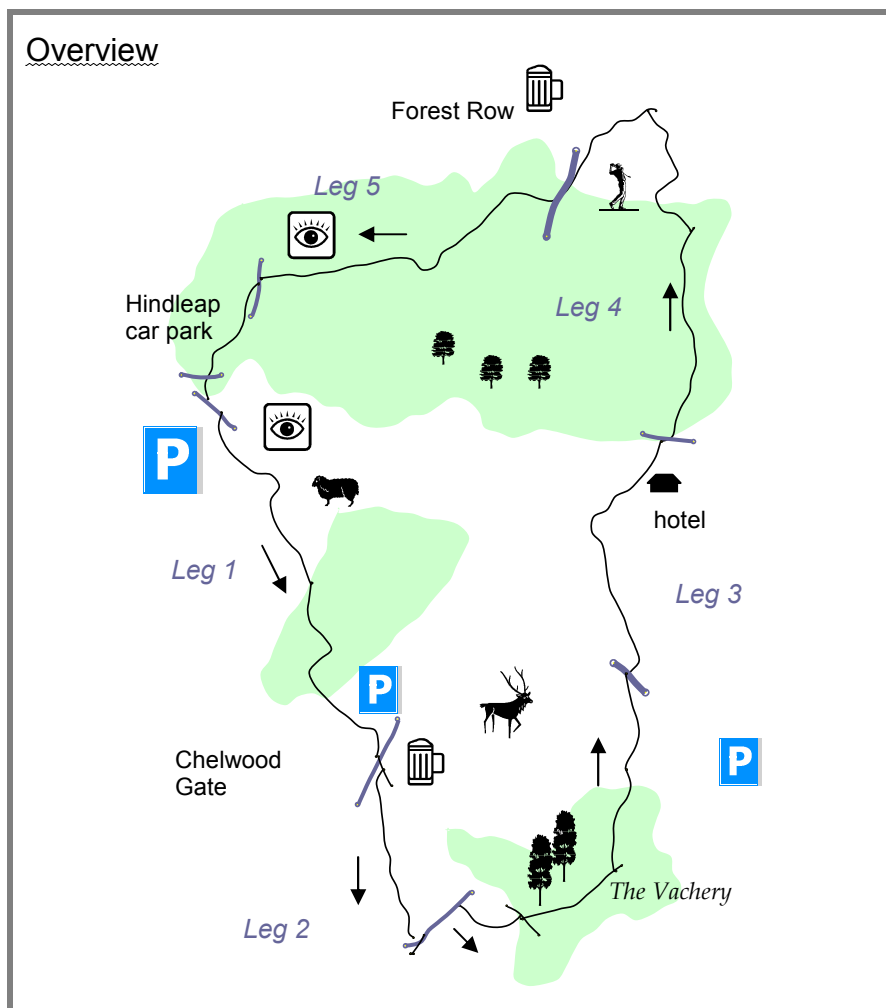
Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest)

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Forest, views, parkland

In Brief

This is a circular walk in East Sussex through a magnificent hilly forested landscape with many magical encounters. Ashdown Forest is not a single



forest but a complex arrangement of wild woods, landscaped forest, deep stream valleys, open parkland and heath. This walk tries to show you all its best features with constantly changing views in different directions.



This walk uses many uncharted, but entirely permissive, paths and demands care if you don't want to get lost. The terrain was completely dry when the walk was planned in summer, but there was some dried mud, so boots are preferable to normal shoes. There are some nettles, so shorts are not a good idea. There is only **one** stile. This walk would be ideal with a dog.

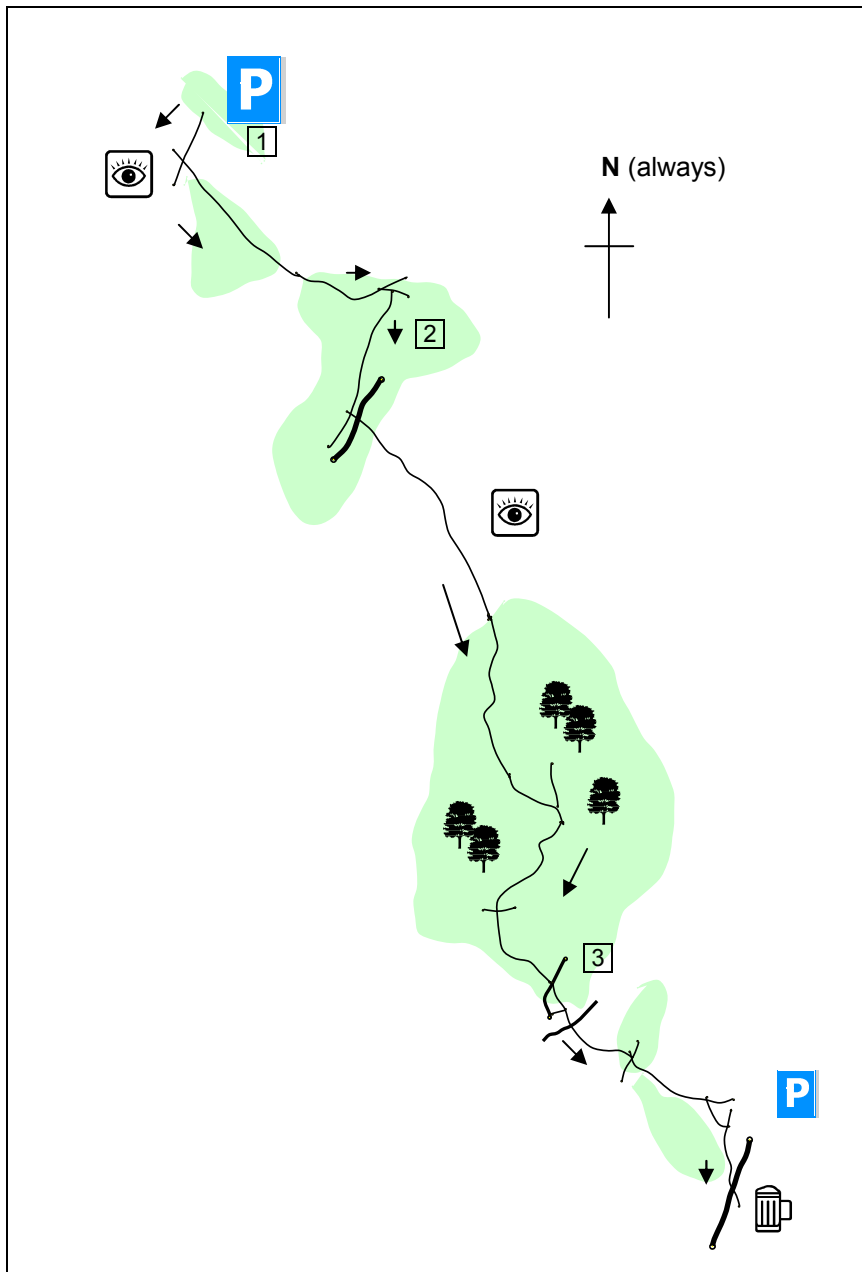
The walk begins at the **Hindleap** car park, east of Sharpthorne. For a refreshment break at Chelwood Gate, another starting point may be preferable. For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Leg 1: Hindleap to Chelwood Gate 4km (2½ miles)

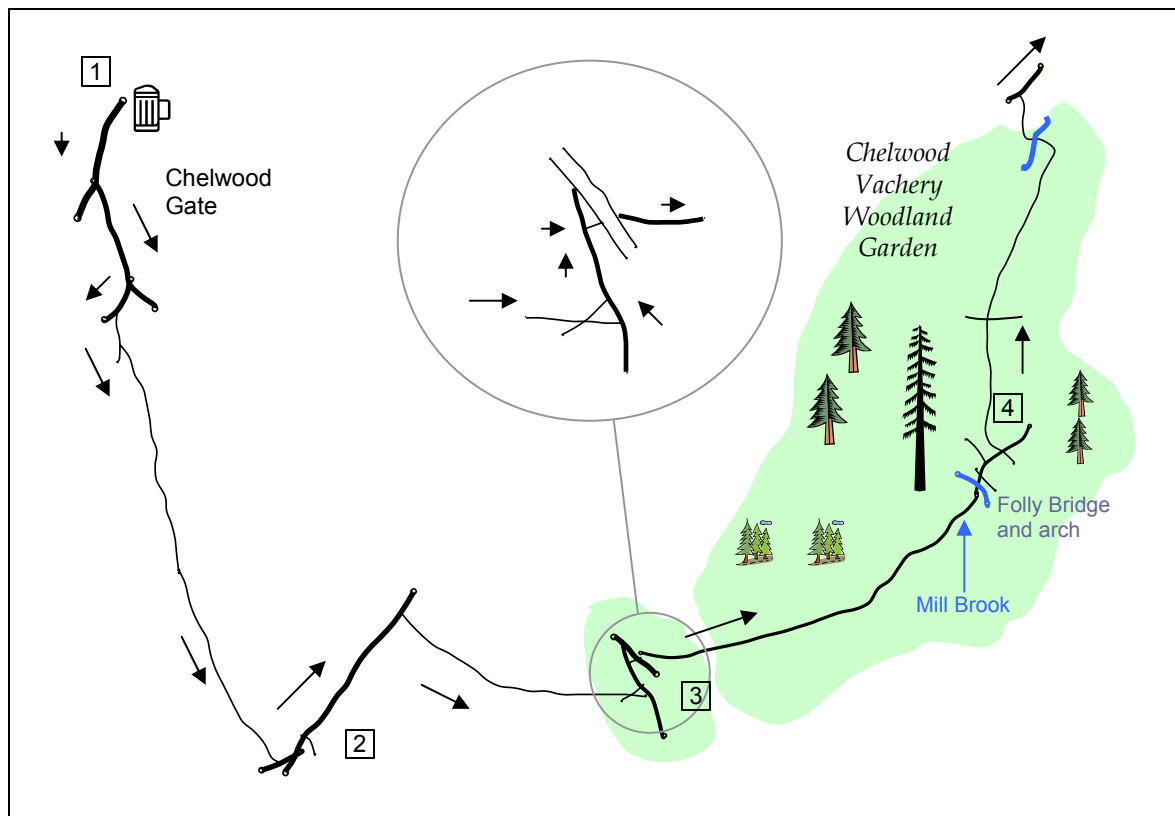
- 1 **See map overleaf.** Immediately on arriving at the car park, you have a fine view south over the Weald of Kent and East Sussex, as well as some of the terrain to be experienced today. Go across the grass towards the view south, past a slanted information table on the subject of rabbits. 15m after the table, turn **left** on a wide level path. Keep ahead for some distance, with the thicker wood always on your right. In 500m, the path forks into two smaller paths. The left-hand path leads up to a pictorial *no horses* sign but the walk takes the **right**-hand fork. In just 20m, turn **right** again on a path downhill deep into the woods.
- 2 In 150m, the path comes out of the tall trees into the light. In another 50m, leave the path by forking **left** on a narrow path. *Don't miss this turn.* The short path leads to a road by a wooden barrier. Cross the road to a finger-posted bridleway opposite. The bridleway leads through a gate with great views ahead, continues on a fenced path, goes through two more metal gates and descends wide steps. Go past an unneeded metal gate, over a horse-sturdy wooden bridge and up a bank. You now have a lovely sandy wide path for some distance across Press Ridge Warren. As you proceed, two more paths join from the left, another branches off right, a wide crossing path intersects. Finally, you meet a junction with a wide straight path joining from the left and a track branching off left to a horizontal steel bar. Veer **left** here on this second track, going under the horse-proof bar. (If you're not into limbo dancing, keep straight ahead to a fence and take two left turns.)
- 3 Keep ahead across a driveway on a wide track, with a cricket pitch on your left. The path rises into a more open area. Avoid a path forking left and soon veer right to join a path coming from the left. Continue to a road junction and continue ahead on the main road. The Red Lion pub is on the left. *The Red Lion (Shepherd Neame) is an old pub with a large extension used as a dining room serving traditional food.*





Leg 2: Chelwood Gate to the Vachery 2½km (1½ miles)

- 1 **See map overleaf.** Shortly a road sign informs you that you are in Chelwood Gate. Fork **left** onto Beaconsfield Road (signposted to Nutley). Where this residential road curves left, fork **right** into Sandy Lane. In just 50m, turn **left** through an entrance in the fence onto a marked footpath. *Don't miss this turn.* Keep to the left and, just 50m from the entrance, leave the drive by forking **left** on a footpath. The footpath is indicated with a stake and a homemade sign. The path runs past a fine garden, through a dark area of laurels and holly, across a small grassy meadow, through a swing-gate and by a wire fence along a more overgrown meadow with a boardwalk, indicating that the ground might be marshy in the less clement months. Finally there is an enclosed path, a stile and a gravel drive emerging at a road next to *Woodlands*. Turn **left** on the road.



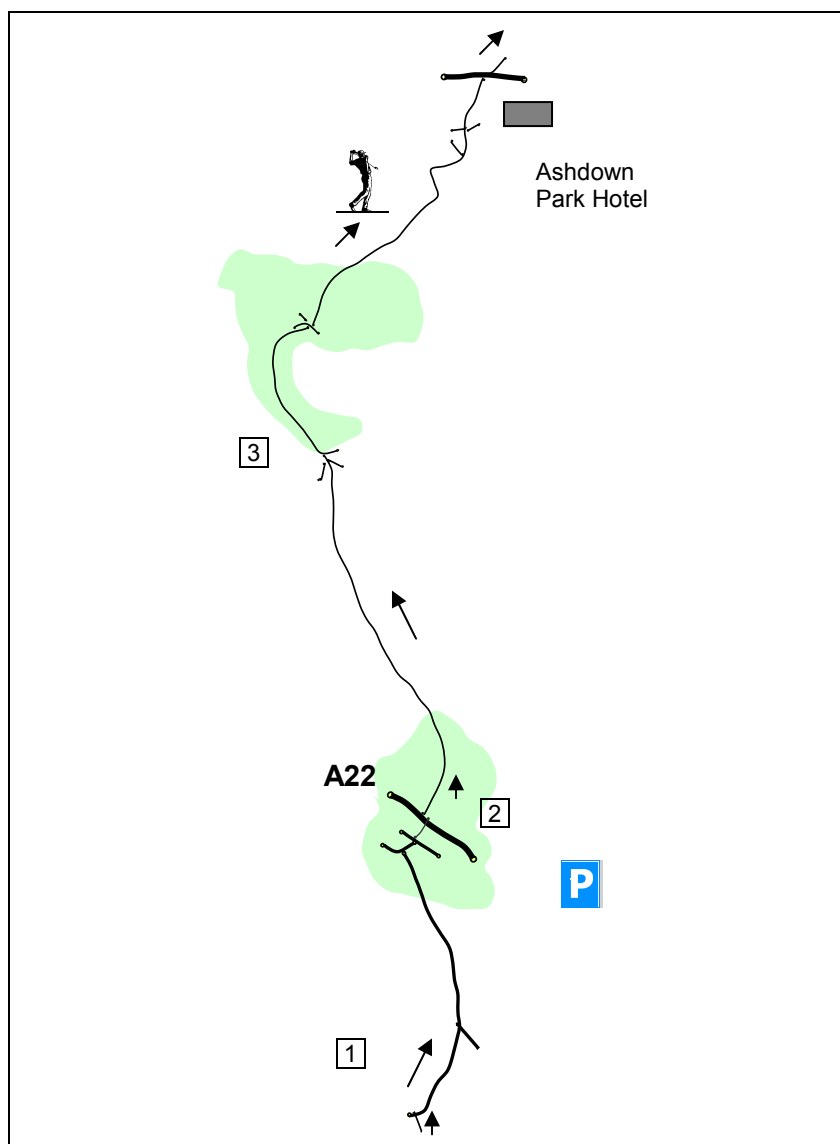
2 Ignore a lane right marked as a footpath and after about 200m turn **right** on a narrow footpath just after *Andorra*. *Don't miss this turn*. The path widens after passing the garden, is fenced at first and then runs briefly through open woodland, crosses the drive to *Sun House* and reaches a T-junction with a stony track. Turn **left** on the track, thus leaving the official footpath. Just 20m before the junction with the main road ahead, turn **right** on a narrow path and cross the main road to a marked bridleway opposite.

3 Follow this wide sandy track into the trees and downhill through Beacon Wood. You reach the Mill Brook at the bottom. *This spot one of the Forest's secret gems, with the brook and the Folly Bridge beyond*. You have a choice of stepping stones or a narrow wooden bridge to cross the stream. Go through the arch of the stone Folly Bridge (which was built as a pleasing feature of the landscape rather than as a practical necessity) and continue ahead on a track that runs through the Woodland Garden of Chelwood Vachery.

The Vachery was a woodland shelter for cows. The woods here were royal land until the late 1600s. The spectacular conifers that you will see shortly were planted just after the turn of the 1900s by the new owner Sir Stuart Samuel as part of an arboretum. The Woodland Garden is now managed by the Ashdown Forest Conservators so, miraculously, it is as accessible as other parts of the Forest.

4 The gates either side are all marked NO HORSES. The route goes through the **second** gate on the left. This is 110m from the arch. Turn **left** through the gate. The path passes through a magical landscape with many conifers including a huge western hemlock. At a crossing path, go straight over. Eventually, the path bends left to cross the stream. In 20m, keep to the **right** bend in the path and emerge onto the open heath. Keep ahead through bracken to a very wide sandy track and turn **right**.

Leg 3: The Vachery to Ashdown Park Hotel 2½km (1½ miles)

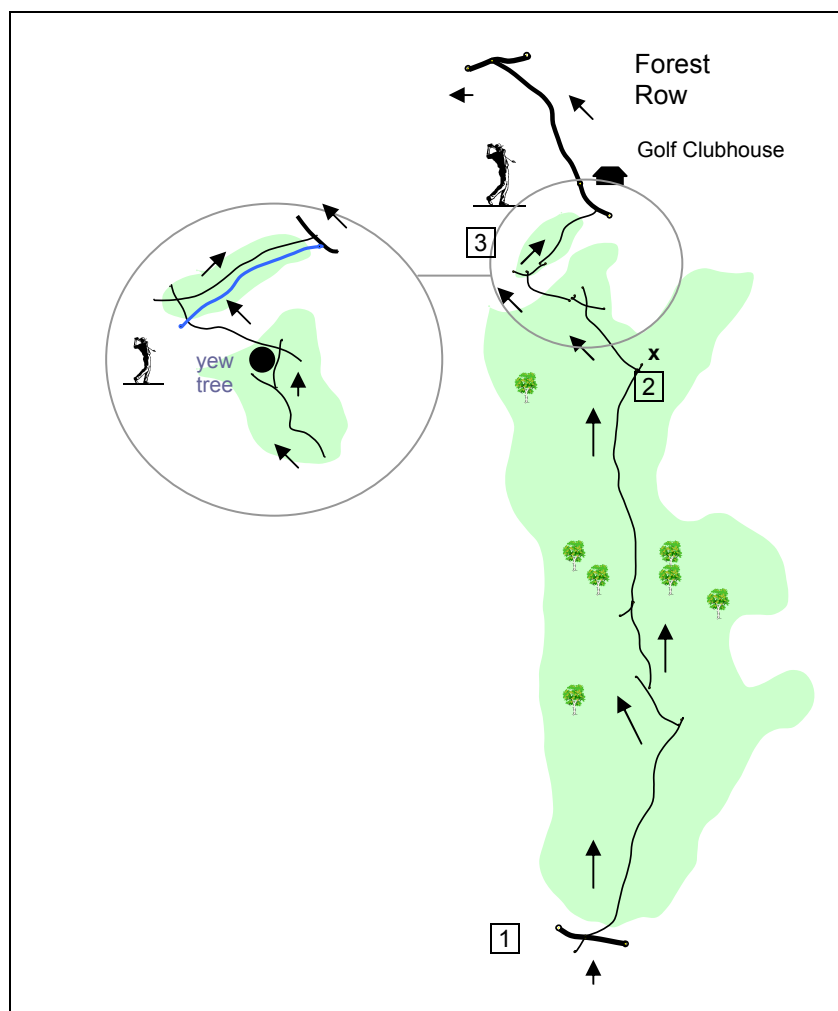


- 1 In 200m, avoid a track sharp right. Eventually the track bends right, where you ignore another track off to the left, and reaches a T-junction with a track that runs parallel to the main road, the A22. Cross straight over the track ahead and find a very narrow path through the band of trees taking you out to the road. Cross the road carefully and continue on the other side through the gates of *Lewes Park Cottages* on a footpath marked with a yellow arrow.
- 2 The path goes past cottages into trees and curves left, running past a few small buildings until suddenly you pass by an unneeded stile and reach a fine grassy path with the wide open landscape of Ashdown Park Hotel all around. The Hotel itself with its church is in full view ahead to the right.
- 3 On the other side of the meadow, the footpath keeps ahead on a grassy track between woodland on the right and pastures on the left, usually grazed by llamas. *In early summer, these pastures have a spectacular coating of buttercups.* It then joins a tarmac drive with a pond on the left and various walks with alluring names signposted for hotel guests. Continue past the pitch 'n' putt to pass the main hotel building on your right. The footpath zig-zags left-right and follows the yellow arrows through the car park and up a grassy slope between posts on the other side. It comes out to the road via a small yard.

Leg 4: Ashdown Park Hotel to Forest Row 2½km (1½ miles)

- 1 Cross the road straight over to a wide footpath directly opposite. Stay on the main path avoiding tracks off. After some distance, you see ahead a metal gate marked *private*. 20m before the gate, at a homemade sign, turn **left** and in a few paces turn **right** on a rough track. Soon you come to a fork. Take the **right** fork, really straight ahead, a smoother path. Soon the path is joined by the rough track again. *In late spring the woods here are carpeted with bluebells.* After some further distance, you can see ahead that the path is about to come out of the dense woodland into the light (in fact, onto the open golf links). 50m **before** the end of the woodland, you need to turn **left**. The path is unmarked and not very clear at the start where it winds over tree roots.

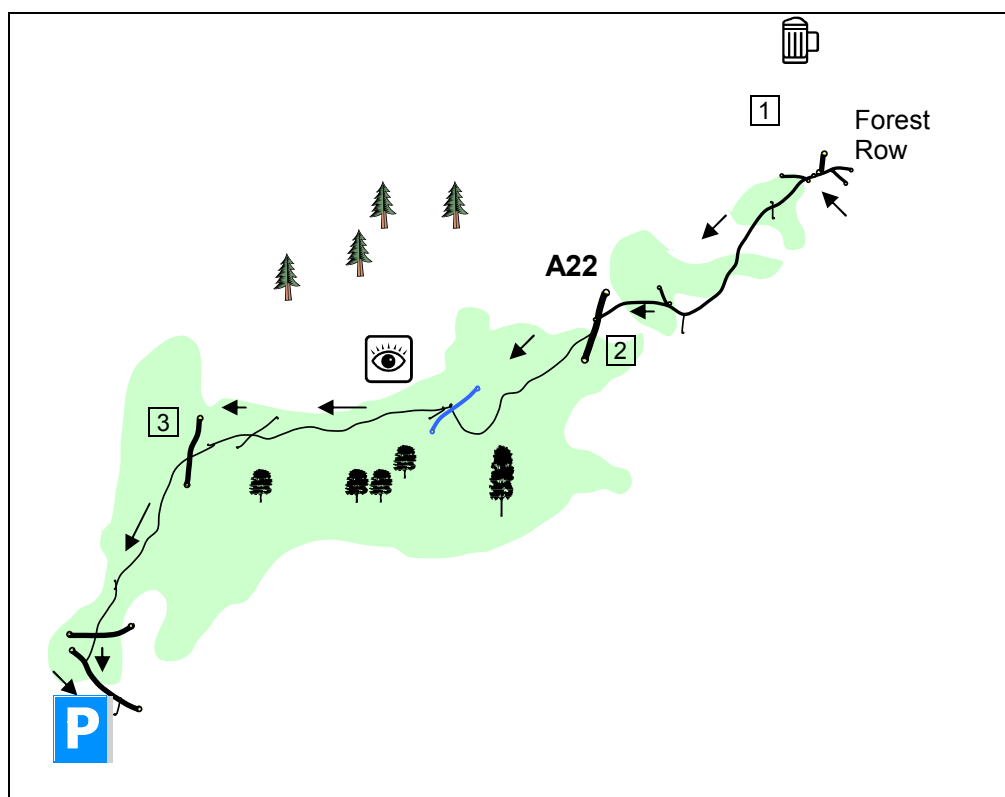
Ashdown Forest is one of the few areas where maps do not show the footpaths accurately. The footpath that branches left on the Explorer map across the golf links is not in the place indicated and is not signposted anywhere. The route described here tries to recreate it.



- 2 The path becomes clearer despite branches strewn in the path. Soon on your right is a huge yew tree on a bank. Veer **right** in front of the yew, go over several more banks and turn **left** at a crossing path. This path takes you to a junction of paths on the edge of the golf links. Cross a (usually dry) stream bed at a convenient point and cross the golf links (checking first for flying golf balls) to a little wooden bridge which you cross into a strip of woodland.

- 3 Turn **right** in the woodland and follow a path running through the strip with a stream on the right. Continue until the end of the woodland strip and break cover (checking again for flying golf balls) aiming for the track that runs between a cottage on the right and the clubhouse on the left. Turn **left** on the track and walk past the clubhouse and alongside the car park on the main drive. On the map, the footpath cuts straight across the greens but it seems kinder to the golfers to use their own access road. *Royal Ashdown Forest Golf Club has two courses, the Old and the West. They seem quite relaxed about sharing their greens with walkers and many of the players look unlikely to reach you with a golf ball.* At the end of the drive, turn **left** into Shalesbrook Lane. Or, for a refreshment diversion, keep straight on along Chapel Lane you will reach the centre of Forest Row where there are four pubs and other amenities.

Leg 5: Forest Row to Hindleap 4km (2½ miles)



- 1 In 25m, fork **left** on the lane to Tompset's Bank. Ignore a footpath left at a 3-way post and soon after avoid Inkpen Lane that forks right. The lane passes tracks left and right. After *Cherry Croft*, the lane becomes stony. After *Deerhyrst Cottage* the lane bends right. Stay on the main track as it bends left again by the entrance to *Monks* and follow it all the way to the main road.
- 2 Cross the road, going over a bank to the sidewalk, and turn **left** on it. In about 100m turn **right** onto a footpath by a fence into woods. Keep to the main path at all times, avoiding all turnings off. The path runs for some distance staying within audible distance of the main road, until it bends right down into the valley. It goes over a bridge and then steeply up the other side through bracken to the top of a hill. *The landscape all around here is memorable with dense bracken, dotted everywhere with isolated conifers.* The path runs through a long patch of woodland and then rises again over

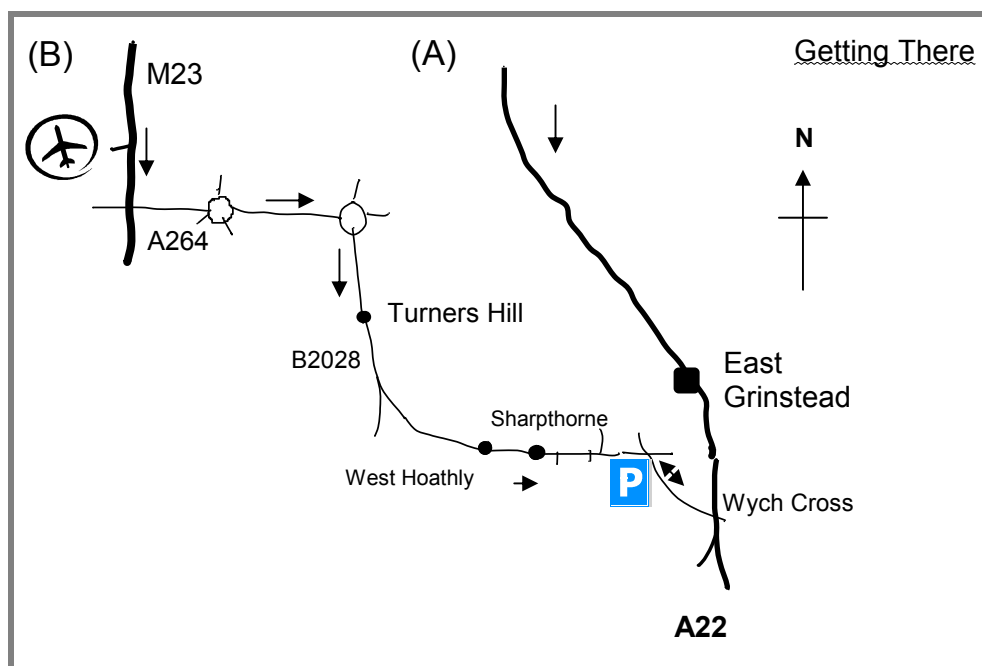
the hillside. *It is pleasant here to turn around to admire the views to the north.* At the top, the path meets a wider sandy track coming from the right. Veer **right** here joining the wider path, ignoring the narrower path branching left towards the woods. The track leads to a road.

- 3 Cross the road to a track opposite and immediately turn **left** on a path that runs at first parallel to the road. After some distance in attractive and varied woodland, the path crosses a dry stream bed and forks. Take the **left** fork, staying under the trees. Soon after, avoid a minor path forking right. The path bends left, crosses Priory Road, continues over an open area and meets another road. The car park is a short distance on the **left**.

Getting there

By car: the **Hindleap** car park (NS grid ref 403325) is just off the road to Wych Cross near Sharpthorne.

- (A) If you are coming from the **east** side of the M25, take the A22 through East Grinstead and Forest Row and turn right (west) at the Wych Cross traffic lights. The car park is 1 mile (1.5km) on the left.
- (B) If you are coming from the **west** side of the M25, with easy access to the M23, the following route is recommended (see the Map) as it is more interesting and avoids East Grinstead. Take the M23 past Gatwick Airport and turn **left** at the next junction, the A264 (*East Grinstead*). At the second roundabout, turn **right**, signposted *Turner's Hill*. A mile after Turner's Hill the road forks. Take the **left** fork signposted *West Hoathly and Sharpthorne*. Pass through both these large villages, and another 2 miles (3km) after Sharpthorne, turn **right** at a crossroads signposted *Wych Cross*. The car park is a short distance on the right.



By bus/train: Metrobus 291 runs from East Grinstead station to Forest Row, *including* Sundays: check the timetable. Metrobus 270 runs from East Grinstead station to Chelwood Gate, similarly.