



Hindleap and Vachery Ashdown Forest, Chelwood Gate, Forest Row

Distance: 15 km=9½ miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: East Sussex

Date written: 17-jun-2010

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Refreshments: Chelwood Gate, Forest Row

Last update: 19-apr-2017

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest)

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

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Forest, magical glades, heath, arboretum, views, parkland

In Brief

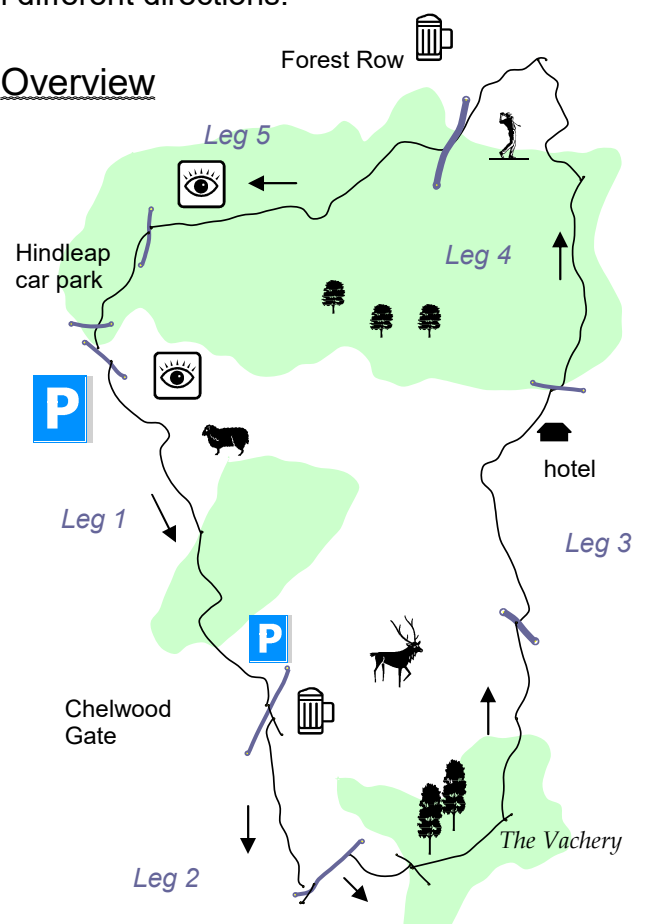
This is a circular walk in East Sussex through a magnificent hilly forested landscape with many magical encounters. Ashdown Forest is not a single forest but a complex arrangement of wild woods, landscaped forest, deep stream valleys, open parkland and heath. This walk tries to show you all its best features with constantly changing views in different directions.

Ashdown Forest has many uncharted paths so you need to be careful in following this text. 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** (pet friendly) stile. This walk would be ideal with a dog.



The walk begins at the **Hindleap** car park, east of Sharpthorne, nearest **postcode RH18 5JQ**, grid ref TQ 403 324. For a half-way refreshment break at Chelwood Gate, a start at **Forest Row**, postcode **RH18 5AZ**, may be preferable. For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Overview



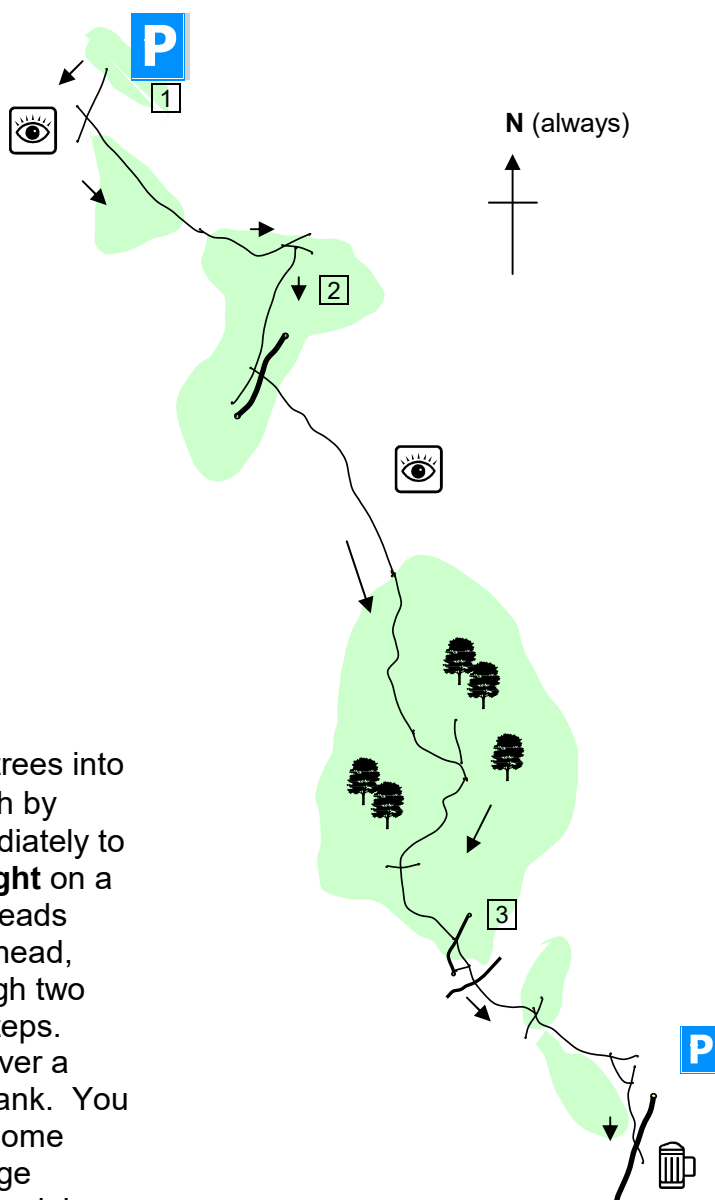
The Walk

Leg 1: Hindleap to Chelwood Gate 4 km=2½ miles

- 1 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 tablet on the subject of rabbits. 20m after the tablet, turn **left** on a wide level path between gorse bushes, passing a bench on your left. Keep ahead for some distance, with the thicker wood always on your right. In 300m, ignore two paths into the wood on your right. 200m further, the path forks into two smaller paths. Avoid the left-hand path which leads up to a pictorial *no horses* sign and take the **right**-hand fork. Immediately turn sharp **right** again on a path downhill deep into the woods.

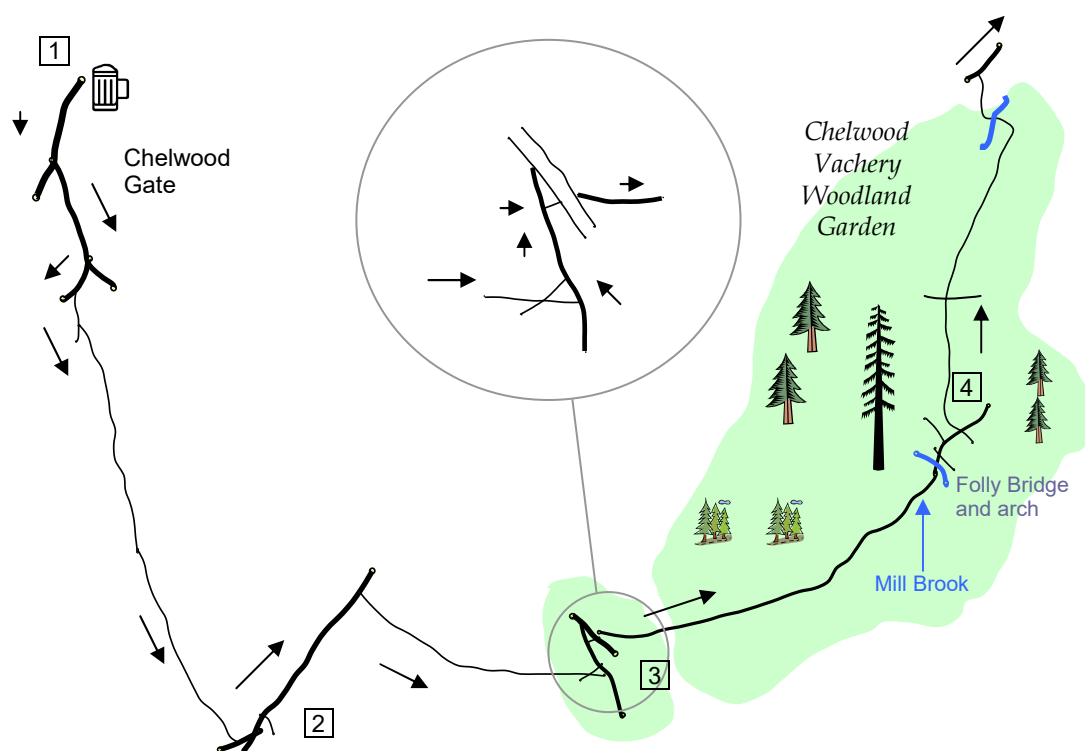
- 2 In 150m, the path comes out of the tall trees into the light. In another 70m, **leave** the path by turning **left** through a gap leading immediately to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** for 10m and **right** on a fingerposted bridleway. The bridleway leads through a metal gate with great views ahead, continues on a fenced path, goes through two more metal gates and descends wide steps. You 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 through the pines of Press Ridge Warren. As you proceed, two more paths join from the left, another branches off right and a wide crossing path intersects. The path snakes uphill and 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 round the horse-proof bar.

- 3 Keep ahead, a fraction right, 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, pass Harold Macmillan Clump and soon veer **right** to join a path coming from the left. Continue to a road junction and keep ahead on the main road, passing the Red Lion pub 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 2½ km=1½ miles

- 1 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 footpath marked with a stone sign. *Don't miss this turn.* Keep left and, in 10m, leave the drive by forking **left** on a footpath, which is indicated with a stake and a sign. The path takes you along the extreme right-hand edge of a garden, through a dark thicket of laurels and holly, through a swing gate and across the centre of a small grassy pasture. Then it goes through a swing-gate in the corner and by a wire fence along a more overgrown meadow with a boardwalk. Finally you encounter a stream, an enclosed path, a stile and a gravel drive emerging at a road next to *Woodlands*. Turn **left** on the road.



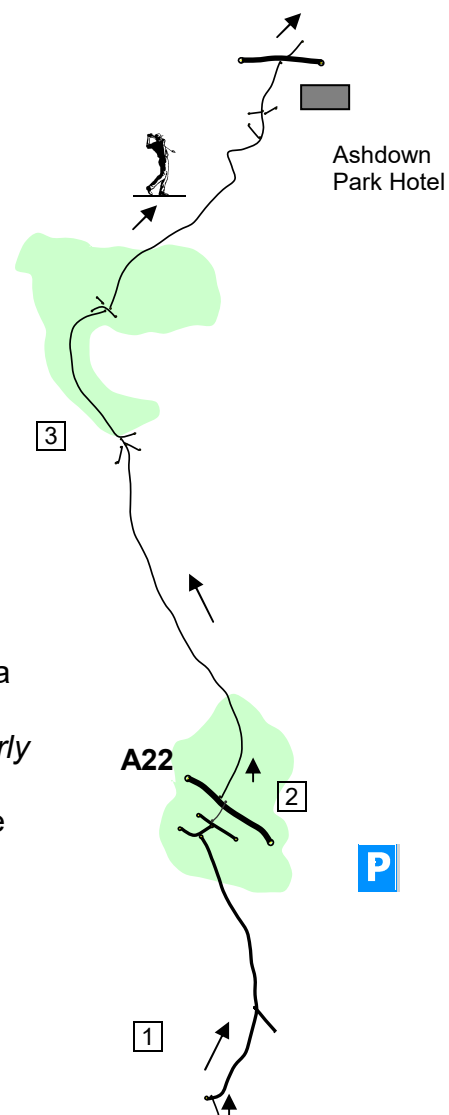
- 2 Ignore a drive right marked as a footpath and, after about 200m, turn **right** on a narrow footpath just after *Andorra*. *Don't miss this turn.* The path widens after passing the garden, is fenced at first and then runs briefly through open woodland, crosses the drive to *Sun House* and reaches a T-junction with a tarmac drive. Turn **left** on the drive, 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, staying always on the main path. You reach the Mill Brook at the bottom. *This spot one is 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 In 10m avoid paths either side and continue on the main track winding uphill. In another 100m, you meet two large old wooden gates, one on each side, with signs NO HORSES. Go through (i.e. round) the gate on your **left**. Your path passes through a magical landscape with many conifers. In 70m, it veers right, shortly passing on your left a huge western hemlock. At a crossing path, go straight over. Eventually, the main path turns **left** to cross the stream. In 25m, turn sharp **right** at a bend in the main path to emerge onto the open heath. Keep ahead through bracken, up a grassy slope, to a very wide sandy track and turn **right**.

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

- 1 In 200m, avoid a track sharp right. In another 300m, the track bends **right**, where two other tracks branch off to your left. You come to 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, about 10m to your left, 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 is in full view ahead to the right.
- 3 On the far side of the meadow, the footpath veers left on a grassy track between woodland on the right and pastures on the left, part of the Ashdown Forest Llama Park. *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 a car park and up a grassy slope on the other side. It comes out to the road via a small yard.



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

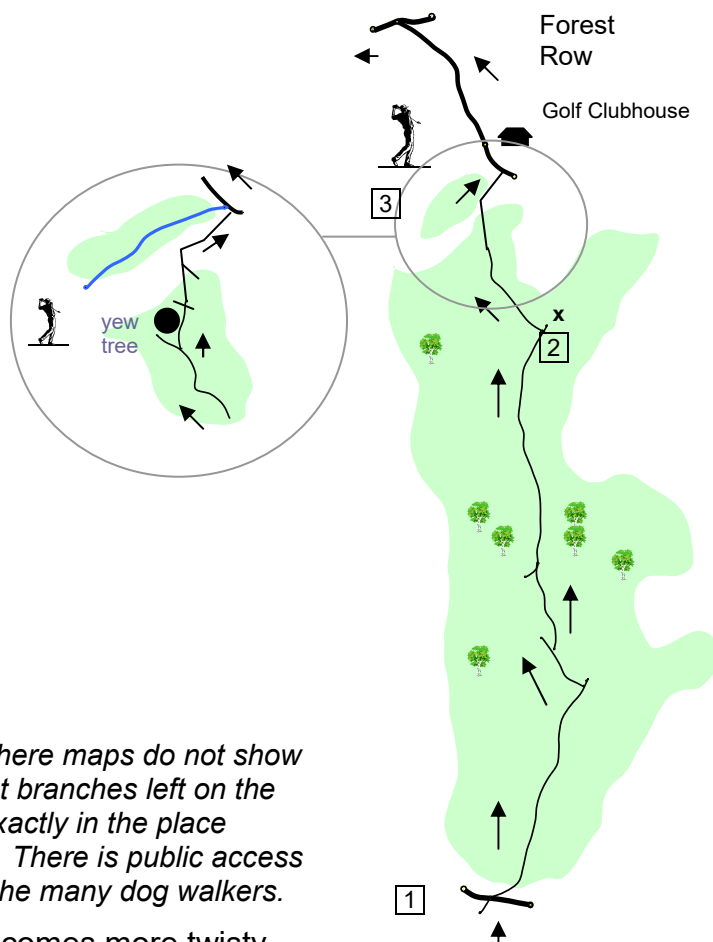
- 1 Cross the road straight over to a wide footpath directly opposite. Stay on the semi-tarmac path avoiding tracks off. After nearly 500m, you see ahead a metal gate marked *private*. 20m before the gate, at a marker post and hand-made sign, turn **left** and in 30m turn **right** on a rough sunken track. In 50m, you come to a fork. Take the **right** fork, really straight ahead, a gentler but rooty path. Soon your route meets the rough track again and turns **right** on it. *In late spring the woods here are carpeted with bluebells.* After 500m more, you meet a wire fence with a gap between upright posts. Turn **left** immediately **before** the posts on a path which is narrow and bendy at the start but quickly widens and becomes clear.



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 exactly in the place indicated and is not signposted anywhere. There is public access over the golf course, as you will see from the many dog walkers.

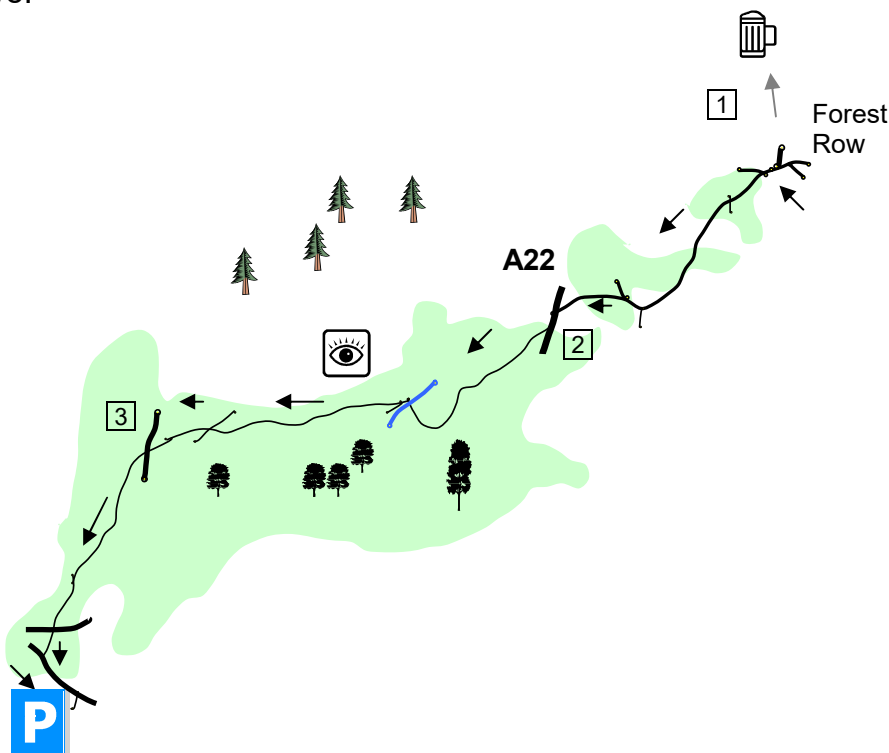
- 2 In 100m, your path descends a bit and becomes more twisty. 80m further, on your right is a huge yew tree on a bank. Veer **right** round the yew (on either side), go rapidly down-up over two more banks and immediately go straight over a crossing path. This very rooty path is joined by another path from the right just before you come out of the trees and reaches the edge of the golf links. Cross straight over the fairway (checking first for flying golf balls) passing two bridges and the stream on your left. (You can go over the bridges for fun.) Turn **right** along the left-hand side of the fairway with the stream and a narrow band of birch trees on your left. Go over another large wooden bridge (with rails) and veer a fraction right towards a wooden seat and a large green-roofed shed that adjoins the clubhouse.

- 3 Turn **left** on the track and walk past the clubhouse and alongside the car park on the main drive, passing the practice tees. (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.* At the end of the drive, turn **left** into Shalesbrook Lane, avoiding a rough track sharp left which leads to the cricket pitch. *Or, for a refreshment diversion, keep straight on along Chapel Lane to reach the centre of Forest Row where there are several pubs and other amenities.*



Leg 5: Forest Row to Hindleap 4 km=2½ miles

- 1 In 25m, fork **left** on the lane to Tompset's Bank. Always stay on the tarmac, avoiding paths leading off and avoid Inkpen Lane that forks right. Your lane passes tracks left and right. After *Cherry Croft*, the lane becomes a stony drive. After *Deerhyrst Cottage* stay with the drive as it bends **right** and is joined by a track from the left, passing a big copper beech. Stay on the main drive as it bends **left** again in front of the entrance to *Monks Wood* and follow it all the way to the main road, going over a crossing drive.



- 2 Cross the road, going down a steep bank to the tarmac footway, and turn **left** on it. In about 100m turn **right** onto a footpath by a fence into woods. In 50, **ignore** a footpath and yellow arrow pointing right, and keep ahead over a wooden bar. Keep to the main path at all times, avoiding turnings off. The path, sometimes narrow, runs for some distance staying within audible distance of the main road. It twice curves left uphill. Finally, about 600m after you first joined the path, it bends **right** down into the valley. It takes you over a sturdy bridge, known as *The Crook Crossing*, and veers left. 40m after the bridge, fork **right** steeply up through bracken to the top of a small hill. Keep ahead now on a wide grassy path. *The landscape all around here is memorable, dotted everywhere with isolated conifers.* The path runs through a long patch of woodland and then rises again straight ahead over the hillside. *It is worthwhile here turning around to admire the extensive views to the north.* At the top, the path meets a wide sandy track coming from the right. Keep ahead to join the wide track, avoiding the narrower path that branches left towards the woods. The track curves left and finally leads to a road, Priory 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 stream bed. Keep generally straight on, avoiding any paths leading off right. The path eventually meets Priory

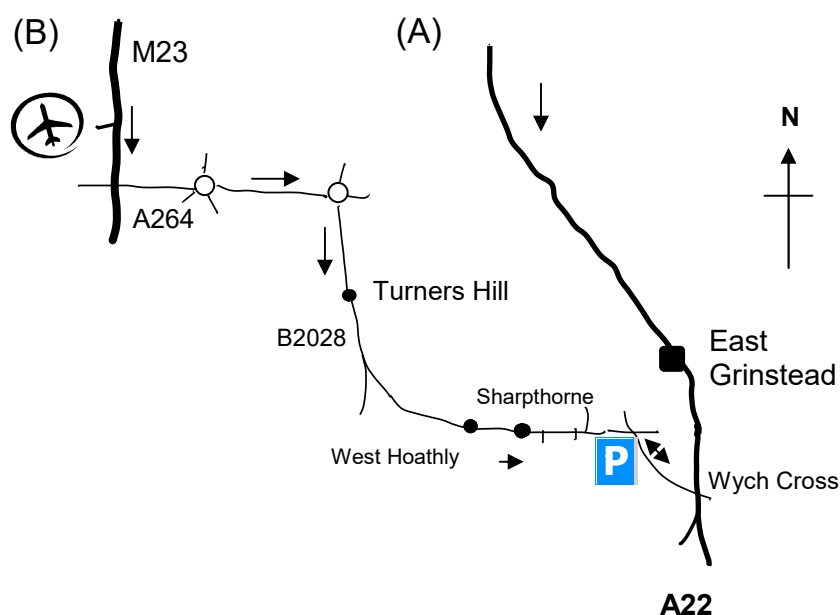
Road again via the Goat Car Park. Cross Priory Road, go over a patch of grass and turn **left** on another road, Hindleap Lane. In 150m, turn **right** onto the open heath to take a final look at the beautiful view, then **left** in 100m and **left** again back to the car park where the walk began.

Getting there

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

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.

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 (3 km) 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.

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