



Seven Sisters - Eastbourne

Distance 27km (17 miles), hilly terrain

Region: East Sussex

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Refreshments: Cuckmere Haven, Birling Gap, Eastbourne

Map: Explorer 123 (Newhaven to Eastbourne)

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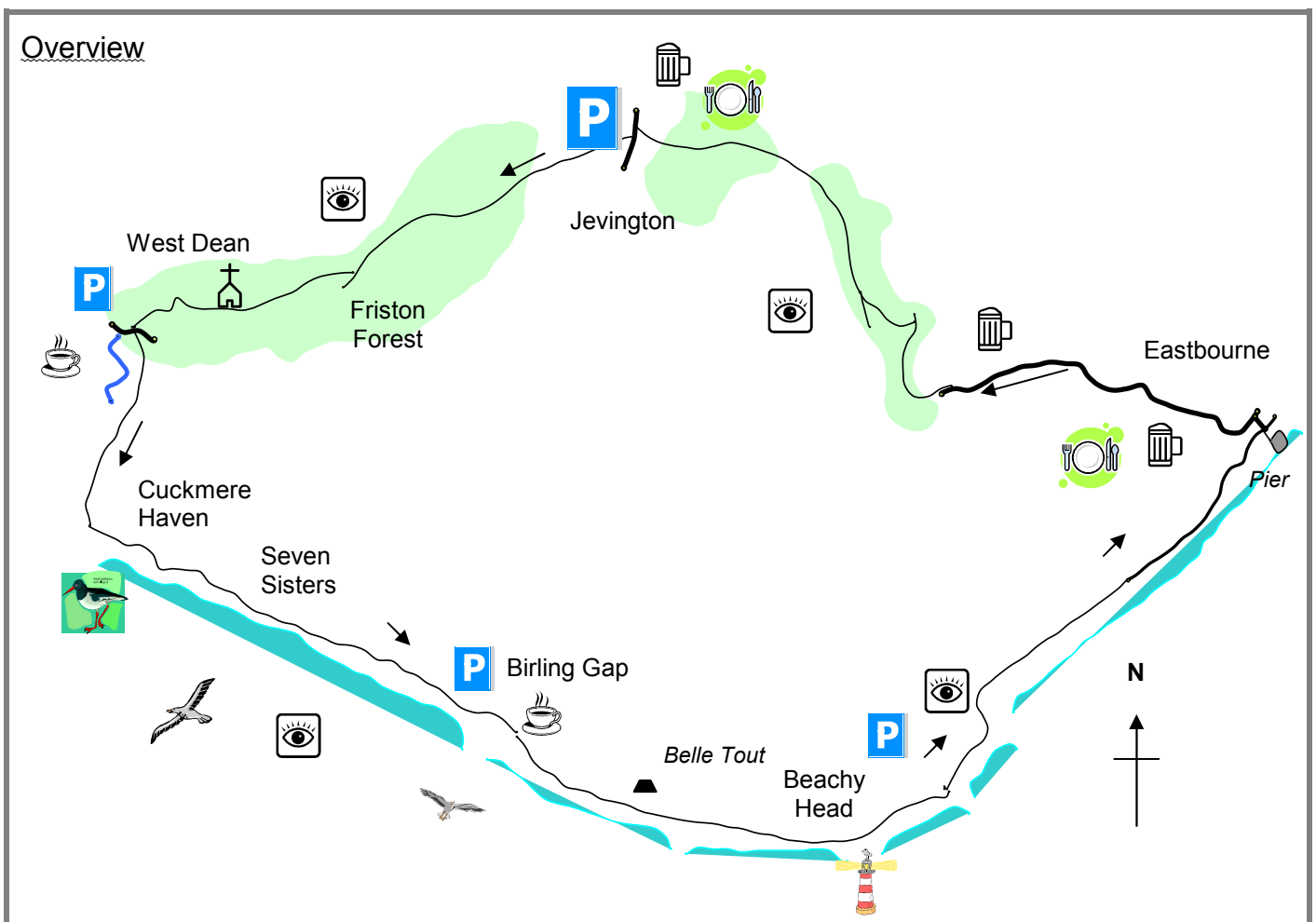
Downland, village, river, cliffs, seaside town

In Brief



The full circular walk described here is a mighty undertaking for one day and you need to be fit to undertake it, not just for the distance but for the up-and-down terrain over the downland of the Seven Sisters. However, there are places here of real star quality and this is a walk you won't forget in a lifetime. Also, it is possible to cut the length of the walk *drastically* by completely cutting out the long section through Eastbourne. (This shortcut is only briefly sketched here but is easy to work out with the map.)

Overview

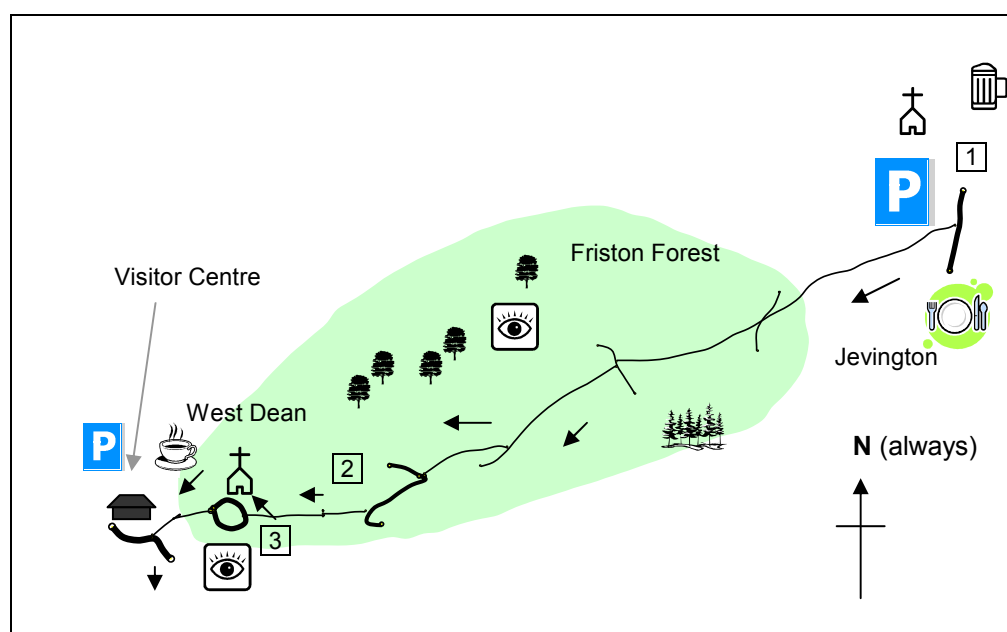


The walk begins at the small car park on the west end of the village **Jevington**. For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

The village of Jevington is a delightful place to start a walk with its cottages of local stone. The name means 'homestead of the people of Geoffa'. The Eight Bells pub / restaurant is nearer the east of the village. If you decide to walk from there to the church of St Andrews, you pass through an unusual wooden swivel gate. A rare elm grows in the grounds. The 'Hungry Monk' restaurant (originally the 'Monks' Rest') has an ambitious menu and claims to be the place where the original banoffi pie (note the spelling) was invented.

Leg 1: Jevington to Cuckmere Haven 7km (4 miles)



- 1 Turn **right** out of the car park, without going back to the road, onto a chalky path indicated by a blue arrow. Continue straight across by some gates, uphill. At the top the path enters Friston Forest as indicated by the sign. The path crosses a track obliquely. 600m after this, ignore a right fork for Charleston Bottom. 200m later, the path goes over a signposted crossing path. 700m after this, the path forks. Ignore the wide but rougher path left and take the **right** fork, the grassy and narrower one. Just before you reach a gate, look ahead to the right and you will see a White Horse on the downs.

The Litlington White Horse was cut in 1924 by three men overnight so as to startle the locals. East Sussex County Council re-scoured it in the 1980s and changed the position of the legs from standing to prancing to help prevent slippage of the chalk. It was acquired by the National Trust in 1991.

Go through the gate and cross a grassy area with fine views to the right over the South Downs. Go through a gate and take a grassy path downhill. On meeting a track at a hairpin, keep straight ahead. You are on part of the Forest Walk.

- 2 Where the track begins to curve left uphill, leave it and take the grassy and chalky path that forks **right**. Go past a metal barrier and join a dirt road which soon becomes tarmac. Welcome to the unique village of West Dean! West Dean Manor is on the left.

The Saxon village of West Dean was used by Alfred the Great as a site for a palace and naval base. After 1066 the village was acquired by William the Conqueror's half brother Earl Mortain. The Black Death and French raids decimated the village and it was abandoned in the 1400s. In the 1800s the area was used by smugglers, especially the Alfriston gang.

- 3 Take the next road on the **right**, going past the church and the parsonage.

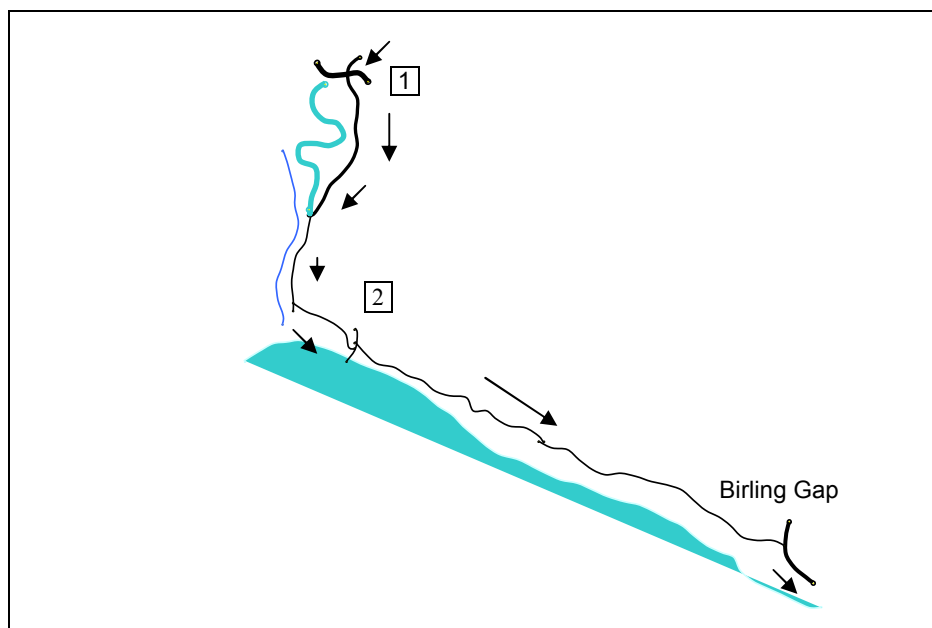
The 12th-century West Dean church of All Saints, with Saxon traces, is the most ancient in the Cuckmere Valley. The unusually squat gabled spire looks rather like a monk's cowl. The next-door Old Parsonage is the oldest priest's house in England still in occupation.

Follow the road round to the left and at a road junction keep ahead on a stony path past a 'phone box and up some steps. This is a long procession of steps, numbering more than 200, but the reward is great. At the top, keep ahead to a wall and pass through the gap. Below you is an amazing sight: the Cuckmere River with its wide meanderings down to the distant sea. There are two seats here in case you need to rest to take it all in. After admiring the view, go ahead down the grass and, at the bottom, go through a wooden gate to the main A259 road. The Seven Sisters Visitor Centre is on the right.

The Visitor Centre of the Seven Sisters Country Park is a converted 18th-century barn containing models, maps, pictures and artifacts connected with this area and its wildlife. There is a shop, a small restaurant / teahouse (the Exceat Farmhouse) and a garden (the Europe Garden). The car park (NB) is pay-and-display.

There is a wide choice of routes from here but the text gives you the best chance to see wildlife, the cliffs from below and, if you like, dip a toe in the ocean.

Leg 2: Cuckmere Haven to Birling Gap 4½ km (2½ miles)



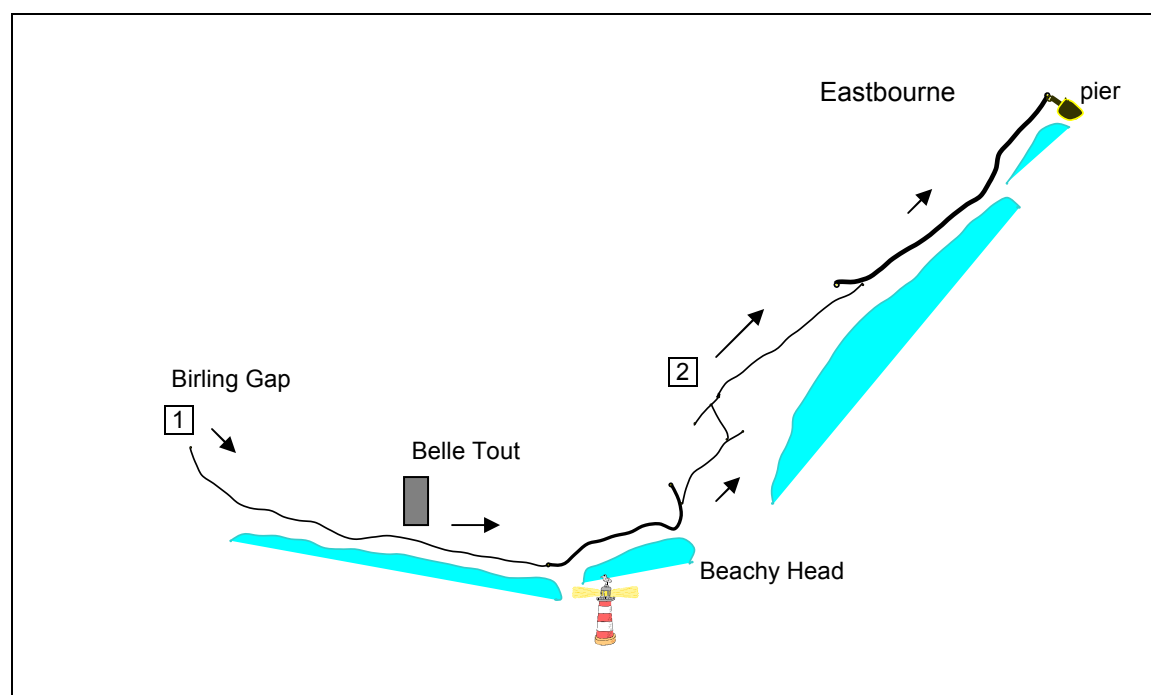
- 1 Cross the main road, go through a gate by a cattle grid and keep ahead on a concrete path. After about 1km take a footpath **right** that runs between two lagoons. *There is so much wildlife to see or hear from the waterside: you are almost certain to see heron and different geese, with a good chance for oystercatchers, fulmar and redshank.* The path goes through a

wooden gate and runs between the river and the shallows. Finally it nears the beach where you turn **left**. You can use the brassica-strewn beach or, more comfortably, the path through the shrubs, avoiding the higher ridges where there are nesting birds. On reaching a fence by a noticeboard, go through a gap and go steeply up.

- 2 From this point, your route is self-guided and you are likely to be among many other trippers and hikers all taking the same obvious route to Birling Gap and onwards to Beachy Head. The terrain is undulating and rather strenuous and there always seem to be more than seven sisters to conquer. The going will get a bit easier after Birling Gap but that seems far off. The Belle Tout lighthouse, by the way, that you can see in the distance is *after* Birling Gap. There is a stile and you join the South Downs Way (SDW). A National Trust sign indicates Crowlink, an isolated village inland from your route. Later there is a ladder stile and a commemorative monument and finally you reach Birling Gap, turning **right** on a track and down a track past bungalows, and a welcome respite.

Birling Gap is a coastal hamlet owned by the National Trust. Erosion has removed some of the fishermen's cottages dating from 1878 and rendered others uninhabitable. The café / tea room was once a bit scruffy but it has now been modernised. There is a staircase leading down to the award-winning pebble beach from which you can take good photos of the the Seven Sisters cliffs. Beware at high tide!

Leg 3: Birling Gap to Eastbourne 8½km (5½ miles)



- 1 Continuing the self-guided route up some steps, you soon reach the Belle Tout lighthouse.

The Belle Tout lighthouse was a very belated response to many shipwrecks at Beachy Head, a notorious hazard to shipping. The first granite lighthouse only started operation in 1834. Its siting on the cliff top made it difficult to see – a severe flaw in a lighthouse – and the new one was built (see later). The building was later sold as a private residence. It was damaged during World War 2 by Canadian artillery who were apparently trying to miss it. The BBC

filmed 'The Life and Loves of a She-Devil' there and it also featured in the James Bond film 'The Living Daylights'. Most famously, in 1999 the 850-ton Belle Tout was moved 17 metres from the cliff face using a system of hydraulic jacks and four lubricated steel-and-concrete beams which remain in place in case they should be needed again. There is also a little café here.

Further along, you reach the most southerly point of Beachy Head.

The cliff at Beachy Head is, at 162 metres, the highest chalk sea cliff in Britain. The chalk of the cliffs are a testament to 30 million years of a subtropical period, up to 65 million years ago, when the skeletons of microscopic plankton hardened into chalk. The chalk was then eroded and shaped by ice ages. The name Beachy Head is a corruption of the French word 'Beauchef' meaning 'beautiful headland' and nothing to do with a beach. The new red-and-white lighthouse started operation in 1902 and is now automated. Beachy Head is notoriously a favourite location for suicides.

Further on, you pass the *Beachy Head* pub over on the left. After this, take the tarmac path along the cliff edge. After passing a viewing platform, fork **right** on a level stony path, indicated by a white acorn symbol. Soon Eastbourne is in view. This is a pleasant path on a wooded slope. When you reach a wooden post with a waymark, take the **left** fork and follow the path round left. At a junction at the top, turn **right** on a wide grassy path, thus leaving the South Downs Way. (You may of course stay on the SDW back to the start avoiding Eastbourne.)

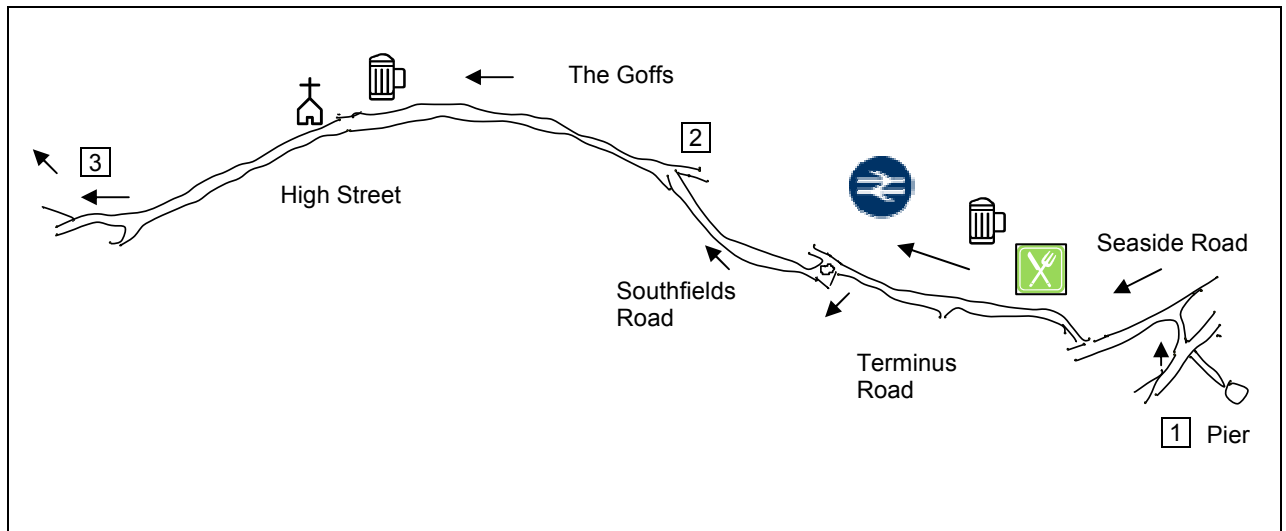


- 2 Stay on this lovely wide grassy path all the way to the start of the town, at the end going down steps. There are several routes to the pier: the road, the lower promenade and a middle promenade which is a little uncomfortable because of the well-meaning gravel. There are also several gardens along the way. After 2km (1½ miles) you arrive at the pier.

Eastbourne pier was opened in 1870. It featured a theatre (now a bar and nightclub) and a camera obscura. There are several shops and kiosks and of course a fine view of the town.

Leg 4: Eastbourne to Jevington 7½ km (4½ miles)

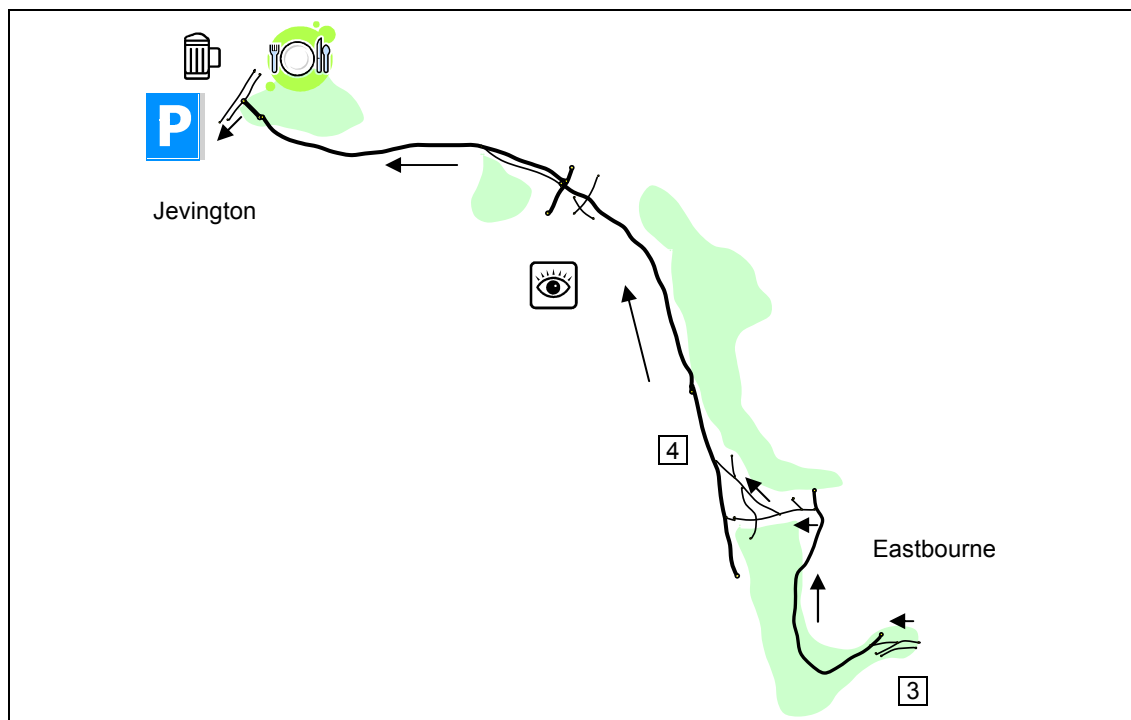
- 1 **See map overleaf.** Turn **left** opposite the pier and go up Cavendish Place and then **left** on Seaside Road. In about 200m, turn right onto the pedestrian-only Terminus Road. Pass the *Duke of Devonshire* and the *Terminus* and a portland stone sundial. At the end of the pedestrianised section, keep ahead past the station. At a roundabout, zig-zag left-right into Southfields Road and follow for some way to a T-junction with a road called The Goffs. Turn **left** here.



2 The Goffs leads into the High Street of Eastbourne Old Town.

The old town was once called 'Bourne' and then 'East Bourne', made up from a group of hamlets. It is much older than the Victorian seaside resort. St Mary's Church is late 12th century. The Lamb Inn (Harvey's) dates from 1240 but its cellars go back to 1180.

Go past (or visit) the *Lamb*, Waitrose and St Mary's church and over traffic lights. Upland Road curves right and becomes East Dean Road. Immediately after a side road fork **right** by a seat onto a footpath.



3 This lovely level woodland path is joined from the right by a track. It goes around the valley with houses on the right. After some distance, the main path zig-zags left-right uphill. Stay on this main path until it emerges from the woods. 20m after coming out of the woods, turn **left** uphill on a narrow path and in 10m ignore a minor path that forks right. There is a fine view behind over the town. Go through a gap in the trees. About 30m from the gap, before you reach the top, turn right on a crossing path. Where the path forks near the top, take the **left**-hand fork, the higher option, which leads to the top and meets a wide path. This is the South Downs Way.

Turn **right** on it. (The very wide grassy path runs parallel to a track and most walkers choose the path for comfort.)

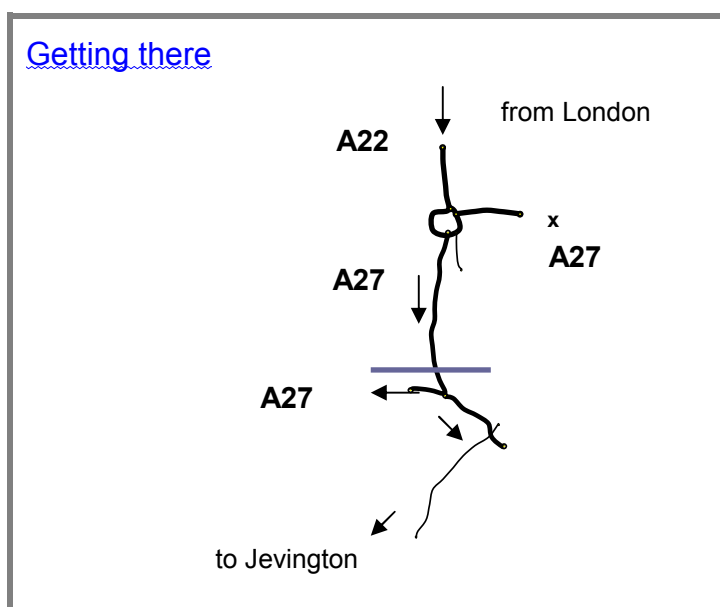
- 4 The path goes past a round dewpond and then, on the right, past a burial mound surmounted by a stone pillar. On the left, you can see the route over the cliffs that form the earlier part of this walk. The path curves left gently uphill. Go over a track to a triangulation pillar on your left. Go over another track and through a one-bar gate. Immediately there is a choice between a track and a parallel path on its left. Do *not* choose the path if you are bare-legged! The long stony path eventually descends into Jevington. Turn **left** for the car park.

Getting there

By bus/train: from Eastbourne station.

By car: to get to **Jevington** from the North take the A22. After passing Hailsham, about 5 miles (8km) from Eastbourne, you reach the big roundabout by Polegate Services. Go **straight ahead** at the roundabout, ignoring the major left turn for Eastbourne, on the road signposted *Brighton, Newhaven A27, Lewes, Alfriston, Willingdon*, the Polegate Bypass. Soon the road splits, with the right-hand lane signposted *A27 Brighton Newhaven Lewes*. Keep to the **left** lane as for *Polegate, Willingdon*. The road goes over a railway, curves left, and passes that sharp right turn for the A27. Soon after, you reach a crossroads with traffic lights. Turn right on the Wannock Road signposted *Wannock Jevington East Dean*. Follow the road for 4km (2½ miles) into the village of Jevington. The car park is at the far end of the village on the right, just past the *Hungry Monk* and two minor roads on the left. It is marked with a white-on-blue **P**.

Alternative starting points are Cuckmere Haven Visitor's Centre (pay and display) and Birling Gap.



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