Fancy Free Walks

point your feet on a new path

Alfriston and the Long Man

Distance: 15 km=9½ miles moderate-to-easy walking

Region: East Sussex Date written: 12-jul-2014

Author: Hautboy

Refreshments: Litlington, Alfriston, Wilmington

Map: Explorer 123 (Eastbourne) *but the maps in this guide should suffice*

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

Public rights are restricted to printing, copying or distributing this document exactly as seen here, complete and without any cutting or editing. See *Principles* on main webpage.

Giant figure, high hills, villages, nature reserve, river, historic buildings

In Brief

This is a walk with great variety: a mysterious giant, high hills, a vast nature reserve where you can lose yourself in the wilds, a river, ancient churches and other buildings, country pubs with character; and to cap it all, East Sussex's arguably most picturesque village. True to our site's motto, this walk takes you on a lonely unmapped path. There are too many perfect places to take refreshment, so you are spoilt for choice. To enquire at the *Plough and Harrow* in Litlington, ring 01323-870632. Litlington also has the most delightful tea garden. Alfriston has **three** pubs and numerous teashops and restaurants. Finally, in the starting/ending village of Wilmington there is an ideal pub/restaurant.

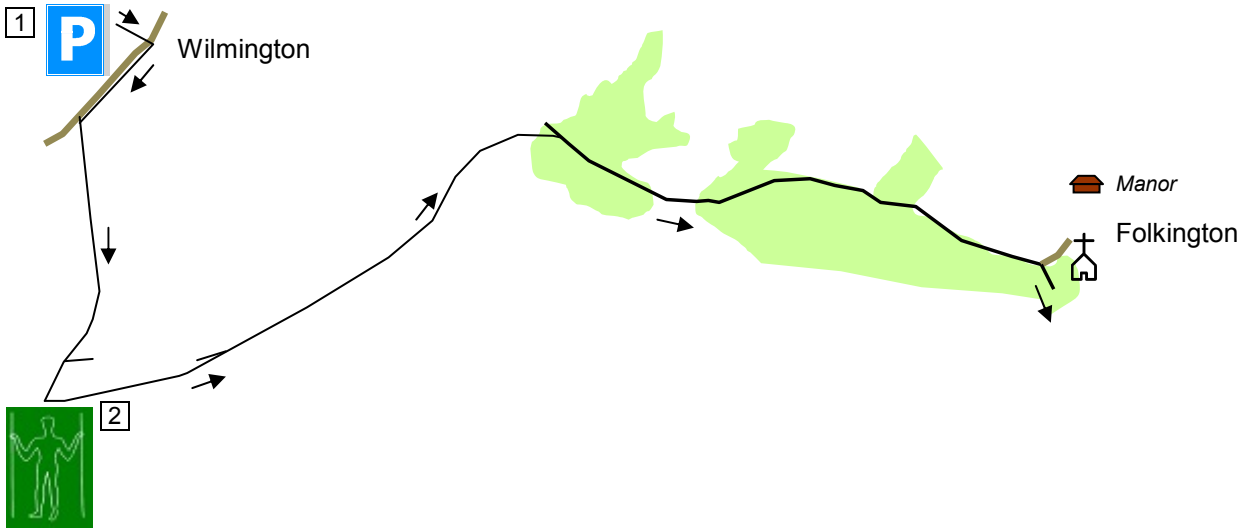
There are some nettles on this walk but only on the fringes of the paths. It was walked in Merrell shoes but boots would be a comfort because of one or two muddy patches on the bridleway after Folkington, to say nothing of the long hike. There are only two unavoidable stiles, so this walk should not be a challenge for a dog owner.

The walk begins in the free **Long Man car park** in **Wilmington**, near Polegate, East Sussex, **postcode BN26 5SL**, just off the A27, easily accessible via the A22, A26 or A23. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Immediately from a small area beside the Wilmington car park you have a good view of the Long Man standing squarely on the hill, holding his two staffs. This walk will take you closer, before circling round over the South Downs. The village of Wilmington and its church must be seen before you leave. (More about them later.)

Leg 1: Wilmington to Folkington 2⅔ km=1⅔ miles



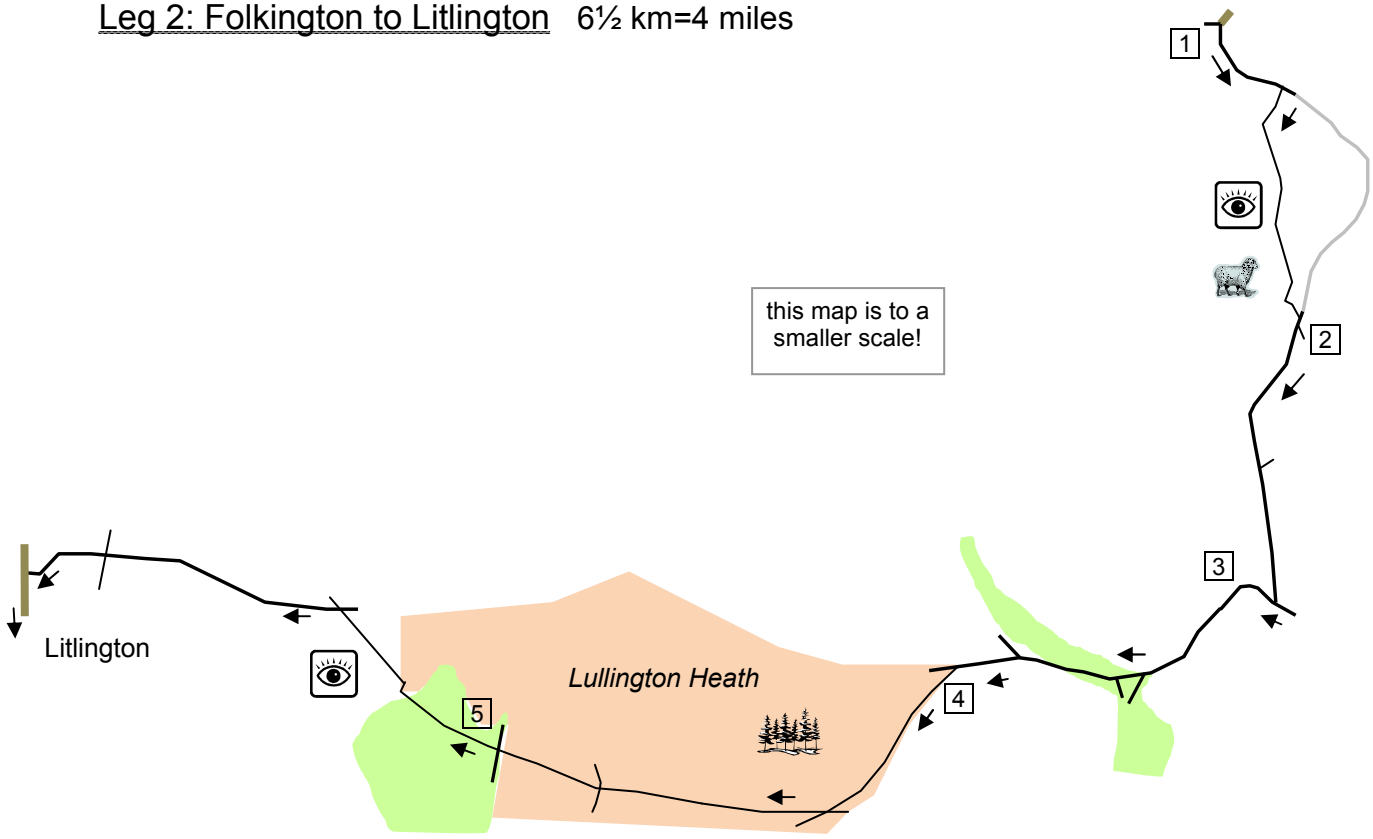
1 From the Wilmington car park, go out to the lane and cross straight over up steps to take a footpath that immediately turns right parallel to the lane. (If the footpath is very overgrown, you can simply walk on the lane and turn left at the next track.) At the end of the path, after a wooden barrier, turn **left** on a wide path heading straight for the *Long Man*. The path ends at a small wooden gate. Go forward towards the giant where, in 60m, you will find an information tablet (identical to the one in the car park).

In Julius Caesar's "Gallic Wars" he writes of "figures of vast size" found in Celtic Britain after the Romans landed. Could this giant be one of them? Perhaps the god of Bel? (The name "Bel" appears in local names.) Whether Celtic or Norse or of much later construction is unclear. (The oldest written reference to it is only from 1766.) The two staffs in the giant's hands could be agricultural implements or props for walking down the hill. Originally the figure was carved from the chalk; the modern rendering is white breeze blocks.

2 Turn immediately **left** following a wire fence on your right, on an unsigned grassy path. This lovely green high path is greatly superior to the official path with great views left over the Weald of Sussex, including Arlington Reservoir and another view of Wilmington and its church. Soon the official footpath joins you again from the left. At a marker post, ignore a sharp right turn (another lovely path but not on this route) and keep to the main path. *Note that you are on part of the Wealdway, a long-distance path running from Gravesend to near Eastbourne.* The path takes you through a wooden gate as it enters trees. Here, as in several places, there are tempting permissive footpaths to be avoided. Immediately your path comes down to a T-junction. Turn **right** here on a wide path in woodland. This beautiful path becomes chalky and descends to a junction of tracks in the small village of Folkington. Your route is right on a track but first you will want to go ahead on the lane only 20m to see the church, the Old Rectory and possibly have a peek at the (private) Manor.

Folkington is "Fowington" in speech and in old spelling. Saxon fortified villages like this one were set up by the South Saxons (hence "Sussex") when they arrived in the year 477, led by their King Aelle and his three sons. The first syllable could be "folk" or possibly "feoh" meaning "cattle" (cf. German "Vieh"). The church dates from the mid-1200s and is dedicated to St Peter ad Vincula ("in chains"), referring to the festival of the saint's liberation. Note the box pews, rented by notable families. One such was that of MP William Thomas (1641?-1706) whose gravestone records his wife Catherine, his four sons and eleven daughters, of which one son and four daughters survived. Folkington Manor, built in 1843 near an older site, is by far the largest property. Although a private house, it gives regular concerts and other cultural events.

Leg 2: Folkington to Litlington 6½ km=4 miles



1 Having turned **right** on the track (or left if coming back from the church), follow it downhill. After the first field boundary on your right, look for a marker post with a yellow arrow and a *Wealden Walks* sign. Turn **right** here on a wide green path between fields. (This path over the fields will re-join the main track later but is much more interesting. You could stay on the rather muddy main track if you have a dog, or if the crops are wet, or if you hate stiles.) As the field on your right ends, just before a wire fence barrier, go **left** through a crop field on a narrow but well-defined path. At the other side, go over a stile into a sheep pasture and take a path which curves uphill to the right. (The path can be seen going over the crest on the right. It gets clearer as you proceed.) After an ascent with great views, go over a stile at the top (possibly bypassable on the right) and follow a path across the centre of the pasture. *On your left you can see Ovenden's Windmill in Polegate.* When you meet a wire fence, veer **right** alongside it to go over a stile on your **left** in 50m. Go over another stile in the hedgerow, down and up steps, on a narrow path through bushes, to come down to the main track. Turn **right** on the track, immediately ignoring a footpath on your left.

2 You will be following this track (still on the Wealdway) for nearly 1 km. About half way, ignore a bridleway on the left. Vegetation changes from shrubs, some low-hanging, to trees and back to shrubs. Finally you come down to a marker post at a 3-way junction. Turn sharp **right**, thus leaving the Wealdway.

3 Your wide path curves left between fields, then rises under horsechestnuts, ash and sycamore, along a course that can be a little muddy. Continue, ignoring side paths, until, about 500m along the path, you reach a major fork. Take the **right** fork, the more open option, spurning the left-forking track into trees. Shorty after, a track joins you from the left: you are now on part of the South Downs Way (SDW). Continue on the track uphill under trees, then up into the open. You arrive at a major junction with a 3-way fingerpost: keep straight ahead, thus leaving the SDW which forks right. Suddenly you are up to the highest point with great open views. In 200m, you reach a noticeboard for Lullington Heath, a nature reserve.

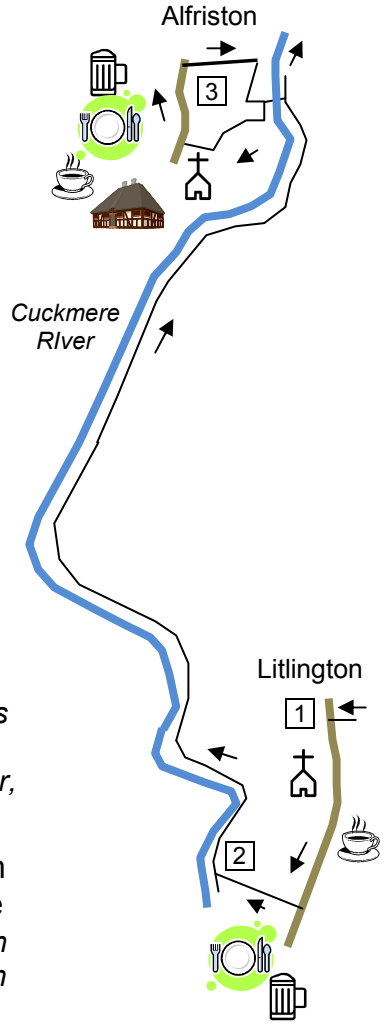
Lullington Heath National Nature Reserve is genuinely unique being the largest remaining patch of chalk heath in the country. Chalk heath was formed in the last ice age (ending about 18-14 thousand years ago) when dust was blown south from the front of the glaciers and settled on the chalk land. Saxon ploughmen had little interest in the thin soil, so it remained uncultivated after the Celtic people had fled. The mixture of soils allows acid-loving species such as heathers to grow amongst lime-loving downland plants such as thyme, salad burnet and dropwort. The profuse growth of scrubland is due to the wholesale death of rabbits from myxomatosis in the 1950s, resulting in a radical turnover in bird species. Grazing has now been restored by the introduction of Exmoor ponies.

4 Fork **left** on a path into the nature reserve, through a small metal gate, passing a bench seat, going gradually downhill. In summer, various wild flowers are in abundance on this south-facing slope. After 600m you reach a pair of wooden gates. Go through the smaller gate to reach an oblique 4-way junction. Fork **right** here on a gently rising path. You are on a fabulous green nature trail with all types of shrubs, wild flowers, trees, briars and (comfortably distant) brambles. This straight path is easy to follow and you can see it rising ahead over the next hill. You pass an entrance gate on your right, after which the path descends and comes down to the bottom of a valley at a junction of paths. **Avoid** a wooden gate and noticeboard on your right and instead go straight ahead through a small metal gate, steeply uphill. In 300m or so, you meet a wide crossing bridleway.

5 The route in this text soon takes a short unofficial path between fields with the best views on the walk: if this option should be barred in the future, or if you have any doubts, simply turn **right** on the bridleway and **left** on the main track after 400m. Go straight across the bridleway on a wide path through woods. After 350m, you come out suddenly into fields at Fore Down with terrific views ahead to Alfriston and the Downs beyond. Go straight ahead (zigzagging a fraction right-left) on a wide grassy path between fields. In 300m you come to an oblique crossing track. Veer **left**, now back on your original track. The track runs downhill between more fields, with fabulous views. After a crossing farm track, your path continues through trees, goes **left** into a yard and **right** on concrete to a road in Litlington, opposite the Long Man Brewery. Turn **left** on the road.

Leg 3: Litlington to Alfriston 3 km=1¾ miles (including village tour)

Litlington, another small Saxon town, on the Cuckmere River, boasts a 100-year-old tea garden, a 12th-century church and an ideal pub and garden. The most notable building is the 17th-century Clapham House (just south on the road) the home of catholic Maria Fitzherbert who married the Prince Regent (future George IV) in secret. The little church of St Michael has three 13th-century sundials built into the walls. The chancel roof has unusual corbels (jutting supports) and a double sedilia (seat for ministers). The floor of the nave is not level but slopes down.



1 On your right is the church, well worth visiting, whose garden has a picnic table. After some attractive houses, on your left is the Litlington Nursery and open-air Tea Garden. *The double tea garden offers an ideal rest-break before the crowds in Alfriston. It also has gift shops.* On your right soon is the *Plough and Harrow*. Your route is right on a signed footpath just before the pub, but first you may like to drop in for drinks and some of their ample dishes.

wc

The Plough and Harrow usually announces itself with a humorous sign-board. This 17th-century alehouse has a large garden at the back in which you can sample a truly comprehensive menu. Beer, naturally enough, is Long Man.

Having turned **right** on the footpath (or left if coming back from the pub), follow this tarmac path to a 3-way fingerpost near the bank of the Cuckmere River. *Note that you have been walking on the SDW again and also on the Vanguard Way, a long-distance path from Croydon to Newhaven.*

2 Turn **right** on a path that runs along the bank of the river, invisible at first due to reeds. (It is also possible to cross the footbridge and use the left bank, but that path is rougher and muddy in parts.) After a wooden swing-gate, your path runs along a grassy bank, with the church steeple of Alfriston visible ahead. After about 700m of walking beside the meandering river, your path goes through a pair of wooden swing-gates. In another 700m you are level with the church and the thatched Clergy House. The path follows the curve of the river and reaches a bridge. [2014: under repair with a temporary board walk.] The village of Alfriston is **left** over the bridge. You need to return to this point after your visit. The village is a total delight and on no account to be skimped.

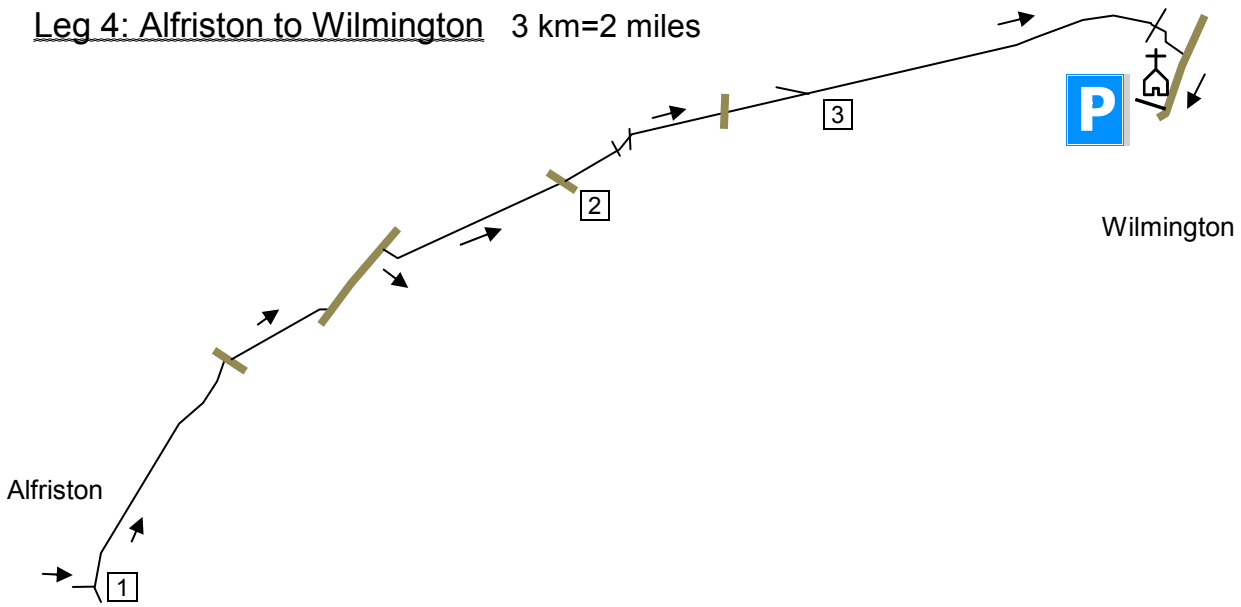
The name "Alfriston" means "Aelfric's farmstead" after a Saxon chief, and its origins are even earlier. This tiny village has less than 800 inhabitants but these are swollen enormously by the sudden invasion of tourist hordes. Of the three inns, the "Star Inn" is the oldest, having been a flophouse for pilgrims on their way to Chichester. The figurehead outside on the street is possibly from a warship sunk at the Battle of Beachy Head in 1690. The "George Inn" dates from the early 1500s. There is also the "Smugglers' Inn", apparently well-named. At the north end is a rare market cross. The church of St Andrew, which you saw from afar, is so large that it is often called the "Cathedral of the South Downs". The bell ringers give occasional demos and you may arrive at the time of the festival of bell with handbells and large bells on the Green.

The thatched Clergy House, next to the church, was the first property to be purchased by the National Trust. In 1896, Octavia Hill, co-founder of the NT,

helped to save the house which was in a pitiful condition. The house had been built in 1350 by a farmer who prospered after the Black Death. It was quickly taken over by the church but was in later centuries used to house farm labourers. Inside, the original wood-beamed ground floor is on show, including the high main hall with its central open fireplace. It also has a charming garden. It is open five days a week, except Jan and Feb. Entry free to NT members.

3 The following is one of several ways to see the village. Immediately after crossing the bridge, turn **left** across the Green to the church and the Clergy House. Turn **right** across the Green to a road. Go up steps for the art gallery, leading to the main road. Turn **right** on the road through the village. There are several restaurants and tea rooms, together with three inns. There are the *Apiary Coffee Shop*, the *"Post Office"* (a large deli) and a bookshop. River Lane will take you back to the riverside to cross back over the bridge.

Leg 4: Alfriston to Wilmington 3 km=2 miles



1 After your visit, turn **left** to continue along the river bank, avoiding the SDW which runs straight ahead. The path goes through a swing-gate onto a lane. Cross the lane, a fraction right, to go through another wooden swing-gate (a bit tight if you have a backpack) to go diagonally across a meadow. A swing-gate in the corner takes you onto a lane: turn **left**. In 150m you reach *Milton Court* on your left. Go over a stile on the **right** opposite the house. (It may be easier to hop round a large metal gate 10m further along the lane.) Go ahead over the field for 20m, then turn **left** on a wide path across the field towards houses.

2 At the other side, cross a lane via two stiles, both avoidable, and follow a nice mown path across a meadow, through a wooden gate and over a track. Your path goes up a bank onto a narrow, slightly overgrown path and through a wooden gate. Immediately go over a crossing path, through a new wooden gate and across a meadow, with a new plantation of assorted trees on your left, a woodland in the making. Ahead are the old flint or thatched houses of the hamlet of Milton Street. Go over a (rather high) stile to cross the lane, a fraction left, up steps and straight across a field on a path heading slightly to the left of Wilmington Church, visible ahead.

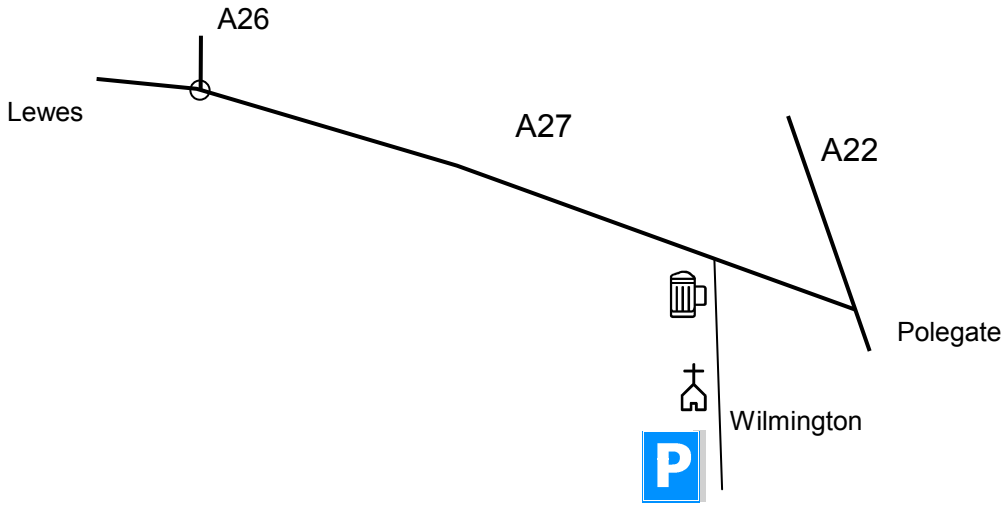
3 You are joined by a grassy path from the left. Continue straight ahead in the next field, with the Long Man gradually revealing himself on the face of the Downs. The church and the remains of Wilmington Priory can now be clearly seen. Your path bends right and ends at a tarmac drive. Turn **left** for only 5m and **right** through a metal gate opposite a stone seat into the churchyard. You pass near the double-bole yew tree, thought to be 1000 years old, and the entrance to the church, which is well worth visiting (see the historical note). A gate and steps take you out to the lane, where the village and pub are on your left, with the car park on the **right**, where the walk began.

Wilmington is pre-Saxon although it probably had a Celtic name in earlier times. It was in the possession of Godwin whose son Harold Godwinson was killed in 1066. The Priory was built in the late 1100s by the French Abbot of Grestain. The remains of the Priory are now incorporated into a large farmhouse, now a superior guesthouse. The church was founded in the year 1000 but was modernised in the 1100s (the Chancel) and the 1300s (the Nave). On the north side is the new Bee and Butterfly window, restored by an Oxford man after the original was lost. The insects are faithfully represented.

For final refreshments, the "Giant's Rest" pub/restaurant is at the north end of the village, a quick walk – or drive if you are on your last legs. It has been well re-appointed in a spacious continental style, with main courses and puddings written on a chalkboard. Beer is Long Man, of course.

Getting there

By car: Wilmington is signed off the A27 road where you will also see a brown tourist sign for the *Long Man*. (The A27 can be reached from the A23, the A26 or the A22.) The sign is for *Litlington* because you're already in Wilmington as soon as you turn. But you need to go ½ mile through to the other side of the village, passing the church. The free car park is the last thing on the **right** before open country.



By bus/train: bus 40 or 47, including Sundays, from Berwick Station to Alfriston and Litlington. Bus 126 to Alfriston from Eastbourne station. Check the time-tables.

*fancy **more** free walks?* www.fancyfreewalks.org