



Ashdown Forest, Church Hill, Withyham *Ravines and Parkland*

Distance: 17½ km=11 miles or 12½ km=8 miles + optional extra 3km=2 miles
easy walking with navigational challenges

Region: East Sussex

Date written: 24-jul-2010

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St Johns, Withyham, Boarshead (optional)

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest)

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

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Woodland, hills, heath, deep valleys, parkland

In Brief

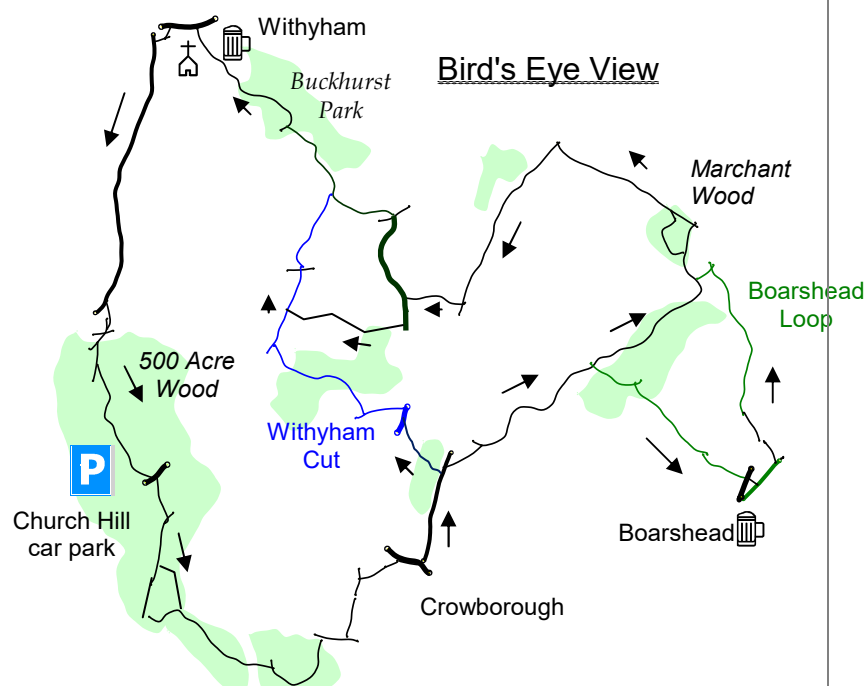
This walk explores the remarkable eastern parts of Ashdown Forest, venturing into the bordering countryside and discovering several surprises along the way. You will meet secret woods and unknown paths which keep you alert, with elegant parkland and a village with an iconic pub.

A short cut, the **Withyham Cut**, reduces the walk by 4 km=2 miles but omits some pretty landscapes. An optional excursion to **Boarshead** adds 3 km=2 miles to the walk.



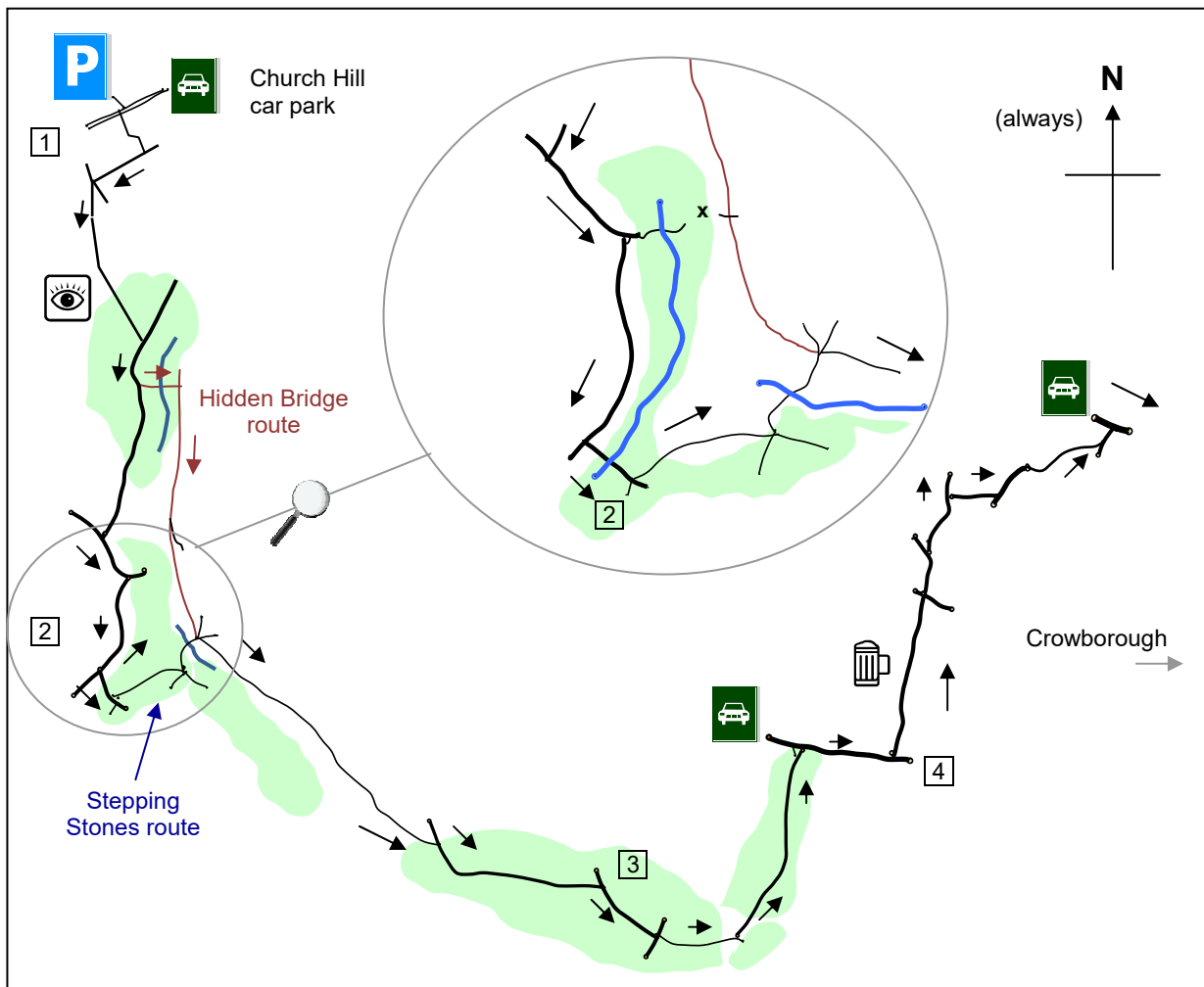
The going underfoot is fairly firm, but, except in a dry summer, boots are recommended due to one or two boggy sections (e.g. by *Penns in the Rocks* in Leg 3). This walk is nettle-free. Your dog will thrive on Ashdown Forest, although this walk goes wider afield over some dog-challenging stiles.


The walk begins at the **Church Hill car park** (grid ref 494327, approximate **postcode TN6 1XD**) on the B2188 just north-west of Crowborough, East Sussex. For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk

Leg 1: Church Hill to St Johns 3½ km=2¼ miles



- 1  Already, from the car park, you have a stunning view south across the Forest to the hilly area that will soon be under your feet. Cross the road and take a narrow grass path directly opposite. (The gorse is so dense now (2017-19) that the following route has changed.) Just before a dense bank of gorse, fork **left** and follow a path round the side of the gorse. In 80m, you reach a wider crossing path. Turn **right** on this path uphill. In 150m or so, you reach a lopsided 4-way junction of wide tracks. Avoid the first track sharp left, but take the *second* very wide track to your **left**. It leads downhill and, in 150m brings you to a very clear level crossing path. Turn **right** on this path, soon entering fine woodland. In 200m, the track goes beside a large metal gate. Just 25m after the gate, just before the track curves right, there is a small path on your left going into the trees.

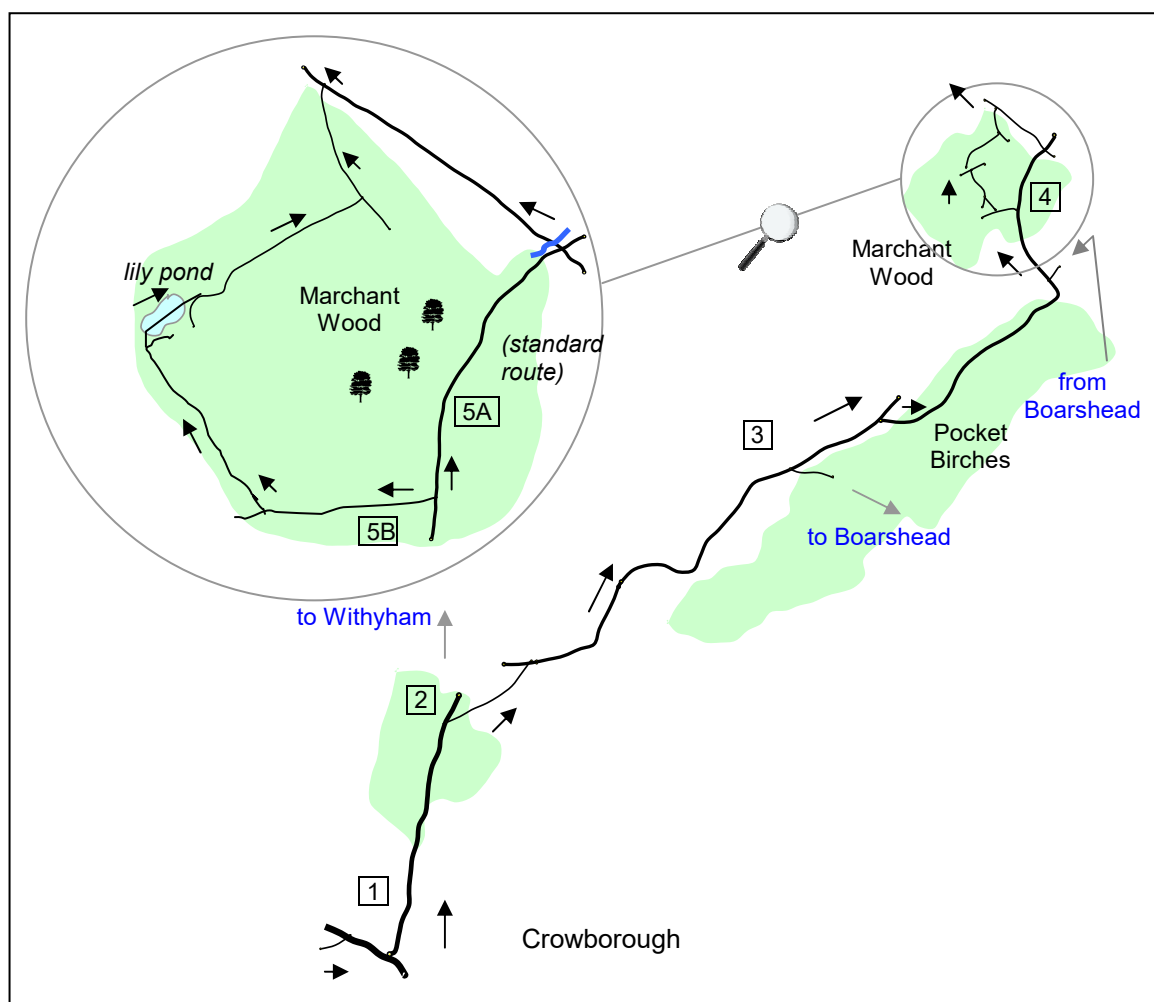
You now have a choice of **two** routes to cross the stream. The *first* choice, "The Hidden Bridge", is adventurous and involves a steep slope. The second choice "The Stepping Stones" is longer but a little safer in damp conditions. Do sections [2a](#) and [3a](#) or [2b](#) and [3b](#).

- 2a The Hidden Bridge.** Turn **left** on the narrow path into trees. Follow this tortuous path left-right and up-down, then along the top of a long bank. After 130m, your path takes you very steeply down natural steps (careful!) to a stream bed. Go straight over the stream, across an old brick bridge (the *Hidden Bridge*) and over a 3-plank bridge. The path goes straight ahead, steeply up a bank, and suddenly brings you out onto the open heath. Immediately turn **right** on a sandy path that runs parallel to the woods on your right.
- 3a The Hidden Bridge (continued).** In 200m, at a fork, avoid a path that rises over the heath on your left and keep to the narrower path on the **right**, staying near the woods. You reach a junction of paths with several banks and a ditch. Keep ahead straight over the ditch, up bank, keeping the wood on your right. Your path zigzags right-left through birches. Exactly 400m since you arrived on the open heath, you meet another junction with a stream and some natural stepping stones straight ahead. Avoid a bank down to the stream bed and take the next path to your **left**, going up through birches, keeping the stream bed close by on your right. Now skip to Section **4**.
- 2b The Stepping Stones.** Ignore the narrow path and continue straight ahead along the track. You come to a T-junction with a surfaced track. Turn **left** here. Shortly you come to an area used for stacking timber with a broken stone bridge on the left (site of the old mill) and your first view of the deep stream valley. Keep ahead in the same direction on the straight gravelly track with fine views down to the stream valley on your left. Soon you reach a good stone bridge on the left. Turn **left** over it on the main track, ignoring a track that goes straight ahead. *This stream valley is a hidden delight, off the usual walkers' beat.*
- 3b The Stepping Stones (continued).** Immediately after the bridge, **leave** the main track by taking a narrow path that forks **left** downhill. *[2019-20: walkers report some changes here; **detailed feedback welcome.**]* The path winds through woodland and comes to a junction with a straight path coming from the right and, on your left, a ramshackle wooden fence. Turn **left** between the posts of the fence and follow the winding path down to a stream. Step across the stream, using some natural stepping stones, up the other side where there is a choice of three paths ahead. Take the **rightmost** rather narrow grassy path, the closest to the stream bed.
- 4** The path winds upwards through young birch and oak trees and follows the course of the stream, visible down on your right in the shallow valley. Stay on the main woodland path, avoiding all minor paths on both sides. You will be above the stream all the time but sometimes the path descends a fraction and comes quite close to the edge. After about 400m, this rooty path climbs high above the stream through beautiful woodland, curves left and reaches an open area and a T-junction. Turn **right**, entering more woods, going uphill and, in 250m, coming to another T-junction. Turn **right** onto a wide track, immediately going over a bridge.
- 5** In 100m, the path goes over a wide crossing track, with a residential road visible up on the right. Continue uphill on a narrower winding path. At the top, go up a bank into a clearing (referred to locally as *The Old Cricket Square*). Cross the clearing, veering **left** in the middle onto an oblique crossing path, to head for the corner. Your wide path goes uphill, becomes level concrete and meets a path from the left. Soon you reach a road at St

Johns, one of the villages that make up the large town of Crowborough. Turn **right** on the road using the footway.

- 6 In 150m, turn **left** downhill on Coopers Lane. This is a road of modern cottages, each with its own distinct charm. *You will pass on the way the old Coopers Arms, now a dwelling, and, soon after, the old Grocer (aka the "Old Post Office")*. At the end, go straight ahead down a narrow lane to the left of a pair of redbrick cottages. At the bottom, avoid a level path left that crosses a bridge and continue straight ahead across a wide bridge and a small yard with a white cottage on the left. Continue up a fenced path and, just before it begins to level out, fork **right** on another fenced path. At a T-junction with a small residential road, turn **left**. In 20m, take a narrow enclosed path running between *Sally Gap* and *Springwood*. At the end, go **left** on a drive, immediately coming to a main road. Turn **right** on the footway of London Road, Crowborough.

Leg 2: St Johns to Marchant Wood 3½ km=2¼ miles



- 1 In 150m, by a red pillar box, turn **left** on a lane Gillridge Lane, passing an oast. *Note the sculpted tree, just before a convenient bench seat*. Follow the lane until it enters woodland. Just after passing on your right a large timber yard you will see a footpath on your left.

Decision point. If you would like to shorten the walk and take the direct route to Witherham, jump to the **Withyham Cut** described near the end of this text.

2 Ignore the footpath on your left, go another 40m and take a footpath forking **right**. The path goes through woodland and over a stile into a meadow. Go diagonally across the meadow following the very clear marker posts [Oct 2019: now gone]. In the opposite corner, go over a stile and turn **right** on a tarmac drive. The path goes past an oast (*note the witch weather vane*) and the long converted farmhouse of Gillridge Farm. Soon you have great views on the right, and soon on the left too. In about 800m, the path reaches Orznach Farm and Oast. About 100m after the oast, you reach a junction offering an optional right turn.

Decision point. If you would like an excursion to Boarshead slightly lengthening the walk but with a fine pub, take the **Boarshead Loop** described at the end of this text.

3 Continue on the track, ignoring the path on the right, soon passing a coppice on your right. After 250m or so, before a gate leading into a farm, veer **right** as indicated by the fingerpost into the woodland of Pocket Birches. *You may see deer here crossing the path.* The path comes out into the open and bends left. In 20m, it meets a footpath coming from the right by a 3-way fingerpost.

Here the **Boarshead Loop** re-joins the walk.

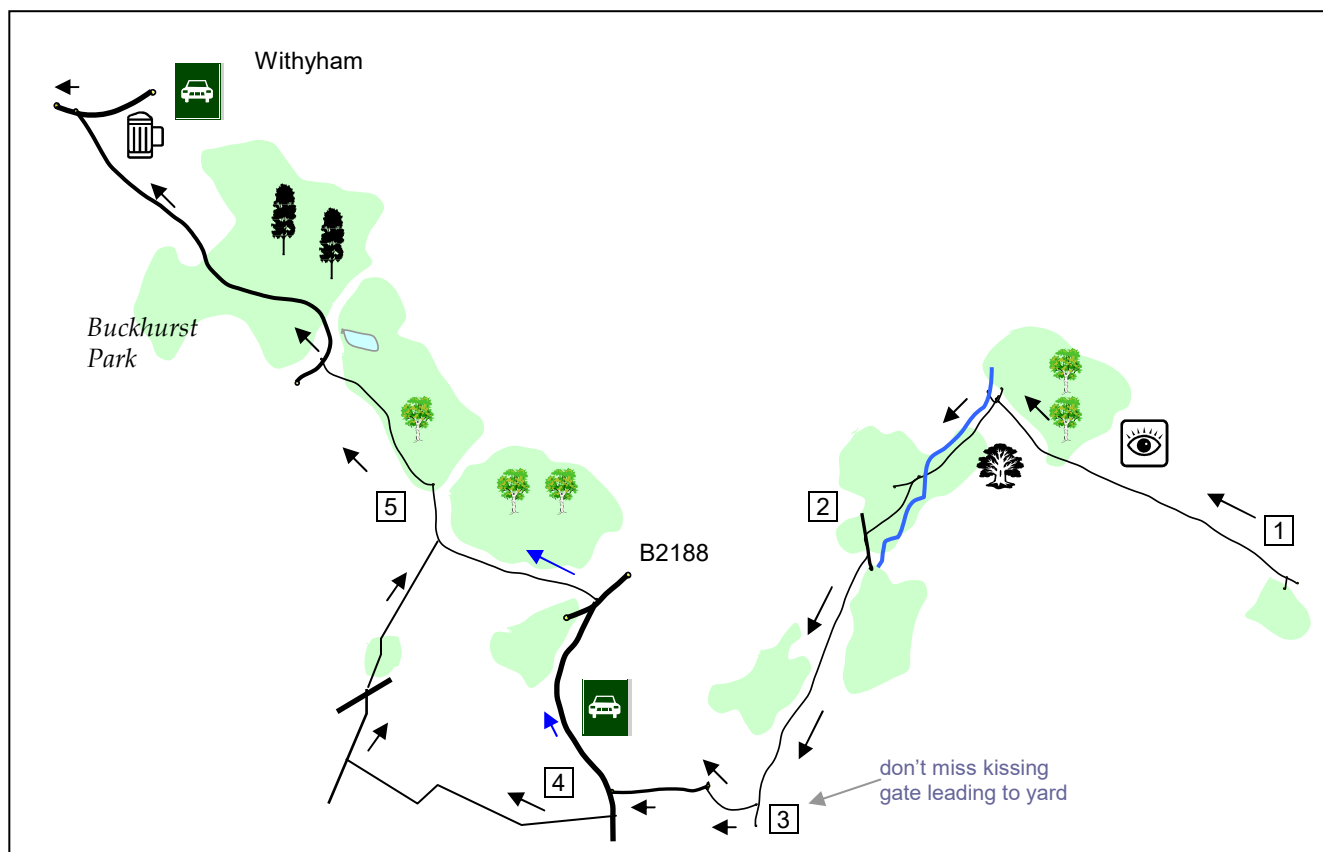
4 In 100m, the path enters woodland. In 50m after entering the woodland, you see on your left a large wooden gate and a stile. Here there is a “long cut” through Marchant Wood (still open in 2020) which is one of the unknown delights of this area. It only adds about 100m to the distance. This route is not a public right of way, but it seems to be currently open thanks to an enlightened landowner or the people of the nearby hamlet. Treat it with care and consideration and, if you are a large group or in any doubt, take the standard route (Stage **5B**).



5A **The Marchant Wood “long cut”** (see detail in map). Go **left** over the stile into the wood on a wide path, rather churned up by foresters, which curves left. The path narrows where the churned-up part ends. Exactly 200m after entering the wood, and 40m before a field you can see ahead, turn **right** over a birch-trunk bridge onto a path which in May is a stunning dense carpet of bluebells. The path goes over a bridge with rails (tread gently!). In 40m, turn **right** with the path, going past a quite enchanting little lily pond. Cross the pond by a long bridge (or by the longer walkway on the far side). Go past a bench and continue straight ahead on a narrow path into the wood, keeping about 20m from some new tree plantations on your right. At a T-junction, turn **left** onto another path. At the end, go through a wooden gate and through two wooden bars, sliding the top bar to the left or right. Now turn **left** in a meadow towards a house and oast.



5B **The standard route.** Continue straight along the track. Soon there is a meadow on the left with a house visible in the distance and, soon after, you come to a crossing path indicated by fingerposts. Go **left** here over a wooden bridge and up a meadowside towards a house and oast.

Leg 3: Marchant Wood to Withyham 5½ km=3½ miles



-  **1** You are now on part of the long-distance Sussex Border Path. Go up the meadow and through a gap. **Here it is worth glancing back to enjoy the view to the east.** You go past, on the right, an authentic oast that hasn't been prettified. At the top, go over a stile and keep to the right-hand side of a field. Keep straight ahead across the centre of two more fields, over a track and across the centre of another field. Go down through a belt of trees and over a stile and down the right-hand side of a beautiful sloping meadow. Ignore the wooden gate on the right under a tall oak. In the bottom corner, turn sharp **left**, still in the meadow, alongside a stream. Just before the corner, turn **right** through a gate, go over a bridge and **left** again through woodland. **You are now in a lovely stream valley with stunning bluebells in spring.** Up on the left is the famous house and garden of 'Penns in the Rocks', named after a previous resident William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania. Shortly, you will see the classic temple by an ornamental lake facing the house; it was brought here from the Manor House, Finchley, by the present owners in 1963. (See the "Penns in the Rocks" page on historicengland.org.uk.)
-  **2** You join a wide path coming down from the right. In 40m the path crosses a drive. *Note that you are on the High Weald Landscape Trail (HWLT), a long-distance footpath that runs from Rye to Horsham.* In 15m, turn **left** over a wooden bridge as indicated on a marker post, over a stile and up a meadow, with a classic landscaped garden on your right, to a gate at the top. Go over a stile by the gate and up a path that seems hewn from the large rocks. Go by a redundant stile to pass, on your right, a rocky outcrop. Follow the line of birches across the top of a meadow, where you will see a large deer fence before a belt of woodland. Go through a large metal gate and continue along the **right**-hand side of a field. In another 100m there are two gates across the track. Your route goes through the **right**-hand gate. Continue onwards along a fenced path. As the path runs past the

hedge between two fields on your left, look to your right to find a kissing gate hidden in the hedge. *Don't miss this turning!*

- 3 Go **right** through the kissing gate and into the back garden of *Home Place*. Continue through the yard by this house and various other properties such as *Park Oast*. Yes, this really is the footpath! Continue along the drive and, after 250m, exit to a road.

You now have a choice of **two** ways to Buckhurst and Withyham. The Lye Green Route was the first to appear on this guide, but it has now been superseded by the Meadows Route which has the advantage of avoiding most of the busy road, although it is a little longer.

- 4a **The Meadows Route.** Turn **left** on the road for 100m to a small signpost and turn **right** onto a wide grass path between wire fences. Continue past an unneeded small metal gate, downhill and straight ahead on a track beside a timbered house on your right. As you come up into a field, keep **left** on a fenced path and go through a gate into woodland. Your path shortly curves left and right and takes you deep into the wood. There is only one marker but, with a little care, you can locate the main path. Soon you negotiate a recently-renewed stile. Turn **right** on another path which shortly leads over a bridge. Another stile finally takes you out of the wood into a meadow. Keep ahead along the left-hand side and go slightly right at the end to find a stile, by a large metal gate, to exit to a tarmac lane. Turn **right** on this very quiet lane.

Here the **Withyham Cut** shorter option re-joins the main walk.

At the end of the lane, cross over the B2188 road and go up a sunken woodland path. Where the wood ends, go **left** over a stile into a large meadow. Keep to the **right**-hand side and go over a stile at the edge of a wire fence. Keep straight ahead across the next meadow heading for the corner of the wood ahead. Here you meet a junction with a stile on your right. Ignore the stile and continue along the right-hand edge of the pasture.

- 4b **The Lye Green Route.** Turn **right** on the road for 600m to a T-junction with the B2188 Lye Green Road (*care! fast road, blind corners*). Now go straight across over a stile into woods. In 200m, the path goes through the remains of a wooden swing gate and continues beside a coppice on your right. In another 250m, the path takes you over a stile into a large open pasture. Turn **right** along the edge.

- 5 In about 150m, go over a stile in the fence on the right and keep ahead on a path on the other side of the fence. In about 400m, the path leads out into the imposing landscape of Buckhurst Park. The house, not seen on this walk, is up to the left.

Buckhurst has belonged to the De La Warr and Sackville families since the Norman Conquest. Sir George (Jeffrey) Sackville was given the title Lord of Buckhurst in 1200. Anne Boleyn and her sister Mary ("The Other Boleyn Girl") would have known and visited Buckhurst as girls. Queen Elizabeth I visited and hunted at Buckhurst, a royal tradition that was maintained by Queen Victoria, Edward VII and the present Queen and her relatives. The current house at Buckhurst dates from 1603. The park was laid out by Humphrey Repton in the 1700s and in the early 1900s Sir Edwin Lutyens added a wing and Gertrude Jekyll designed a formal terraced garden. The Estate is a working estate which produces organic meat from the fine herds of Sussex Cattle, Jacob Sheep and Large Black Pigs.



Go down the grass slope and turn very sharp **right** on the driveway. Stay on this imposing main driveway, avoiding all minor turnings off, going past a lake on the right. The driveway passes some white-board houses and an old well. It then crosses a bridge over the infant Medway, with a cricket green on the right and some rock formations on the left. In ½ km it comes down to a road by the *Dorset Arms* (staying open in 2020). *The Dorset Arms is an ideal stopping-off point with its excellent food and ales (all of them Harveys, which is a limitation but not necessarily a drawback) and of course the excellent location with its pleasant little green from which you can watch the world go by.* **The Dorset Arms closes on (non-holiday?) Mondays.**

Leg 4: Witherham to Church Hill 3½ km=2¼ miles

- 1 Turn **left** on the road, using the footway on the other side, including a section beside the village hall. In 100m, as the footway ends, turn **left** at a fingerpost through a metal swing-gate and on a path leading up a grassy slope, through a wooden swing gate to the churchyard.

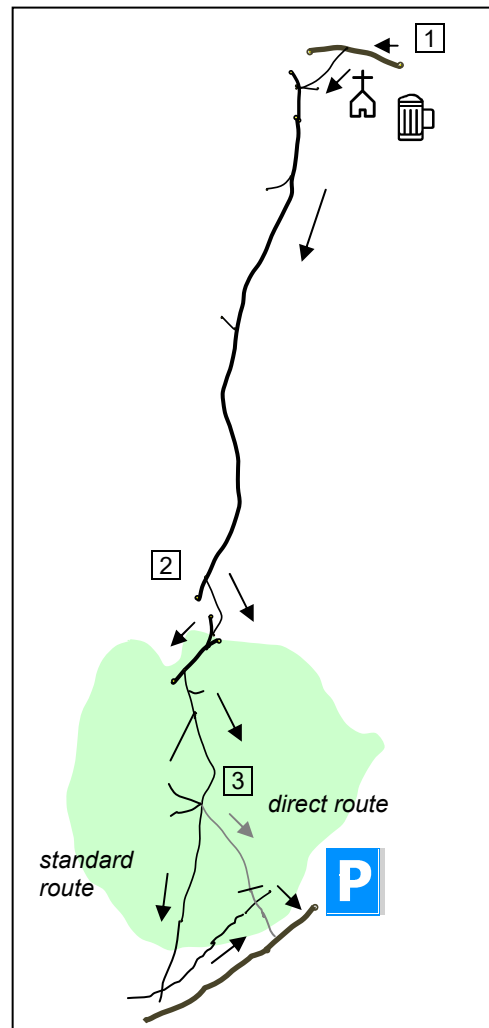


The Church of St Michael and All Angels was rebuilt in 1672 but a church has stood here at least from the late 1200s. For more details of the church and the Sackville Chapel that occupies the north-east corner, see the other walk in this series "Poohsticks and Sandpits".

Go round the church and exit the churchyard down from the west door. Go **right** on a drive coming from the Rectory, past wooden benches, and sharp **left** on a lane, part of the long-distance Wealdway (WW). This quiet cul-de-sac lane runs for about 1½ km with views to the right and some paths off leading to the occasional farm or house. Finally it reaches the hamlet of Fishers Gate. Before the white gates, go **left** over a stile.

- 2 Keep to the right-hand side of the pasture, rounding the corner, going over a bridge and stile, re-joining the drive and passing a small pond on the left. Go straight over a tarmac drive and turn **right** at a T-junction, still on the WW. In 50m, fork **left** on a stony track, slightly uphill, thus leaving the WW. This is the Five Hundred Acre Wood, referred to in the Winnie-the-Pooh stories as the *Hundred Acre Wood*. In 150m, the track passes a metal barrier and minor junction on the left and comes immediately to a fork. Take the **left**-hand fork through another barrier, a rather stony track. Keep to the track, avoiding all turnings off, following the yellow arrows. A little care is needed now: your path makes a definite **right** bend and comes to a junction of **five paths** by a large pond, hidden in trees, on your right.

- 3 Take the **leftmost** path, an unsigned forestry track, slightly uphill. (The *official* footpath is the next path to its right – a much longer option. It leads

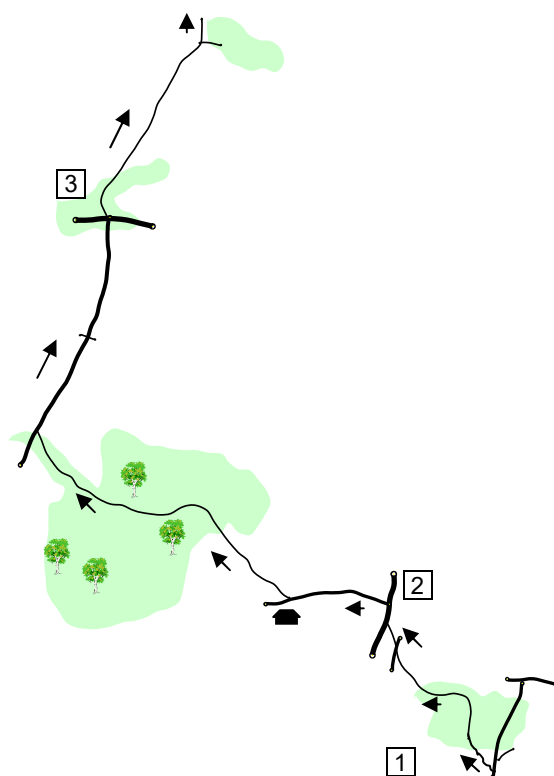


in 600m to the road, where you would need to turn left on another path for 500m to reach the path to the car park.) After 300m or so, go straight over a wide crossing path, through a gap in a wall of brushwood, through a band of holly and straight across another crossing path. Now follow the path directly opposite. It leads you through pines and, in 150m, back to the Church Hill car park where the walk began.

The Withyham Cut 3 km=2 miles

This is a short cut for walkers who want to go direct from the Crowborough area to Buckhurst Park and Withyham.

- 1 Turn **left** on the footpath just after the large timber yard. In about 50m, there is a lake on your right and, after some more woodland, a lake on your left. Later, at a gap in the trees, you have good views left. Follow an enclosed path out to a junction with a farm track. Veer **right** to an enclosed path by a fence, go **left** at the corner and down to a road. Turn **right** on the road.

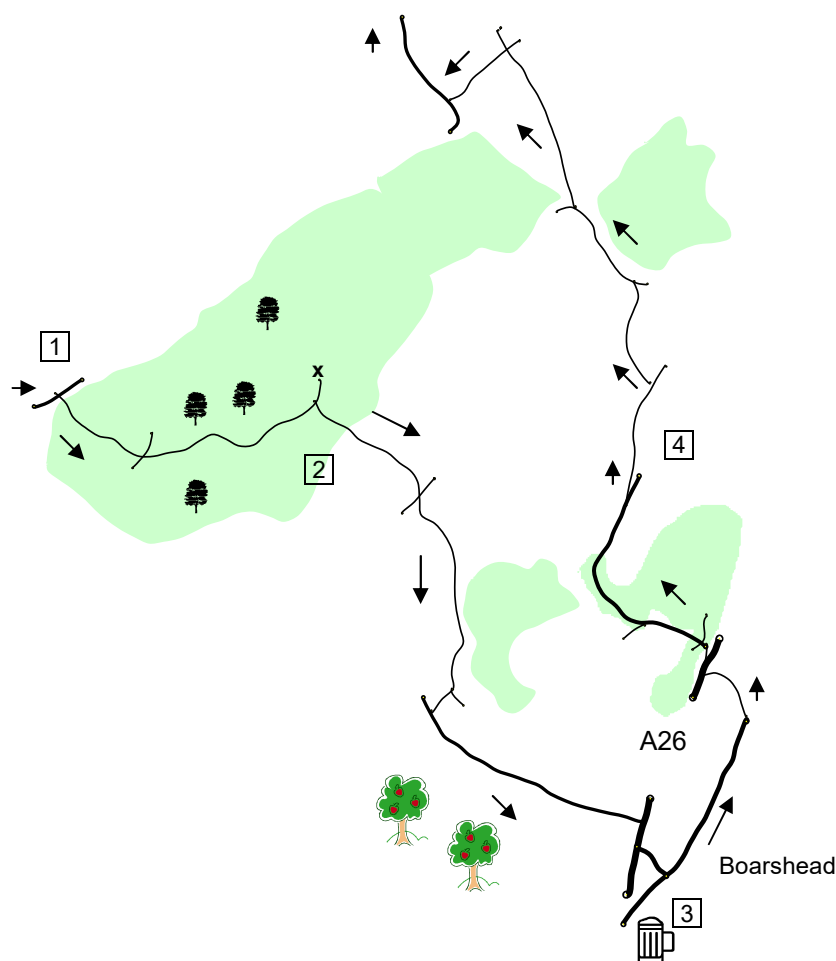


- 2 In 50m, turn **left** on a drive for *Highfields*. It runs parallel to another drive. (You'd think they could share.) Opposite the whiteboard house *Bowmans*, go **right** through a swing gate and follow a fenced path diagonally across the meadow. The path takes you through another swing gate into woodland and, after some distance on a fenced path, on a more winding route leading eventually down and over a stile. Turn **right** on this very quiet lane. The lane goes by the partially derelict *Whitehouse Farm* and immediately passes a footpath on your right.

Now continue the walk from the indicated point in **Leg 3 stage 4a**.

The Boarshead Loop 4 km=2½ miles

This is a short excursion taking you further east across interesting countryside with a good pub en route before re-joining the regular path.



- 1 Turn **right** and follow a narrow path downhill into woodland. At a junction with a crossing track, go straight ahead on another, now wider, track. The track crosses another path and veers right. After passing through a lighter area, with bluebells in late spring, the path descends into a darker area and a stream is visible on the right. Here, take a **right** turn to cross a bridge over the stream. (If you find yourself going steeply uphill on the sandy path, then you have missed this turning.)
- 2 Go across the centre of a large field. At the far side, at a 4-way fingerpost, go straight on, along the left-hand edge of the field. At the bottom of the slope, the path turns **left** over a stream on a grassy trail, uphill in the open, then through a high deer gate at the top. It zigzags round the left-hand edge of a big apple orchard. About 150m after entering the orchard, look for a 3-way fingerpost and turn **right** here up between rows of fruit trees. At the next fingerpost, go **left** on a track and follow it all the way to a road, the A26. *There is a farm shop just before the exit.* Go out through the gates, turn **right** on the road for 20m, **left** to a minor side road and **right** at the T-junction, leading to the *Boar's Head Inn*.



The Boar's Head Inn is a friendly 17th-century inn just off the main road with a good selection of real ales and excellent food. It has a strict 'no mobile phones' policy and any violation results in a fine that goes to charity. The pub closes in the afternoon.

- 3 After refreshment, retrace your steps, **ignore** the side road on the left by which you arrived and stay with the cul-de-sac to the end. Continue on a footpath that curves round to the main road. Cross the road carefully to a path opposite. On reaching a junction of drives, turn left on a track between *Green Loanings* and a metal gate. By a sign for *Leggs Field*, take the **right** fork. Pass *Little Renby*, shortly after to come to a fence on the left with a sudden fine view. Cross a stile on the **left** and continue on the other side of the fence. Note that you are on the Sussex Border Path (SBP).
- 4 Shortly, there is a sign steering you onto a dark narrow sunken path through the trees. As the path rounds a field corner, the gloom clears as the grassy path nears the field again and, 50m later, there is a 3-way fingerpost. Fork **left** here and keep to the right-hand edge of the field. At the bottom, join a track coming from the right, 40m later to come to a junction at a fingerpost. Go over a stile on the **right** and diagonally up the centre of two fields. At a 4-way fingerpost, turn **left** along the edge of another field and **right** at a T-junction with a track.

Getting there

By train: **Crowborough** station is 2 miles from the walk; go straight up Crowborough Hill, passing the *White Hart*, continuing on London road; or take a bus (196 or 227?); look for the *Old Hay Barn* care home and a red pillar box on the right and turn **right** on narrow Gillridge Lane. Start the walk from **Leg 2**.

By car: the **Church Hill** car park (grid ref 494327) is off the B2188 road. If coming from the London area, one route is via Hartfield and Withyham, or Hartfield and the Kings Standing junction (very scenic). Another route is via the A26 Tunbridge Wells and Crowborough.

