



Penshurst Rivers and Hills

Distance: 16 km=10 miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Kent, East Sussex

Date written: 19-may-2012

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Date revised: 18-sep-2017

Refreshments: Fordcombe, famous pubs near Penshurst, *Kingdom*

Map: Explorer 147 (Tonbridge) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Rivers, hills, views, famous pubs

In Brief

This walk takes you along the banks of the gentle Kent Water, then up into the hills for an enthralling and heavenly high meadow walk, then back beside the youthful Medway, calling in finally at some notable pubs. (To reserve a table at the *Spotted Dog*, ring 01892-870253. For the *Bottle House*, ring 01892-870306.)

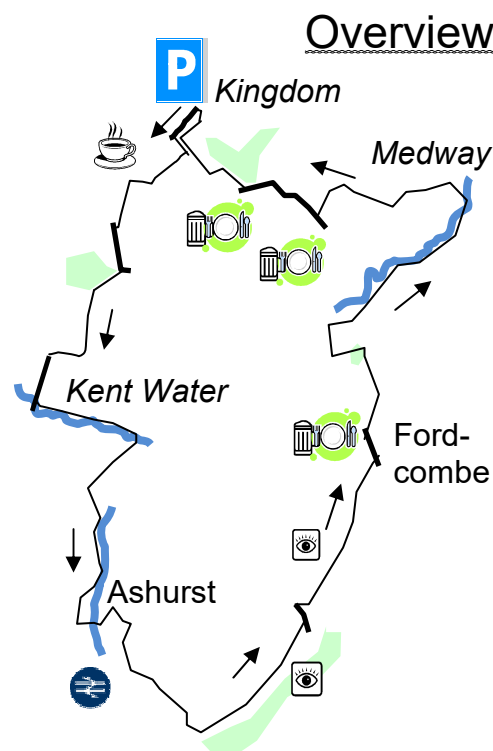


There are few nettles on this walk but scratchy undergrowth can be uncomfortable for bare legs. Otherwise, any kind of attire is fine. There is usually some mud on the bridleway off Bassetts Lane and, taken with the distance, you may find boots are a comfort. Your dog can come too since nearly all the stiles have a dog gate.

The walk begins in the car park of the **Kingdom Wholefoods Café** clubhouse, postcode **TN11 8DU**, in South Park Wood, just south of **Penshurst, Kent**.

This site is an adventure area, a centre for hiking and off-road cycling. It is marked on the OS map with a "P" symbol. Please make use of the café whose coffee and snacks make an excellent start to the day. The café clubhouse is open 10-4 daily but the car park is always open. It is at the top of a winding track.

Look for a sign at the entrance, easily missed. See their website www.thiskingdom.co.uk. On days of big special events, you may find the generous car park full, in which case you can park nearby on the roadside or in Fordcombe. **Ashurst Station (post-code TN3 9TL)** or the lay-by beyond the bridge at Ashurst are other starting points. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

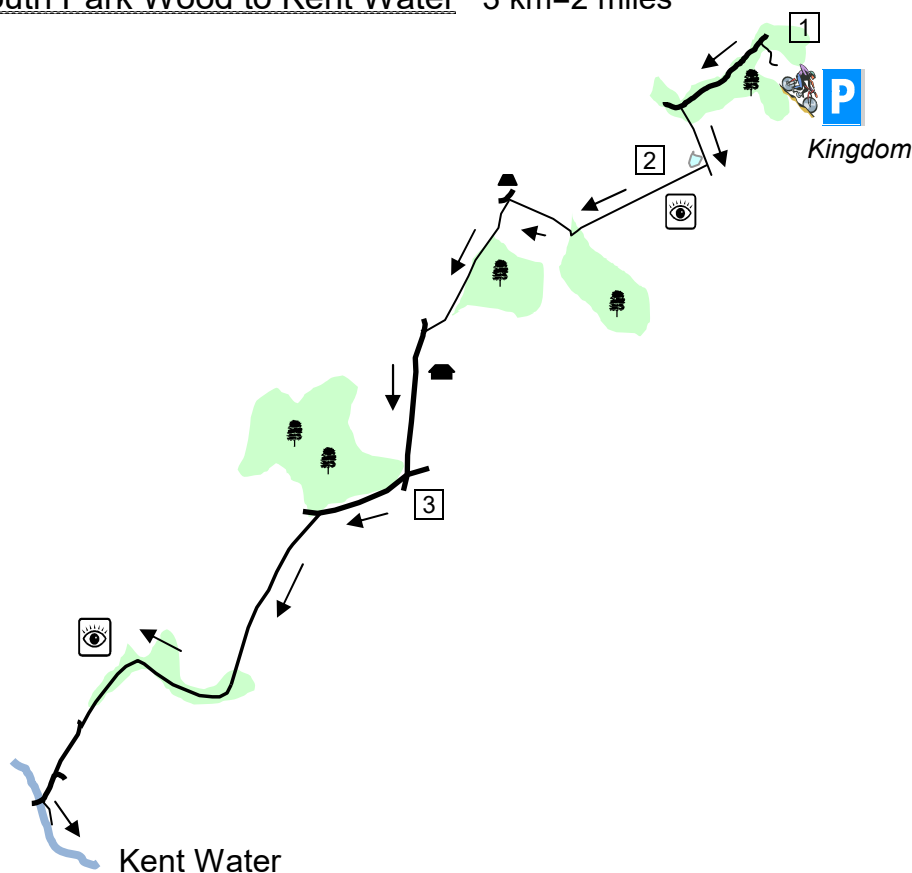


The Walk

If you have the latest Explorer map 147, the cover picture is a scene of Penschurst Off Road Cycling which used to run this South Park Wood site. It is still an outdoor centre but, as well as cycling, it hosts an adventure course, country walking, yoga, weddings, camp-fire cookery and various outdoor events. The clubhouse café is run by Basil Wholefoods and provides breakfast and hot and cold lunchtime snacks. Parking is free but please make use of the facilities and enjoy the really good coffee and healthy grub.

This wood, with the adjoining field, was owned in the mid-1800s by Viscount Henry Hardinge of Penschurst. Returning amongst popular adulation from his governor-generalship of India, he built a racecourse here to entertain and outdo his society friends and rivals.

Leg 1: South Park Wood to Kent Water 3 km=2 miles



- 1 Leave *Kingdom* by the way you came in: back down the winding track and **left** on the road. In 200m, go **left** on a signed footpath up some steps to a large crop field. Follow the footpath straight ahead across the centre, passing a large clump of trees in a hollow on your right. Immediately after passing the clump, turn **right**, keeping the clump on your right. (There is a tiny yellow marker pointing the way.) Where the edge of the clump curves away, keep dead straight on along a narrow path across the centre of the field, enjoying great high views across the Weald.
- 2 The path becomes clearer as you progress. Over on your right you can see one of the great houses of this area, *Stonewall Park*. When you reach the other side, turn **right*** along the edge for 30m and **left** through a wide gap into the adjoining field. (*The official footpath through the hedgerow is usually overgrown.) Turn **right** round the perimeter of the field, immediately turning **left** in the corner. Just after you turn left again in the far

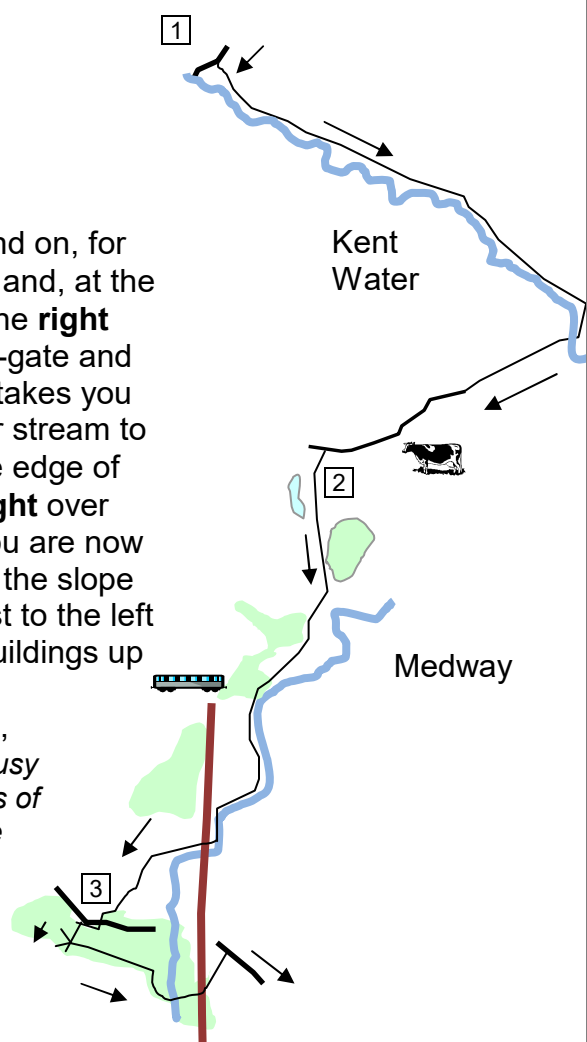
corner on the opposite side of the field, look to your **right** and go through a gap in the bushes to reach a road. *On your right, the low house is a gatehouse for Stonewall Park. Don't cross the road but turn immediately **left** over a stile and go along the left-hand side of a meadow. In the corner, go through a gap in the fence and continue similarly in the next meadow and again in the next. At the end of this last meadow, veer **right**, avoiding a stile over on your left, and go through a metal gate and over a stile to a road. Turn **left** on the road, going past *Finches* on your left.*

- 3 In 350m, at a road junction, turn **right** and **right** again on a quiet lane, signposted *Bassetts, Cowden* [2017: road closures do not affect walkers!]. In 250m, fork **left** under wires on a bridleway [2017: the signpost is missing]. (This is the *only* short section of this walk where mud may be a problem. You will need to skirt it on either side.) You pass a pond on your right and enter woodland. Nearly 500m from the start, the bridleway curves right at the edge of the hill with views south where the trees allow. In another 300m, the bridleway suddenly bends left downhill. (A farm gate straight ahead gives you a good photo-opportunity first.) The path goes through a broken wooden gate and down to a tarmac drive. Turn **left** on the drive and keep ahead on a tarmac lane coming from the left. In 70m, turn **left** at a footpath sign by a white fence on a path leading across the sheep pasture with the Kent Water flowing beside you on the right.

Leg 2: Kent Water to Ashurst 3 km=2 miles

The Kent Water rises from springs somewhere west of here and meanders eastwards until it flows into the Medway nearby. It forms the boundary between Kent, on the north side, and East Sussex.

- 1 You will be following the Sussex Border Path, off and on, for about 4 km. Follow the ragged edge of a long field and, at the far end, go over a bridge with railings and keep to the **right** alongside a golf green. Go through a metal kissing-gate and straight across another grassy meadow. The path takes you under power lines and over a bridge across a minor stream to reach the edge of a crop field. Turn **right** along the edge of the field and, in 60m, just before the corner, turn **right** over the Kent Water using a hidden concrete bridge. You are now in East Sussex for a short section. Keep ahead up the slope of the pasture, past an oak on your right, aiming just to the left of a low corrugated barn belonging to some farm buildings up ahead. At the far side of the field, join a dirt track, passing the farm house and cow pens on your right, with more buildings on your left. *Willetts Farm is a busy dairy farm, far from the chocolate box image, with heaps of machinery and productive herds. Be sure to sample the Willetts Farm **ice cream** while you are here: they make their own in 21 flavours, all quite delicious. You may need to ring ahead on 01892-740320. 70m after the last cowshed, turn **left** into a long grassy meadow, just before a marker post, using a plastic sleeve or hook, still on the Sussex Border Path.*



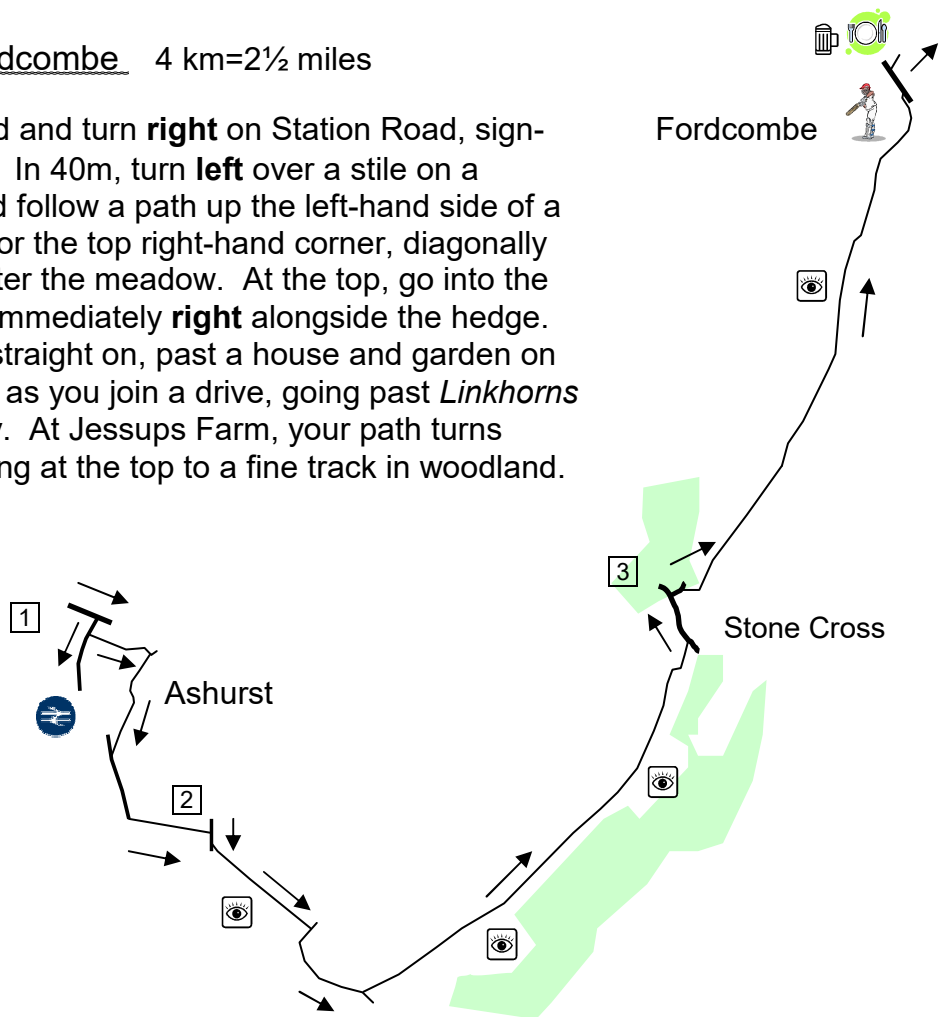
2 Keep to the left side of this long pasture. Your route passes a small pond on your right and sunken banks on your left. **At least one of the pastures may contain dairy cattle, all well used to people and easy to bypass.** At the far side, the meadow narrows with woodland on your right while, on your left, the young River Medway appears. Your path veers a fraction right, keeping the river on your left and follows the bank through a muddy willow grove by wartime pillboxes on your right and into another long meadow with a railway arch visible on your right. In the far corner, go through a small gate and through some woodland, under a railway bridge beside the stream. Keep along the left-hand side of the next meadow and finally go over a stile to the main A264 road.

3 Cross straight over the road and turn **right** into a tarmac lay-by. (Some walkers prefer instead to turn **left** and use the main road into the village.) In 25m, turn **left** over a stile by a signpost. In 25m, at a junction of five paths, turn sharp **left** on a path through a plantation of poplars and birch. Your path winds and, after 150m, reaches a T-junction. Turn **right** here to go over a stile towards a weir on the Medway along the left-hand side of a meadow. After 80m, go **left** through a wooden gate and across a bridge over the weir, back into Kent. Follow the path under a railway bridge and between fences out to the main road. Turn **right** through the village.

Ashurst was once a site of pilgrimage when, some time in the 1300s, a local carpenter created a carving that the priest proclaimed to be miraculous. For several centuries, people would bequeath their jewellery to the carving and the village became quite prosperous. Whether it was carved from ash wood is not known.

Leg 3: Ashurst to Fordcombe 4 km=2½ miles

1 Ignore a residential road and turn **right** on Station Road, signposted *Ashurst Station*. In 40m, turn **left** over a stile on a signposted footpath and follow a path up the left-hand side of a flowery meadow. Aim for the top right-hand corner, diagonally opposite you as you enter the meadow. At the top, go into the next meadow and turn immediately **right** alongside the hedge. In the far corner, keep straight on, past a house and garden on your right, and veer **left** as you join a drive, going past *Linkhorns* with its leaning chimney. At Jessups Farm, your path turns abruptly **left** uphill leading at the top to a fine track in woodland. Turn **right** on this track.



2 In 30m, turn **left** beside a large wooden gate and go along the top of a field with great views south to the South Downs, soon going through a line of oaks. At the top of the field, turn **right** on a wide path which quickly bends left. Shortly after, just before a metal gate, go **left** by a chunky 3-way fingerpost through a small metal gate beside a large one. The next short stretch is the loveliest of the walk with a high level path along the top of a



grassy meadow with views of more hills, woodland and valleys down on your right: the closest thing to heaven. At the other side, go through a wooden gate (easier than the stile) and along the top of another steeply sloping meadow with Burrs Wood below. The large village of Groombridge is visible down on your right. (See the walk [A Way Through the Rocks](#) in this series.) *This route is also part of the Wealdway, a long-distance path running from Gravesend to the coast.* Go through a kissing gate and continue along another meadow. Finally you encounter a kissing gate and a fenced path widening to a grassy area near some ornamental trees. Your path goes down right by a house and a fence and out through a kissing-gate to the main road at the small community of Stone Cross.

3 Turn **left** along the main road and shortly, at a road junction, turn **right**. In only 10m, turn **right** again on a drive and keep **left** to go over a stile on your left into a sheep pasture. Keep along the right-hand side and go over a stile into a field, still keeping to the right-hand edge. After 1 km, your path runs between hedgerows, passing a pond on your right, and in another 150m runs beside a cricket pitch, where you may see a game in progress. Go out beside the pavilion and veer **left** on the road at Fordcombe.

Fordcombe owes its prosperity to the Chafford Mill, just down the hill on the Medway, which produced some of the finest paper from which, in the 1800s, Bank of England notes and postage stamps were made. The local pub, the Chafford Arms, serves several of the local brews (including Larkins) together with lunch and has a large garden with views over the Medway valley. The pub also serves coffee and fish and chips. The pub sign illustrates the "ford" in the village name.

Leg 4: Fordcombe to the Medway Bridge 3 km=2 miles

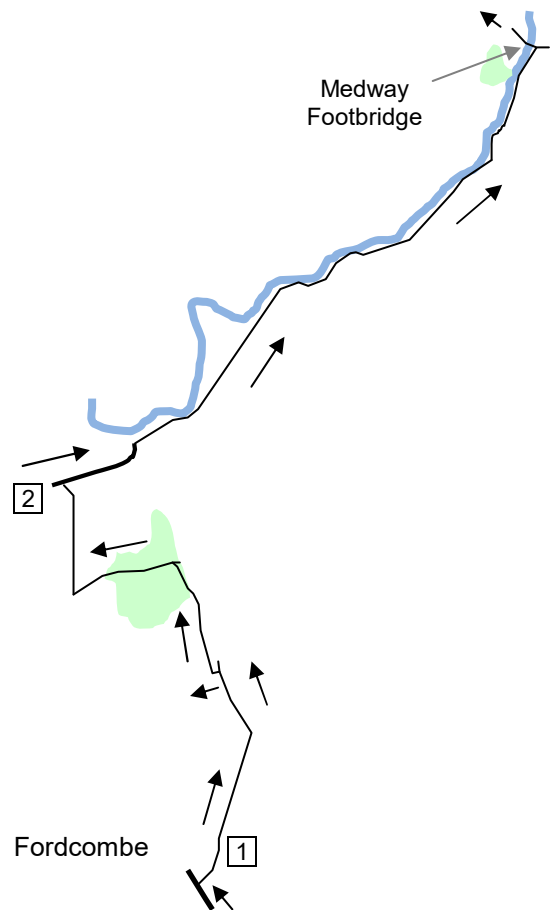
1 **See map overleaf.** Go down the main road passing the village sign, the school and a terrace of stone houses and, immediately after, turn **right** on a footpath. *However, for refreshment, you may first like to make a short diversion down the road to the "Chafford Arms", a big village pub with a lovely*



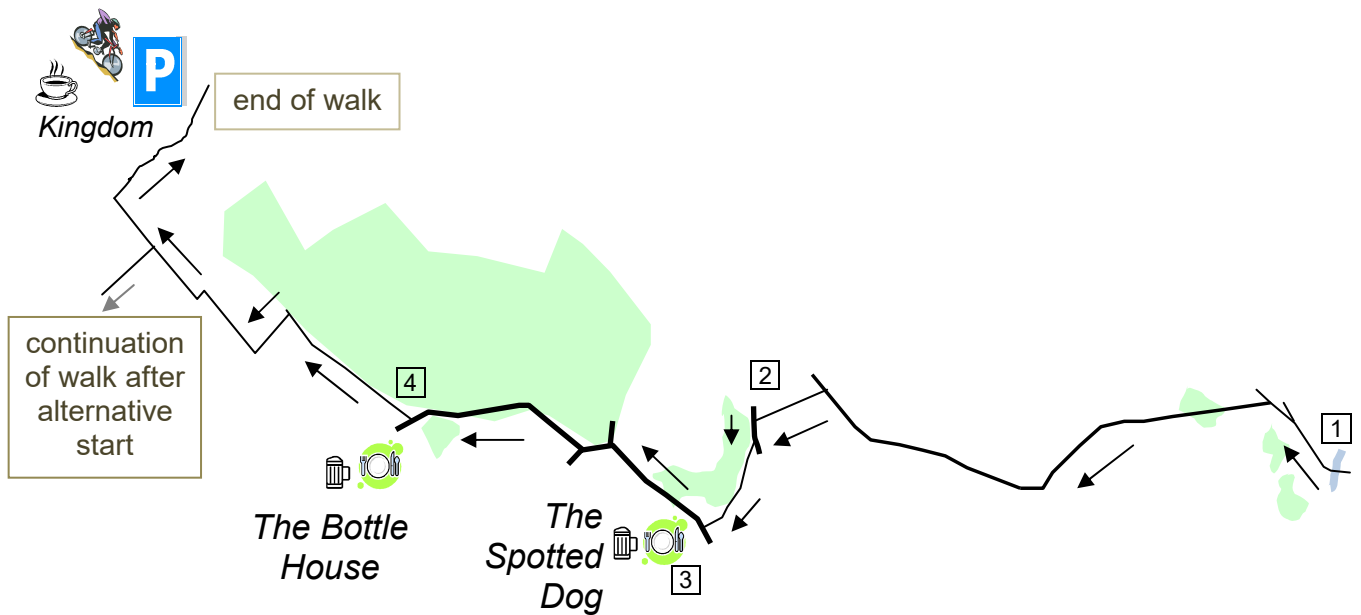
garden and views over the countryside. Follow the wide grassy path and, on entering a crop field, keep dead straight ahead across the centre. (In case this field is overplanted and a little tiresome to cross, note that this is the only one on your route.) At the other side, go through a chain stile and down the left-hand side of a meadow. Penshurst Place is visible about 2½ km away just to the right (see the other walk in this series [Chiddingstone, Penshurst: a Hundred Oasts and Two Castles](#)). At the bottom of the meadow, do *not* go through the chain stile ahead but turn **left** through a kissing-gate and **right** along the right-hand edge of the adjoining field. At the bottom, go ahead into a bluebell wood, After 80m, keep **left** with the path through the middle of the wood, ignoring a chain stile on your right. Your path comes out into a field and goes along the top edge, with Spring Hill Oast dominating the view ahead. At the corner, turn **right** down the gone-wild edge of the field, going over a 2-plank bridge at the bottom to meet a broad path.



- 2 Turn **right** on the broad path, going between fields, with a ditch on your right. The path bends **left** and **right** over a bridge with the Medway now close by on your left. *(The Private signs only apply to anglers!)* Keep left in this pasture, keeping close to the riverside. Your path passes very close to the Medway, along the left-hand side of a rather muddy meadow. You have the choice of following the river bank or keeping to the footpath which bypasses the meanderings of the river on your left by going straight ahead at an angle across the grass. You pass under low- and high-tension wires, then over a stile and a plank bridge to continue beside the river. Go over a bridge and through a chain stile into the next meadow, followed by another which, in season, is full of summer flowers. You next meet a 3-plank bridge and a chain stile leading into a large meadow. In 150m, where a path comes in from the right, go **left** over a bridge across the Medway.



Leg 5: Medway Bridge to South Park Wood 3 km=2 miles



- 1 Keep ahead on a path that leads away from the river, slightly right, across the meadow. Keep to the left-hand side, heading for a metal gate and stile. Cross the (shaky) stile, avoiding a footpath to the right, and continue ahead on a wide bridleway between hedges. You pass a pond on your left and the bridleway veers left towards the buildings of Nashes Farm. Veer **right** past the sheds on a wide track, avoiding all lesser paths off. In nearly ½ km, immediately before a house, turn **left** on a [2017: unmarked] path running beside a field on your left.

- 2 Approach the main road carefully, turn **left** on it for 30m and then go **right** up steps on a signposted footpath. Go over a stile [2015: care! the stile is broken] into a sloping meadow. Your path runs level, veers right uphill and goes steeply up a slope. Continue up the steepest part (infested with Himalayan balsam: take care not to pick up any seeds on your shoes!), over a stile and up to a road. Turn **right** on the road to reach the *Spotted Dog*.



The “Spotted Dog” is one of the celebrated pubs of West Kent, housed in a 15th-century white clapboard building which started life as several cottages. There is a large terrace at the front and a smaller one at the back which affords views across the Medway valley. The menu qualifies it as a gastropub and reviews are very good. Real ales available are Larkins, Harveys plus one or two guests, such as Doom Bar and Black Cat. These can be enjoyed on the long comfortable settees, provided you mind your head on the beams. Whatever they may say, however, the “Spotted Dog” is a bit snooty about walkers who are, at the threshold, asked to leave their boots outside. The “Spotted Dog” is open from 11.30 till the evening, closed on Mondays at 3pm, except occasionally on bank holidays. Food is available whenever the pub is open.

- 3 After possible refreshment, continue along the lane, going past the famous double sign pointing to two pubs. Ignore the right turn here and continue on the road. In 50m, avoid a road on the left (Nunnery Lane) and stay on the major road, now called Coldharbour Road. In 350m, you come to the *Bottle House*.

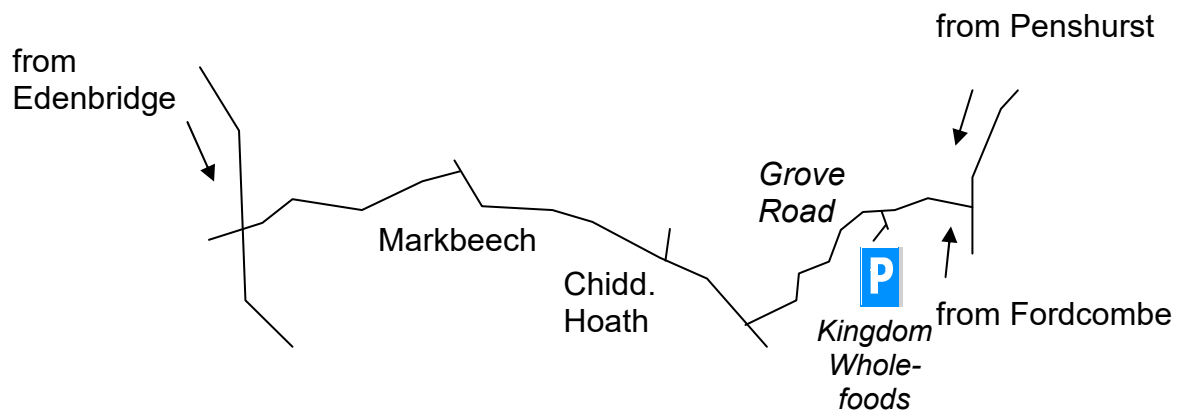


The “Bottle House” is another ancient inn, an equal rival to the “Spotted Dog”, with a pleasant terrace, a good menu and some local ales. It was built in 1492, the year that Columbus sailed. It was one or two farm cottages until 1773 when it was first licensed. Parts of it were a baker, a shop, a farrier and a cobbler, later there was a skittle alley, a chapel with graves and their attendant ghosts who still haunt the area. The current layout dates from 1938 when the two cottages were joined again. The name “Bottle House” derives from the large number of bottles that were found in the rubble.

- 4 Turn **right** just before the *Bottle House* going through the pub’s car park and going along the drive for *Horns Lodge*, through a small wooden gate beside their main gate. Just before a *Private* sign attached to a fence, turn **left** as indicated through a wooden gate on a path between fences. The path bends right, taking you left in 150m through a gate into a field. Turn **right** in the field (the signpost is misleading), alongside the hedge of a garden on your right. At the corner of its fence, keep straight on across the field to a large clump of trees (familiar if you began the walk at *Kingdom*). If you did *not* begin the walk at the *Kingdom Clubhouse*, turn **left** just before the clump, by a tiny yellow arrow, and where the edge of the clump curves away, keep dead straight on along a narrow path across the centre of the field continuing the walk from section 2 of Leg 1. As you reach the end of the field, there is a short cut back to the Clubhouse car park as an alternative to retracing your outward journey by descending the steps to the road. Turn **right** along the edge of the field, being careful of the crops as this is not a right of way. When you reach the corner go **left** through a gap in the bushes on a path that takes you into the adventure area. You pass to the left of the large chestnut called the *Seven Sisters*, supposedly the largest living tree in the British Isles, before arriving back at the car parking area where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: if coming from the London area, west side, one attractive way is from the B2026, Kent Hatch Road; about 2½ miles south of Edenbridge turn **left** to go through Markbeeche; keep right at Chiddingstone Hoath, and in ¾ mile turn **left**, signposted *Penshurst*, into Grove Road. Look for a rough track on your **right** in less than 1 mile, with a sign **Kingdom Wholefoods Café**. The car park is at the top of the winding track where you will see the large two-story clubhouse. If you decide to go through Penshurst (either from Tonbridge or Tunbridge Wells, on the Penshurst Road, or from the north on the B2176), go south on the B2188, signposted *Fordcombe*, and in about ½ mile, turn right on Grove Road, signposted *Chiddingstone, Edenbridge*; the car park is on the **left** in just over ½ mile.



By train: start the walk at Ashurst station.

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