Fancy Free Walks

point your feet on a new path

Leeds Castle

Distance: 8 km=5 miles — easy walking

Region: Kent — Date written: 29-aug-2015

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Refreshments: Leeds village

Map: Explorer 148 (Maidstone) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Quiet lanes, easy field paths, woodland, views, historic house, parkland

In Brief

This walk takes you past the "loveliest castle in the world", although the route keeps you in suspense for a while. For there is much more to Leeds: not just the villages with their period houses, also extensive woodland with sudden views over the green meadows.

A visit to the castle is a fabulous experience but this walk only skirts it on a public footpath, taking you past the entrance. An optional entry to the grounds and/or the castle is chargeable.

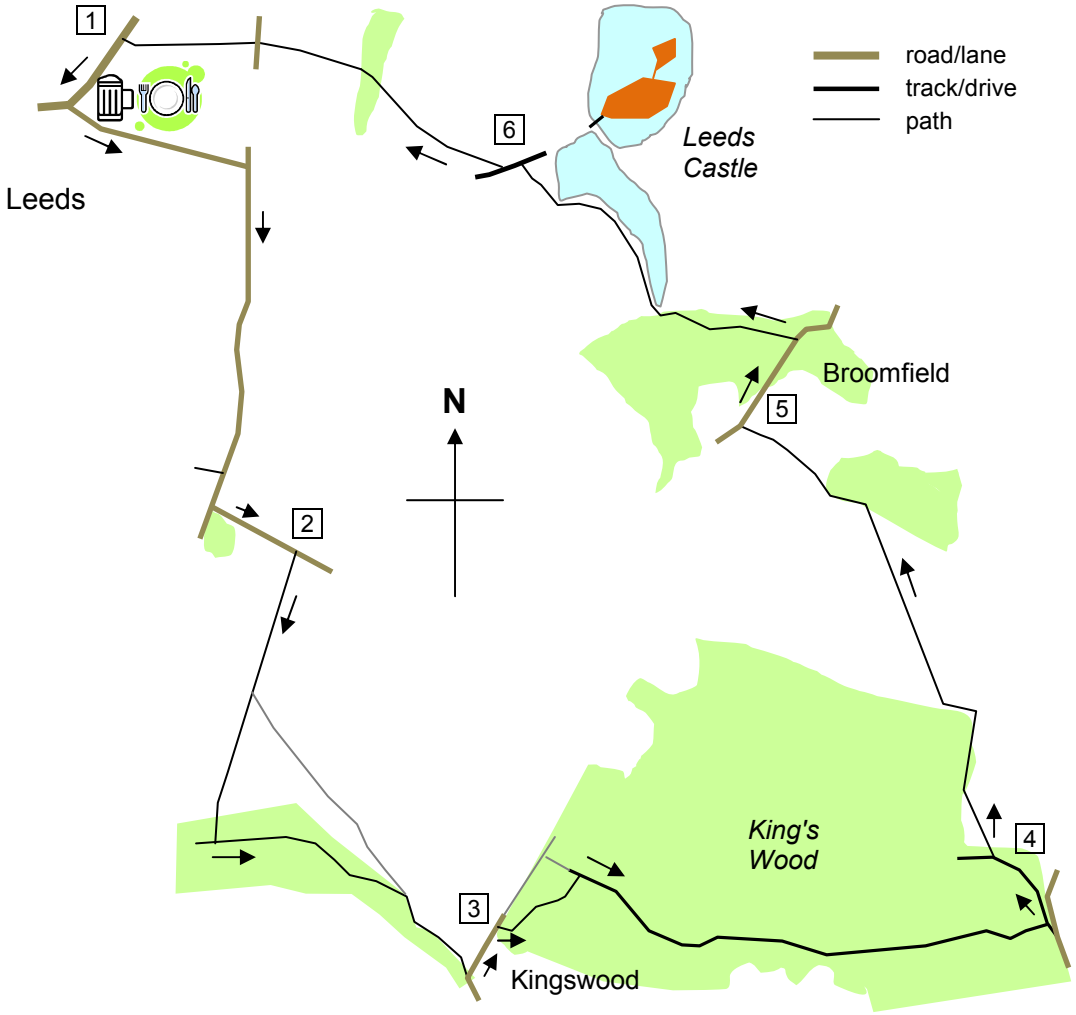
There is an excellent pub in the village, the *George*, especially good for food. Booking is necessary on a popular day. To enquire, ring 01622-861314.

There are some nettles and brambles in the woodland, making the wearing of shorts inadvisable. The walk is, on the whole, dry with just a few muddy patches in the woods, making boots a recommendation, especially if the weather has not been completely dry. With only one stile, no main roads and just a few sheep by way of livestock, this walk is suitable for your dog.

The walk begins at the car park beside the church in Leeds village, near Maidstone Kent, postcode **ME17 1RL**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

The village of Leeds got its name from the stream that now runs underground near the George Inn, called Hlydes or "the noisy one". (Different from Leeds in Yorkshire whose name is a bit obscure.) Also near the inn is the site of Leeds Priory, founded in the year 1119 and dissolved by Henry VIII's orders. The lovely period houses now witness heavy traffic from commuters. Apart from the George, the village had a second pub until recently, the Ten Bells, named in honour of the church. It was demolished in 2014 without planning permission, causing quite a rumpus. (For visitors with time to wander, the site is next to that wonderful timbered house known as Vineys Cottage.)



1 From the church car park, go out to the main road and turn **left**, using the footway. You quickly reach the *George Inn*, a bright prospect for your return. Immediately after the inn, turn **left** on a tarmac lane. Follow this extremely quiet lane for 450m to a junction and turn **right** on another narrow lane. The next turning is in about 750m. After the first field on your right ends, the lane begins to rise gently, sheltered by trees. Suddenly there is an open gap on your right. 50m later, you reach a road junction on your left. Turn **left** here on another lane leading towards Park Barn Farm, with great views of the North Downs.

2 In 200m, before you reach the farm, look for a small signpost. Turn **right** here on a path across the field. About half way across, ignore a path branching off left. (This left fork is a short cut, but this walk steers you into the attractive woodland ahead.) When you reach the far corner, under an

electricity pole, continue straight ahead on a narrow path into woodland and shortly turn **left** at a T-junction on a woodland path. Follow this good woodland path through birch for nearly ½ km, where the path comes close to the field on your left and another path joins. Keep right, staying in the woods for another 200m where you reach a junction of paths by a fence. Turn **left** onto a residential road of bungalows in the modern settlement of Kingswood. Turn sharp **left** on the road.

3 In just over 100m you reach, on your right, a road sign showing "30-mph" and "Kingswood" on the back. **Immediately** after this sign, turn **right** on a very narrow unmarked path into the woods. This secret path is popular with the villagers but completely unknown to outsiders; in late spring there is a marvellous display of bluebells here. The path is tortuous but quite clear. In over 200m, you come to a T-junction with a very wide path. (The area opposite you was cleared of trees (2016).) Turn **right** on this path, leading you deep into King's Wood. Keep straight on for ½ km, passing several side paths and finally entering an open area where the trees have been harvested, ready for re-planting. Keep straight on for nearly 200m where you meet a junction of four paths. Avoid the forester's path that forks away left and take the **second** path from the left, actually straight ahead, possibly skipping round a muddy patch. The path is rutted by vehicles but there is a dry central strip. In 300m or so, suddenly you come out of the dark birches into a much lighter area. Avoid small paths branching off here and keep straight on for nearly 100m where you come to a T-junction, just short of a tarmac road. Turn sharp **left**.

4 Your new path passes *Keepers Cottage* on your right along a rather nettly route. 100m from the cottage, look to your **right** for a narrower path forking away to a stile visible ahead. *Don't miss this turn!* Take this path into a crop field and follow a path straight across the field. When you reach the edge of woodland, your path veers **right** along the edge of the field. In 150m, at the first corner, turn **left**, still following the edge. After only 70m, veer **right** with the path across the centre of this large field. In ½ km you finally arrive at the opposite corner by some woodland. Go through a metal gate here and go along the right-hand side of a pleasant meadow. At the corner of the wood, a charming landscape is revealed, with Broomfield Church ahead, *Roses Oast* and *Church Farmhouse* (dating from the 1400s) further to your left and the sheep fields of the Len Valley to your right. Keep on, heading to the left of the church and go through a kissing-gate into the churchyard. After you pass St Margaret's church, a wooden gate and a tarmac path lead to the road in the village of Broomfield.

Broomfield is named after the broom (yellow-flowered shrubs) that grow on the heath. Its history is as important as Leeds' and the Castle is really in Broomfield. One son of the village was George Brodbridge, martyred in 1555, according to Foxe's Book of Martyrs for denying the Transubstantiation. The church of St Margaret, dating from around 1100, when open, is worth visiting.

5 Turn **right** on the road passing another terrace of cottages and a wild fowl sign, after which the road crosses the River Len. Shortly after, look for a hidden signpost on your **left**, partly hidden in bushes. Take this straight woodland path into trees. In 300m, your path crosses the River Len by a footbridge, curves right and leads through a swing-gate into the parkland of Leeds Castle. Keep right along the bank of the Great Water. Near the end of the lake, veer **right** over a 2-plank bridge, past a yellow post. After a swing-gate, keep ahead up the grass past a horsechestnut and another

yellow post to a tarmac drive, with the Castle now clearly in view on your right.

Leeds Castle was built in the reign of Henry I (1068-1135), son of William the Conqueror. When Edward I came to the throne in 1278 it became a palace for royal queens (no joke intended). Henry VIII lavished vast sums on the castle and visited with Catherine of Aragon. Ownership later passed to other great families, including the Culpepers, forgiven after the "adultery" with Anne Boleyn (see the "Offham, Old Soar Manor, Platt" walk in this series). During World War II, the castle was used for research and as a military hospital. The castle is now run by a charitable foundation as a centre for high-level conferences in medical research or occasional world summit meetings, e.g. Arab-Israeli. In the 1970s the castle was opened to the public, billed as the "loveliest castle in the world".

6 Turn **left** on the drive. Go through a small wooden gate on the right of the drive and veer **right** on a grass path parallel to the drive. Where you meet another yellow post near the drive, stay on the grass, going up a slope. A glance back here gives you a final view of the castle. Just before you reach a fence at the top, fork **left** to go through a small wooden gate and along the right-hand side of a cricket pitch. At the other side, go through another swing-gate onto a wide grassy strip. Your path crosses a tarmac lane via two swing-gates. Keep ahead now heading for the triangular spire of St Nicholas Church and go through a swing-gate into the churchyard. A final wooden gate leads into the car park where the walk began.

St Nicholas Church, Leeds is Norman and its tower is the second largest Norman tower in England (after Tewkesbury). The ancient oak frame supports no less than ten bells, one of which was made in 1617 by Joseph Hatch a renowned local bellfounder. The clock, dating from around 1730, was also made locally.

The George Inn is the quintessential traditional pub with a large garden and, in summer, a long tent, as though you need shelter from the English summer sun. There are many genuine good reviews of the food and everyone seems to rave about the pork belly. (In case it's fully booked, there are three pubs just across the motorway in Hollingbourne.)

Getting there

By car: Leeds Castle is signposted from the **M20** motorway, just 1 hour from London, 7 miles east of Maidstone. Come off at Junction 8. Follow the brown-and-white tourist signs. They will take you after ⅓ mile to two roundabouts close together on the A20. Follow the sign **right** at the **second** roundabout but, in 300 yards, **ignore** the left turn for the Castle and carry on into the village. The car park is at the start of the village, just after a double bend, by the church, on the **left**.

By bus/train: from Bearsted Railway Station, a coach shuttle service to Leeds Castle is run by Spot Travel from April to September (check their website). Start at section 6. Bus 13 runs from Maidstone to Leeds village, not Sundays.

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