



Chiddingstone, Penshurst *A Hundred Oasts and Two Castles*

Distance: 18 km=11 miles

easy walking

Region: Kent

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Charcott, Chiddingstone, Penshurst, Leigh

Map: Explorer 147 (Sevenoaks)

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Oast houses, great houses, quiet meadows, history, pubs

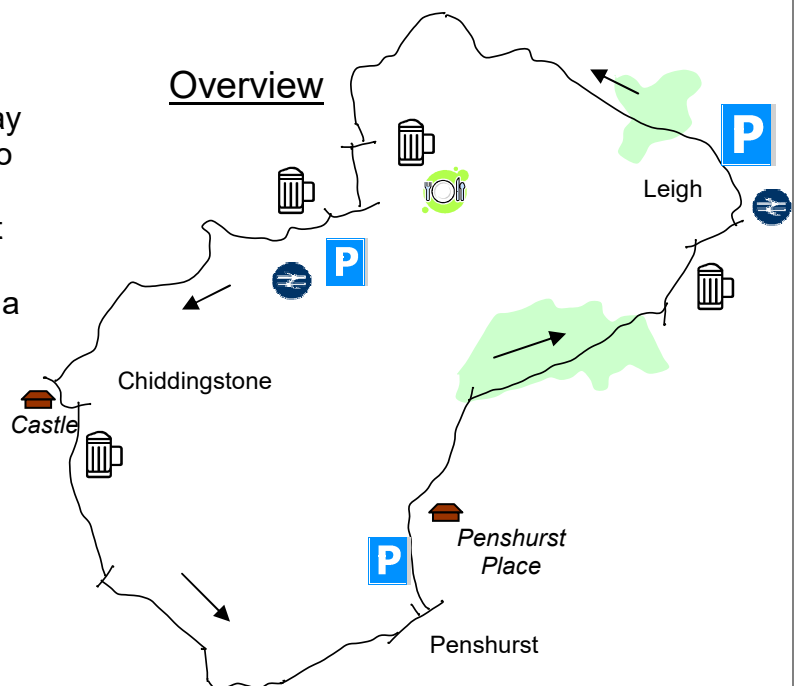
In Brief

This is a walk through history, a gentle portrait of the *Garden of England*. The oast houses, with their white tipped conical roofs, are a visual delight and in between them meadows of great variety that gives you a feeling for the open spaces. On the way, you pass Chiddingstone Castle and the majestic Penshurst Place. The pubs en route give you unrivalled opportunities for refreshment in sublime surroundings.



There are some nettles on this walk and some thistles, so shorts may not be advisable. In the wetter seasons, you will find boots essential around the farms, especially on the first leg. Your dog could come too but he will have little chance to come off the lead.

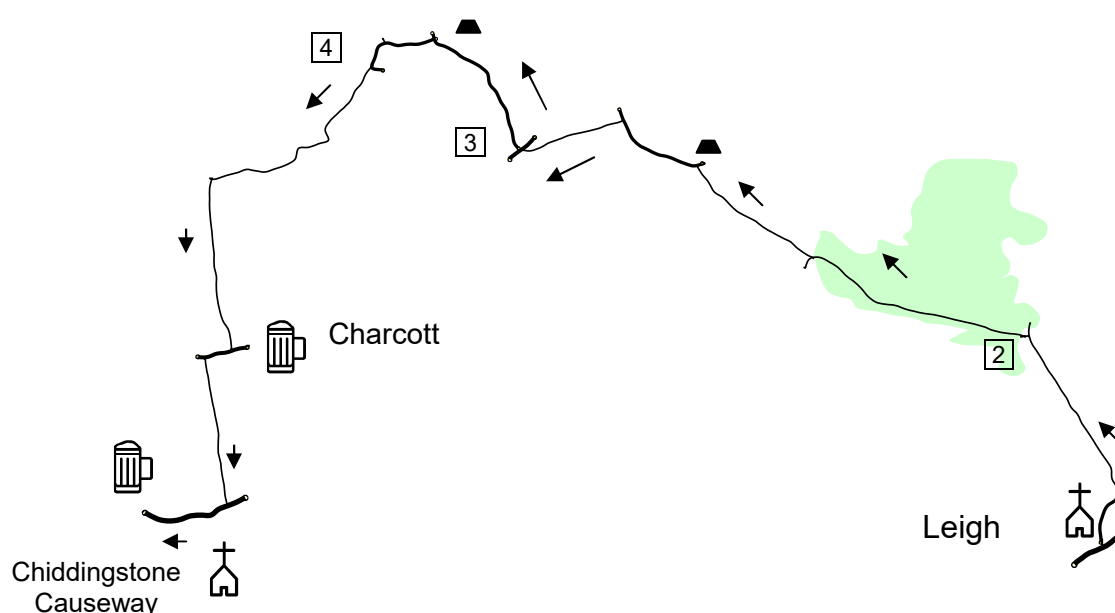
The walk begins in **Leigh**, near Tonbridge, Kent (grid-ref 551465 post-code **TN11 8QB**). Leigh has a railway station. If arriving by car, park next to the Green, avoiding the few yellow lines. Another possible starting point is at Chiddingstone Causeway, post-code **TN11 8JS**, where there is a car park next to the church, and a station, misleadingly called *Penshurst station*. Another possible start is in Penshurst at the large lay-by on the B2176 Penshurst Road, post-code **TN11 8DB**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk

Leg 1: Leigh to Penshurst Station 5 km=3½ miles

Leigh was previously spelt "Lye" or "Lyghe", meaning a "forest clearing", and it is still pronounced "Lye". It arose from obscurity but three moated farmhouses here have been dated from the late 1100s. Much of the land belonged to Sir John Pulteney of Penshurst Place (see later) and it then passed to the Sidney family and several houses here bear their crest, the Bear and Ragged Staff. In the 1800s the village was transformed by the Bailys and Morleys who owned Hall Place. Another major influence was the new Tonbridge to Redhill railway. St Mary's Church was built in the 1300s and much altered in Victorian times. It contains much exquisite stained glass and the new rooms on the northern side are designed to channel the light through them. Leigh has a shop (closed Sundays), the Bat and Ball pub (re-opening 2012?), the Fleur de Lis pub, alms houses, the old waterworks and many Victorian and Edwardian buildings of unique character.



- 1** Starting from the north west corner of the Green, by the school and bus shelter, go up a narrow lane to the church. *Helpfully, the church has a loo through the north east door.* Turn **right** in front of the church and exit by the lichgate. Immediately go between the old gatehouse and *Porcupine House* on a grassy enclosed path. (The path seems to go through private property but it really is a footpath.) On the left you will be passing for some time the grounds of Hall Place. *The "new" Hall Place is a large Tudor-style mansion designed in 1871 by George Devey.* Go through a kissing gate, so tight and delapidated that you may have to part with your backpack, along the left-hand side of a pasture and through another similar kissing gate, a little more generous. At the corner, go **left** through a metal gate, ignoring the footbridge ahead.
- 2** The enclosed path runs through a wood thick with yews and rhododendrons, known locally as the *Birdcage Walk*, with a stream on your right. After about 700m in the wood, you come out via a chain stile into farmland. Keep ahead along the right-hand side of several meadows, heading for the farm and oasts of *Leigh Park Farm* and going through several metal gates, small and large. As you approach the oasts go left-right round the last corner, through a small metal gate and keep to the left of the oasts.

An oast or oast house is a kiln for drying hops as part of the brewing process. The conical roofs are a familiar part of the landscape in Kent but they also occur as far west as Hampshire (see for instance the Waggoners Wells walk on this site). They have several floors on which hops are spread out for drying by hot air from below. The cowl in the roof turns with the wind. Now that more efficient processes are available, many redundant oasts have been converted into homes.



Go past an attractive duck pond with a weeping willow on a concrete track. After 250m on the track turn **left** through a small metal gate on a signed footpath that runs beside a line of trees. In about 300m, at a blunt corner of the meadow, turn **right** at a sign over a bridge and go through a modern kissing gate to a lane.

3 Cross the lane to a tarmac drive opposite, marked as a footpath, and stay on the drive, heading for the white-topped oasts of Wickhurst Farm. On nearing the buildings, ignore a path on the right and continue ahead in an avenue of horsechestnuts. Just after the oasts, take the **right** fork to avoid entering the house. The path zigzags round a black farm shed. Immediately ignore a footpath on the right here and continue on the wide track. In 100m, where the track bends left by a garden, turn **right** through a small metal gate in the direction of a yellow arrow.

4 In 50m, go through a gap in the hedge by the nearest large tree and then go diagonally across a meadow to the opposite corner. Go over a bridge across a stream and turn **left** round a field and then **right** at the corner. Turn **left** and **right** again round the jagged corner of the same field and stay all the way along the irregular left-hand side of the field and finally go **left** through a kissing gate. Head to the left of the buildings and oasts of Charcott Farm, walking the entire length of the meadow, and exit through a gate on the right. *(The author passed some docile dairy cattle and felt no need to go round them.)* Turn **left** on a track to arrive at a lane at a bend in the hamlet of Charcott. *The "Greyhound" is on the left here, a gastropub with an impressive menu including homemade paté, leek and mussel crumble and local pheasant and more intimate and restful than the next chaotic pub.* Keep straight ahead to a major road and turn **right**. In 80m, turn **left** on a narrow straight tarmac footpath. You pass a pillbox on the right, hidden in bushes. At the end, turn **right** on the main road into Chiddingstone Causeway, passing St Luke's church with its large car park, making this an alternative starting point.

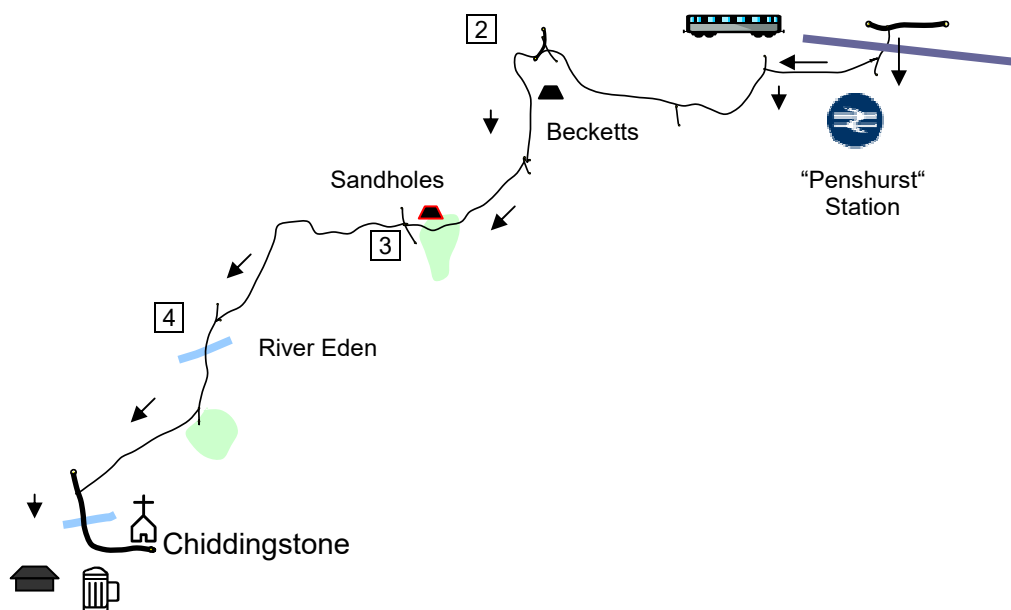


Chiddingstone Causeway confuses visitors since its railway station is called "Penshurst", which is a village 5 km=3 miles away. It is a much bigger village than Chiddingstone itself. The "Causeway" in the name also confuses but it is believed to mean "Chiddingstone over the Causeway" i.e. the hamlet on the other side of the road that crosses the watermeadows. The church was built in 1898 by the Hills family, the cricket bat and ball manufacturers. The "Little Brown Jug" is an extremely popular pub which does hog roasts and often has a children's entertainer.



Leg 2: Penshurst Station to Chiddingstone 3½ km=2 miles

- 1 Turn **left** in front of the *Little Brown Jug* and cross the railway via the station bridge. Turn **right** and **right** again at the bottom of the steps and cross a concrete yard. Immediately turn **right** over a stile and proceed along the right-hand side of a field. *Ahead to the left, you can see Chiddingstone Church.* At the next corner, go straight ahead across a meadow. At the far side, turn **left** beside a line of trees. In about 150m, go **right** through a new gate, in the direction of a yellow arrow. Follow the left-hand side of a small meadow, go over a stile (avoidable through a new metal gate, if open) and follow the left-hand side of a larger meadow. Head for *Becketts Farm* and its oasts, ignoring a footpath left. At the far end, go over a stile about 20m to the right of the corner, just to the right of a large barn, with a small duck-pond on the right. Keep the oasts on your left as you cross this rather bumpy meadow, keep **left** round the corner and go over a stile to the drive.



- 2 Keep all the buildings on your left and follow the drive ahead and to the right where you find a large metal gate. Go over the rough stile here (or through the gate) and continue along the left-hand side of a large meadow. In only 30m, turn **left** through a gap near the corner of the garden. (Strictly, you should use the stile 30m further on but all the gaps in the hedge make it redundant.) Keep **left** round the side of the garden until you are near the back of the house. In front of you is a long hedge. Don't go through the gap in the hedge but stay in the meadow by bearing **right** beside the hedgerow. At the end of the meadow is a very worn open metal gate into another pasture. Ahead to your **right** is a red-tiled house *Sandholes*. Cross the pasture diagonally to go through a gap in the hedgerow about 80m to the left of the house. Continue in the same direction across a smaller meadow with the house on your right. Turn **right** in the corner and go over a stile (or through a gate) onto a farm track, passing a fine converted barn, to reach a lane.
- 3 Cross the lane to a footpath opposite. (In damp seasons there is heavy caked slurry here. To avoid it, you can use a gate 200m **right** along the lane.) Continue along the left-hand side of the large meadow. Follow the edge for nearly 300m, through a hedge and into the next meadow. *Chiddingstone Church is now clearly visible.* In 30m, turn **left** over a stile, or through a wide gap, heading straight for the church. Go down this long meadow,

heading for metal gates in the bottom right. *The tilehung house on the right is Somerden Green.* Keep to the right in the next small meadow and leave it via a new metal gate on the **right** and turn **left** on a good path.

- 4 In a 30m, your path crosses the River Eden by an excellent sturdy bridge at an attractive spot. Continue to the corner of a wood on your left and here go **right** through a gap. Cross a meadow diagonally, following a faint path and veer **right**. Go along the left-hand side of a meadow, through a wooden swing-gate by a pond on your right and through a metal swing-gate to a road. Turn **left** on the road and over the bridge beside the lake of Chiddingstone Castle, one of the sweetest sights of this area.

Chiddingstone Castle goes back to the early 1500s when it was a Tudor dwelling occupied by the Streatfeild (sic) family. In the early 1800s Henry Streatfeild completely rebuilt the house as a medieval castle. The castle was eventually sold to Lord Astor in 1938. It was an army base during the WWII and then a school before it was bought by the eccentric collector Denys Bower. In the late 1950s Bower, who had two failed marriages behind him, formed an attachment to Anna, a woman 30 years his junior who claimed to be the Comtesse de Estainville although she was really the daughter of a Peckham bus driver. When she broke off their engagement, he shot and wounded her and himself, went to prison and was released after four years thanks to the efforts of a solicitor and friend, Ruth Eldridge, who set up a bequest trust after his death in 1977. Her sister Mary Eldridge wrote up his extraordinary story in a book "Beyond Belief". His collection of Buddhist, Egyptian, Japanese and Stuart artefacts is on show. The castle has a tiny shop and café and a lakeside garden. It is open Sunday to Wednesday during the warmer season.

You are now in an area popular with visitors and their cars. As you reach the corner, the church is on your left and the *Castle Inn* straight ahead. *The Castle Inn is a very welcoming pub and they are well prepared for walkers. A local brew and good, if slightly pricey, food with a 2/3-course special, are served, but there is also a "Ramblers Section". Walkers have recommend it as a stop. The Tulip Tea Rooms (recommended), up the passage beside the shop, have a wide range of snacks and some hot and cold meals, with indoor and outdoor seating.*



Chiddingstone village (but not the castle) is owned by the National Trust. The village is the centre of a wider rural parish, although the population has remained stable for centuries at around 1000. The names of the families have also changed little with just six dominating the parish and intermarrying over centuries. The parish has a large proportion of ancient buildings, 70% of them being more than 200 years old. At the centre of the parish stands the Church as it has for a thousand years. The website <http://www.chiddingstone.net/> has an absorbing detailed account of the people, buildings, land and life of the village.

After visiting the church and possibly taking refreshment, you will find a little further along the road on the right a sign for the Chiding Stone. This is only a short distance and worth visiting. You have to return the same way to continue the walk.

*The Chiding Stone is a large sandstone boulder which has been carved somewhat from its natural shape to produce a platform for delivering judgement. See the information plaque for more information. It is **not** the reason for the village's name.*

Leg 3: Chiddingstone to Penshurst 4½ km=2½ miles

- 1 Go a short distance further along the road past the church (*notice the Year 2000 bench on the right and the notice behind it*) and turn **right** on a signed footpath, soon ignoring a swing gate on the left into a sports field. The path runs between fields and then on a path across a crop field. When you meet a path on the left coming across the field, turn **right** over a stile and then **left** thus keeping your direction. Behind to your left the four oasts of Larkins Brewery can be seen. *This is a farm which took up brewing beer in 1986 and now supplies many of the pubs in the area.* The path widens in a grassy area with trees. *You are now on the Eden Valley Walk, a 24km=15 mile walk from Tonbridge to the west Kent border.* Continue through a wooden swing-gate into woodland known as *The Slips*. Keep to the main path and, at the end, go over a stile and turn **right** on a road.



- 2 In 30m, fork **left** on a signed bridleway, go through a metal gate, across the centre of a meadow, through a similar gate on the other side and **left** on a lane, going past a pond on your left, followed by a duckpond, to a cluster of farm buildings known as *Wat Stock*. By a corrugated barn, at an electricity pole with dark-on-pale-blue arrows, fork **right** on a tarmac drive with houses and sheds on your left. The drive, now a track, zigzags between ponds and later becomes tarmac again. It then veers right downhill to reveal one of the gems of this walk. This is the hamlet of *Salmans Farm* with its lake and 4-oast *Salmans Manor* (*note the box hedge and the wind vanes on the top of the oasts*). On meeting the garden wall of a large timbered house, over-humbling itself as *Harden Cottage*, turn **left** and, in 10m, turn **right** between posts on a grassy bridleway.
- 3 Where the path bends right, leave it by going through a kissing gate on the **left** on a narrow path between meadows with a single-wire fence, taking you through another gate. At the end, the path turns **right**. Ahead of you looms the hilly South Park Wood. At the corner, turn **left** through a kissing gate. The path now runs between a stream and a tree plantation and crosses a bridge over the River Eden. Cross a small meadow, go through a gate and up the left-hand side of a field. Keep straight ahead on a concrete drive past the converted barn and cottages of *Warren Farm*. *Note the giant "turtle" in the last cottage garden and the imaginative chicken mansions in the*

small field opposite. Stay on this pleasant drive as the edifice of Penshurst Place comes into view ahead to your left. Ignore a private right fork at some posts. Finally the drive reaches the main road. Turn **left** into the village of Penshurst, passing a store and a little shop.

- 4 Keep ahead at a junction, finally reaching the *Leicester Arms*.

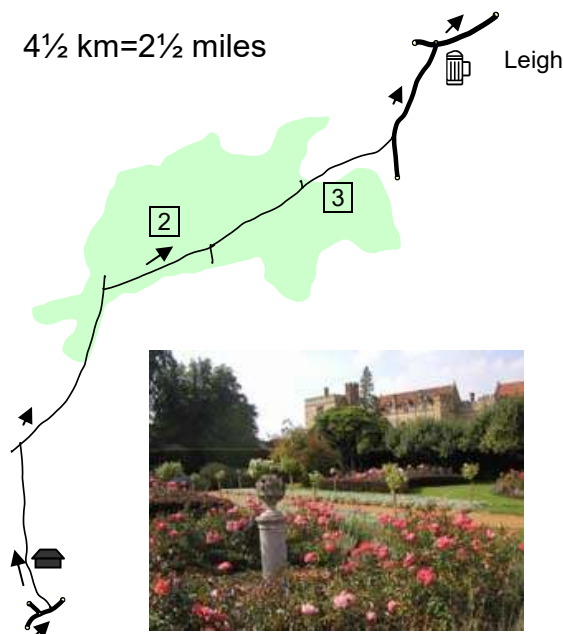




The village of Penshurst lies in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, situated just north of the meet of two rivers, the Eden and the Medway. The church of St John the Baptist dates back to before the Normans, although much altered (partly by Sir George Gilbert Scott). Its first priest Wilhelmus was installed in 1170 by Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. Leicester Square is the charming Tudor forecourt leading to the road. The "Leicester Arms" was owned by Sir William Sidney. His grandson Viscount De L'isle was appointed Earl of Leicester in 1618 and the pub, formerly known as "The Porcupine", was renamed soon after in his honour. The village has an excellent website at <http://www.penshurst-online.co.uk/>.

Cross the road opposite the *Leicester Arms*, up a raised pavement and go **left** into the little Tudor forecourt with its timbered and tile-hung buildings and the *Guildhouse*, under the portico and to the **left** of the church on a tarmac footpath. Soon, the path goes through a metal kissing gate into the parkland where, beyond a haha and an immaculate box hedge, is the noble edifice of Penshurst Place.

The great house of Penshurst Place dominates the village. The wealth of Penshurst came from wool. There had been aristocratic owners at least from 1240 but the owner and builder of the Great Hall (still the first thing visitors to the house see today) in 1340 was a wool merchant, Sir John Pultenay. Sir John was four times Lord Mayor of London in the 1330s and died in 1349 (the year of the Black Death). In 1552 the boy-king Edward VI granted the house to his chamberlain Sir William Sidney, whose grandson would be the poet, courtier and soldier Sir Philip Sidney. The Sidney family are buried in a vault in the church. Penshurst Place, house and gardens, is open every day during the warmer half of the year.

Leg 4: Penshurst to Leigh 4½ km=2½ miles



- 1 Soon the wall and hedge on your right bend away. Keep dead straight across the grass, the view of Penshurst Place getting even better as you progress. Go through two metal kissing gates either side of a drive, keeping straight on along a gravel or grass track in a double-line avenue of oak trees. Where the fence of an enclosure on your right curves away, **leave** the avenue of trees by veering a fraction **right**, across the grass, heading for a small fingerpost visible in the fence ahead. Go through a kissing gate and immediately turn **right** at the fingerpost. On the right is a lake and a garden of clipped yews arranged in a semicircle, with a final view of Penshurst Place. Go over a stile (or squeeze past the gate) and veer **left** uphill. (You can see a fingerpost over to your the right confirming your direction although you can stay on the main path.) Go through a metal gate next to a larger gate by a massive oak and continue uphill. At the top you come to a signpost. Turn **right** here along a very wide avenue of plane trees.
 - 2 In about 500m, ignore a footpath on the right and continue ahead. (This is where the Eden Valley walk rejoins the route. National trails are excellent but one drawback is that they miss some interesting routes across the more sensitive land.) The path continues through the wide avenue of planes, giving good views from this high ground. Soon, ignore a footpath left. At the end of the avenue, the path goes through an open metal gate into a meadow with views ahead.
-   3 Keep in the same direction across the meadow, at first not too far from the line of cypresses on your right and then keeping to the left-hand side next to a field (*note the scarecrow*). Leigh church is now visible down in the valley. Go through an open gate or a V-stile onto a track which leads down to a road. Turn **left** on the road keeping a wary eye open for traffic accelerating up the hill. *On your left soon is another fine pair of oasts at Paul's Farm.* Pass the entrance to the station, go under an arch, passing the old waterworks building and soon reach the main road in Leigh by the *Fleur de Lis* pub. Turn **right** going past more interesting Victorian buildings and the old well, soon reaching the Green where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: if coming from the London area or the south east, the easiest route is via the A21. Take the exit for *Sevenoaks Weald, Hildenborough*. Follow signs for *Hildenborough* until you see signs for *Leigh*. There is also a "scenic route" starting at Limpsfield, through Crockham Hill and onto the B269, or from Edenbridge, through Four Elms.

By train: Leigh or Penshurst station, also Sundays.

By bus: bus 204 or 210 from Tonbridge station, not Sundays.

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