



St Leonard's Forest: shorter walks

Distance: 9 km=5½ miles or 7½ km=4½ miles or 4¼ km=2.7 miles
easy walking with one steep section

Region: West Sussex

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Refreshments: Colgate

Map: Explorer 134 (Horsham) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Woodland, stream, ford, heath, views

In Brief

This walk takes you through some well-known and much lesser-known paths of St Leonards Forest near Horsham. There is an optional excursion to a rarely-visited part of the forest near Colgate. In the wet midwinter of 2013 we found a lot of mud on the forest paths but the lane and the wide sandy tracks were much drier. At the centre, the *Dragon* pub is a worthy resting place.



There are no nettles and only three stiles. In the damper months, boots are essential and you need good footwear to ford the stream. Your dog is welcome although the three stiles will be more difficult for a large one.

The walk begins at the **Roosthole car park**, nearest **postcode RH13 6PG**, grid ref TQ 207 299. An alternative starting point is the *Dragon* pub in Colgate, **postcode RH12 4SY**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

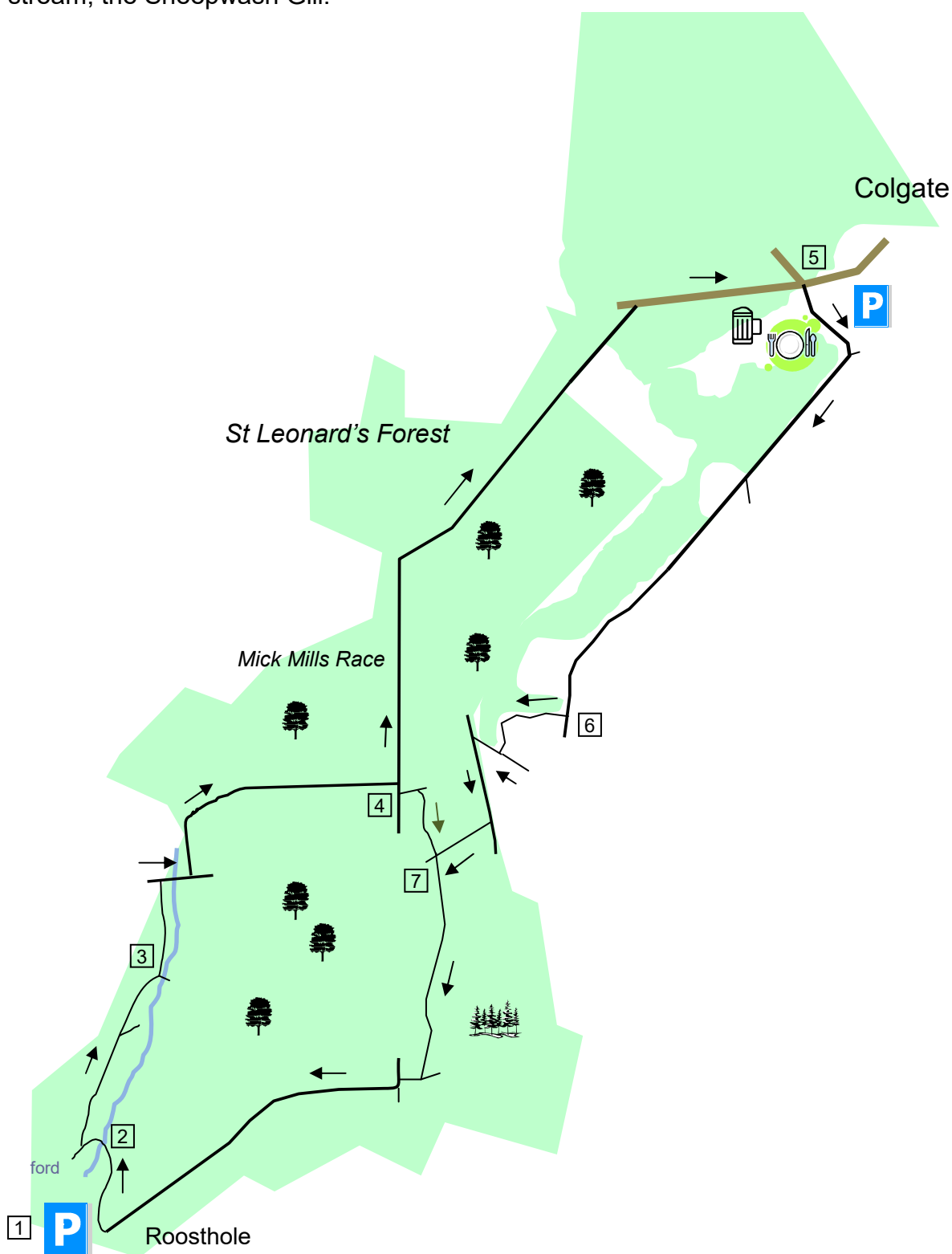
The Walk

St Leonard's was once the western end of a huge forest that spread along the central ridge of the Sussex weald. Archaeological digs have revealed how people lived here in ancient times, hunting wild animals and later smelting iron ore assisted by water power from the many hammer ponds. After the Norman Conquest it was a hunting forest and more open than now. During the Civil War St Leonard's supplied iron to arm the Royalists, causing Cromwell to send a taskforce here to destroy the ironworks. In the 1700s the forest was a haven and half-way-house for smugglers bringing their contraband from the sea to London.

St Leonards is awash with legends; in fact the name comes from a 6th-century French hermit who killed a dragon here. During his tussle with the monster, the saint's blood is said to have fallen to the ground from where white Lilies sprang forth in an area still known as the Lily Beds. He also prayed for snakes to be

banished (as St Patrick did in Ireland). Dragons still roam here apparently, although this may be a story concocted by smugglers to discourage prying visitors.

- 1 Begin the walk at the far end of the Roosthole car park. Go **right** through a wide gap in the fence by a small plaque describing the Heritage Trail. Follow the narrow path downhill for 100m, going over a ditch. Keep **left** here on a path that comes in from the right, going down steps and over a narrow plank bridge over a gill. Keep to the main path uphill, avoiding a parallel path on the left. As you reach the top of the slope, there are three or four possible routes ahead: take the **leftmost** path, usually the widest. The main path bends **left** and descends, soon quite steeply, down to a wide stream, the Sheepwash Gill.




2 You need to ford the stream and there are various points where this is possible. *Perhaps the best point is a couple of meters to the right. There is also a precarious makeshift bridge made from branches.* Turn sharp **left** beside the stream on the main path which curves away uphill. In 30m, turn sharp **right** on a wide path. You will be following this forested path for nearly 1km. Down below on the right is the stream as the path winds its way on a fairly level course, with patches of mud in wetter seasons that you need to skirt around. At a junction, the main path veers off right. Leave it here by continuing straight ahead over a bank.

3 You pass another ford on your right where an official footpath joins you as you continue ahead uphill. Finally you see a meadow on your left and a tree plantation ahead as you reach a T-junction with a fingerpost. Turn **right** at the T-junction and, in 100m, opposite a 2-way fingerpost, turn **left** on a wide unmarked drier sandy forestry path. Your path curves right in stages. After about 700m, ignore a track on the left to reach a T-junction in another 200m with a very wide straight track known as *Mick Mills Race*.

This wide path is exactly one mile long and a legend is associated with it. Mick Mills was one of the local smugglers. One day he met the Devil who told him his time was up and he must surrender his soul. Mick Mills cunningly challenged the Devil to a race along this long straight track, the prize being that he could keep his soul. Needless to say, Mick Mills won the race. (He had probably included some illicit substance in his contraband.)

Decision point. If you would like to shorten the walk to **4¼ km=2.7 miles**, missing the refreshments at Colgate, do as follows. Turn **right** on the wide track and, in just 20m, turn **left** on a wide path. In 50m, fork **right** on a narrow path which immediately curves right. Your path winds its way through trees to meet, after 200m, a wide crossing forestry track. Cross straight over to a narrow path opposite. Now resume the walk from section **8**.

4 Turn **left** on this wide straight track. At the end of the straight section, the path bends left, opposite *Forest Grange* which is private, and passes a fingerpost in a location mysteriously known as *Knights Strength*. In another 700m, you come out past a barrier and a cottage onto a tarmac stretch, and finally out to a road. Turn **right** on the road and proceed for 500m to reach the *Dragon* pub.

 5 *The Dragon in Colgate is the subject of a pub walk in this series and you will find more information there.* After refreshment, go down the private lane, Springfield Lane, that runs beside the pub and its car park. Where the lane shortly bends right, stay on it, with a house and fields on your left, woodland on your right. Ignore a footpath on the left, soon passing barns on the left and right, where the lane becomes gravel. *You now have good views ahead to the left.* You pass *Upper Warren Farm* and *Springfield Farm*, with their peacocks, and another farm, more ramshackle. 50m before the gates to *Old Springfield Farm*, at a 3-way fingerpost, go **right** over a stile.

6 The path runs near the fence on the left and crosses a long 2-plank bridge over the watery terrain. *There are a number of springs here and you may find the ground squishy: it will improve soon.* Another small bridge leads on to a fingerpost. Go **left** over a stile here and along the right-hand side of a meadow through trees, with the Frenchbridge Gill flowing free on your left. In the corner, go over a stile to join a wide path and turn **right** through a swing-gate. In 100m, at a T-junction, turn **left** on a wide track popular with

riders (*and hence somewhat churned up, but only for a short spell*). Ignore a marked footpath on the right and, after a further 150m on the track, turn **right** uphill on a wide unmarked forestry track. Avoid a very small path just before the top but, when you are at the very top of the slope, turn **left** on a narrow but distinct crossing path.

- 7 The path goes over a crossing path and becomes pleasantly grassy and sandy. After 600m of a more-or-less straight level hike, you reach a T-junction. Turn **right** here on a wide track to reach a T-junction in 70m with that straight very wide track *Mick Mills Race*. Turn **left** on this track and almost immediately keep **right** as it bends right, avoiding a grassy path straight ahead. Follow this easy wide highway, probably meeting many families with their children and dogs, for 1 km where you are suddenly back at the Roosthole car park where the walk began.

If you love this area and want to try a more challenging walk, try the 15-mile St Leonard's Forest walk in this series starting in Slaugham.

Getting there

By car: if coming from Horsham, take the St Leonard's Road and turn off, at a signpost for Doomsday Green, on Hammerpond Road. The car park is 1¼ miles (2 km) on the left.

If coming from the north on the A23 (M23), come off at Handcross (also signed for *Nymans Garden*), follow the Handcross Road (direction *Horsham*) west and turn right after 1½ miles at Ashfold Crossways (just before the *Wheatsheaf*) signposted *Bucks Head*. The car park is 2 scenic miles on the right.

If coming from the south on the A23, do as above, but come off at Slaugham and follow the Staplefield Road straight through Ashfold Crossways.

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