



## Steam and Seed Bank West Hoathly, Balcombe and the Bluebell Railway

Distance 18 km=11 miles easy walking  
or 2 walks of 9½km=6 miles and 12km=7½ miles

Region: West Sussex

Written: 08/07/10

Author: Stivaletti

Refreshments: Ardingly, West Hoathly

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

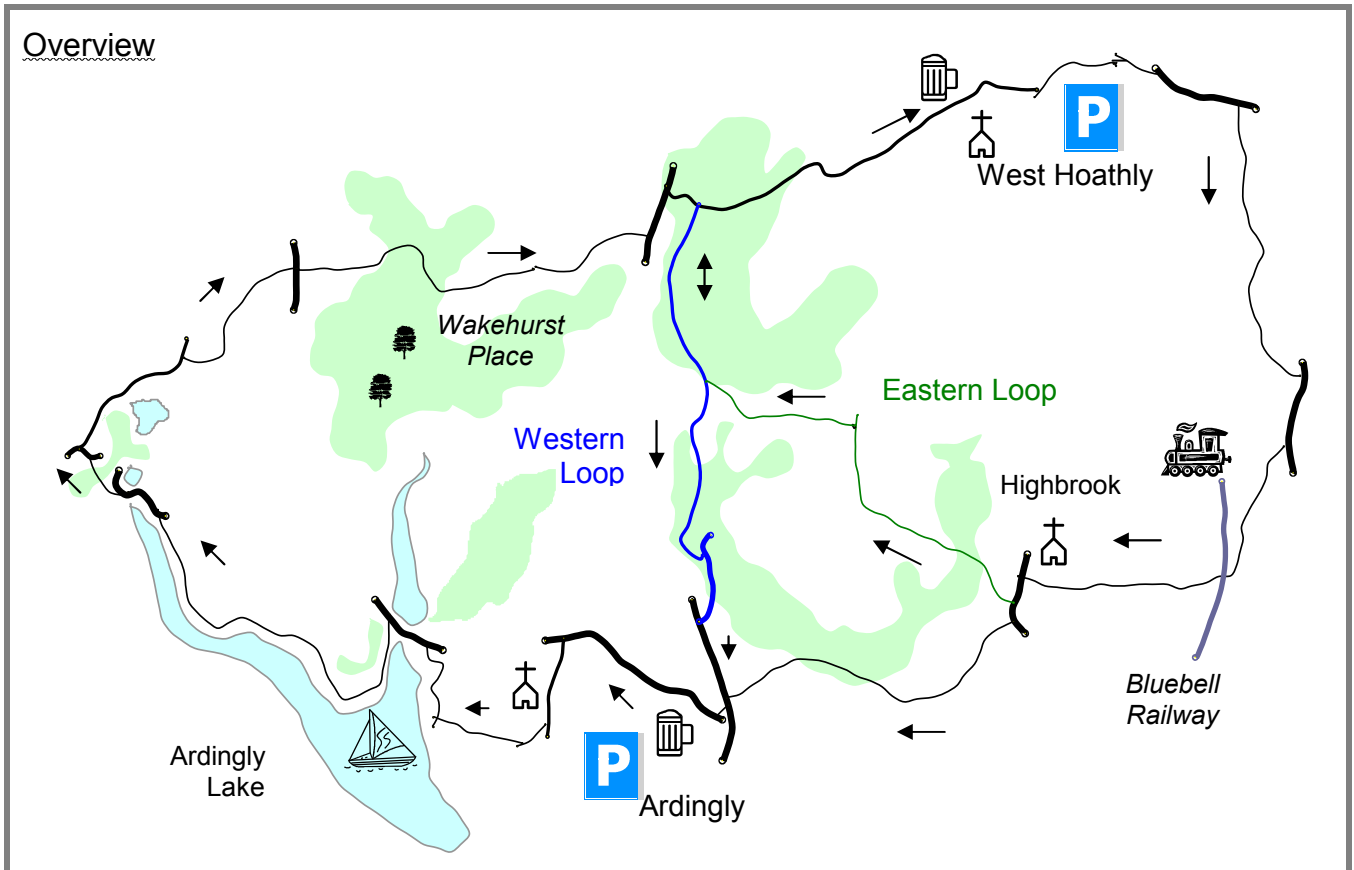
Problems / changes? *We depend on your feedback: [feedback@fancyfreewalks.org](mailto:feedback@fancyfreewalks.org)*

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*Lakes, village, woodland, hills, botanical garden, steam railway*

### In Brief

This circular walk between small Sussex towns is notable by its sheer variety. It runs close to the famous Bluebell steam Railway, the spectacular lake at Ardingly and the botanic gardens of Wakehurst Place.



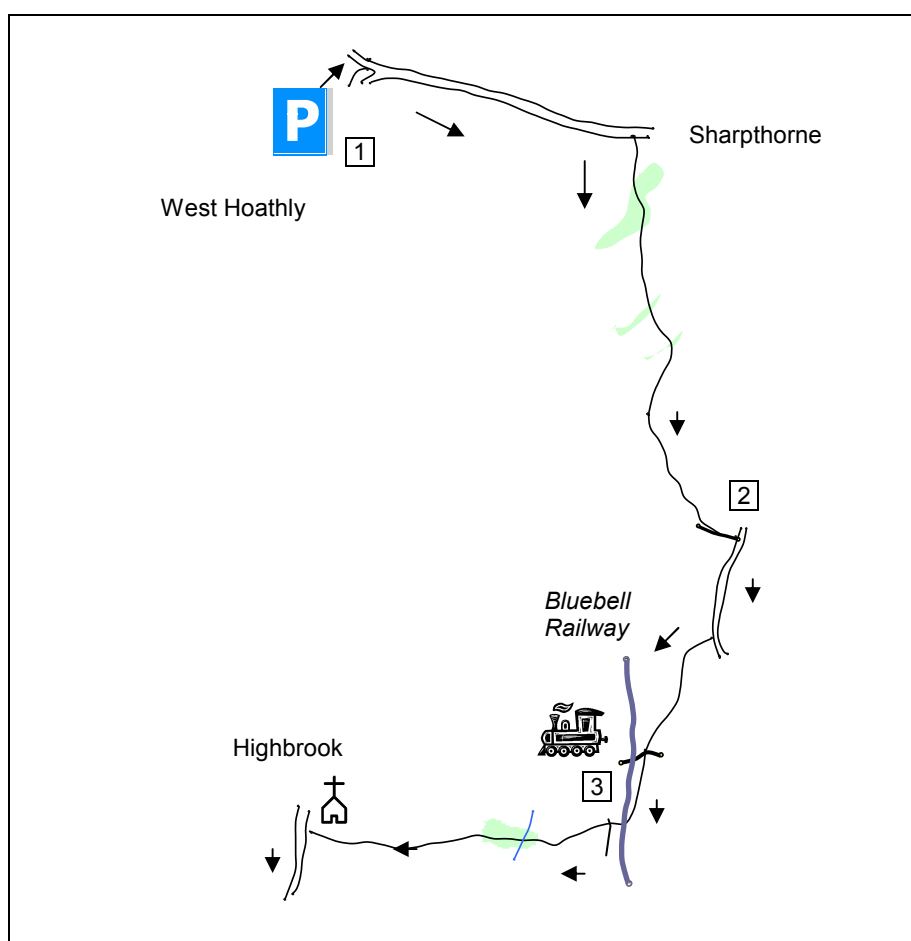
This walk can be split into two separate circular walks: the **West Hoathly-Bluebell Railway** (“Eastern Loop”) walk (12km = 7½ miles) and the **Ardingly-Wakehurst Place** (“Western Loop”) walk (9½km = 6 miles).



There are some small patches of nettles and thistles so shorts are inadvisable. The terrain is easy, so good walking shoes are adequate, except perhaps in the wetter seasons. The stile count is high around West Hoathly but better later. Nevertheless this walk is not ideal for a dog.

The main walk begins at the **Finche Field** car park in West Hoathly. The Ardingly - Wakehurst walk begins in **Ardingly**. For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

### Leg 1: West Hoathly to Highbrook 4km=2½ miles



- 1 From near the entrance to the car park, take the concrete footpath beside some allotments. Turn **right** at the bottom on the main road into Sharpthorne. *As you pass a small grassy area on the left, notice the ventilator chimney of the Bluebell Railway that runs in a tunnel here.* Soon on the right is a garage and small supermarket. Turn **right** here onto a footpath just before the Sharpthorne Club and turn tight **left** at the corner of the building down a narrow fenced path that leads to an unneeded stile out into a grassy open hillside. *Suddenly a magnificent view has sprung up like a jack-in-the-box and you have a good view of the South Downs and the gentler hills of the Weald of Sussex. You are on part of the Sussex Border Path (SBP), the part that runs down to the sea between East and West Sussex.* Up on the right is the distinct spire of Highbrook church, your next destination. Go along the left-hand side of the meadow and at the end

through a band of trees via two stiles (one of which can be bypassed). Go straight across the next meadow in the same direction and on the other side over two stiles in a line of trees. You are now in a long meadow at one corner of Monks Wood. Go half **right** uphill past a lone tree. In the far corner, go over a stile on the left, straight across the middle of the next meadow and over a stile in the hedge. Go half **right** across the centre of the next meadow and in the far corner go over two stiles in the hedge. At the end of the next meadow, go through a metal gate (preferable to the stile as you may have had enough of them for a while). Turn left on a track by *Claverdale*.

- 2 At the end of the track, turn **right** on a road. The path on the left just before Tanyard is the SBP but this route leaves it here. Stay on the road and turn **right** by *Vox End* on a concrete track. Turn **left** at the end and **right** over a rather shaky stile. Go along the left-hand side of the meadow and through a wooden swing-gate, then along the left-hand side of the next meadow, over a stile, through the next meadow and over a stile beside a metal gate. The bridge on the right crosses the Bluebell Railway but the route stays on the same side, through a metal gate and along a meadow with the railway on the right. Half way down, turn **right** over a stile and carefully across the railway. *If you hear a hoot or a toot, this indicates that a train will pass by soon and it may be worth waiting a while. Trains pass roughly on the hour or quarter past.*

*The Bluebell Railway is one of many heritage lines in Britain. It runs on a part of the old East Grinstead-Lewes line that was axed in the 1950s and is operated by volunteers. It runs from Kingscote to Sheffield Park with a stop at Horsted Keynes but by the time you read this it may have been extended north to East Grinstead. The company maintains a large number of steam locomotives as well as the stations and lines with all their original paraphernalia, decorations and advertisements. As you may imagine, the railway has made star appearances in films and TV.*

- 3 Go over a stile ahead, ignoring a path left that runs beside the railway. Pass a small pond, go over a stile, across a sheep pasture and over a stile in the bottom left. The path goes down steps in a beautiful wide band of woodland in a stream valley and over a bridge. It then goes through a metal gate, up the right-hand side of two meadows and, at the top, along an enclosed path that becomes a driveway. On the right is Highbrook church and on the left a well restored smokery.

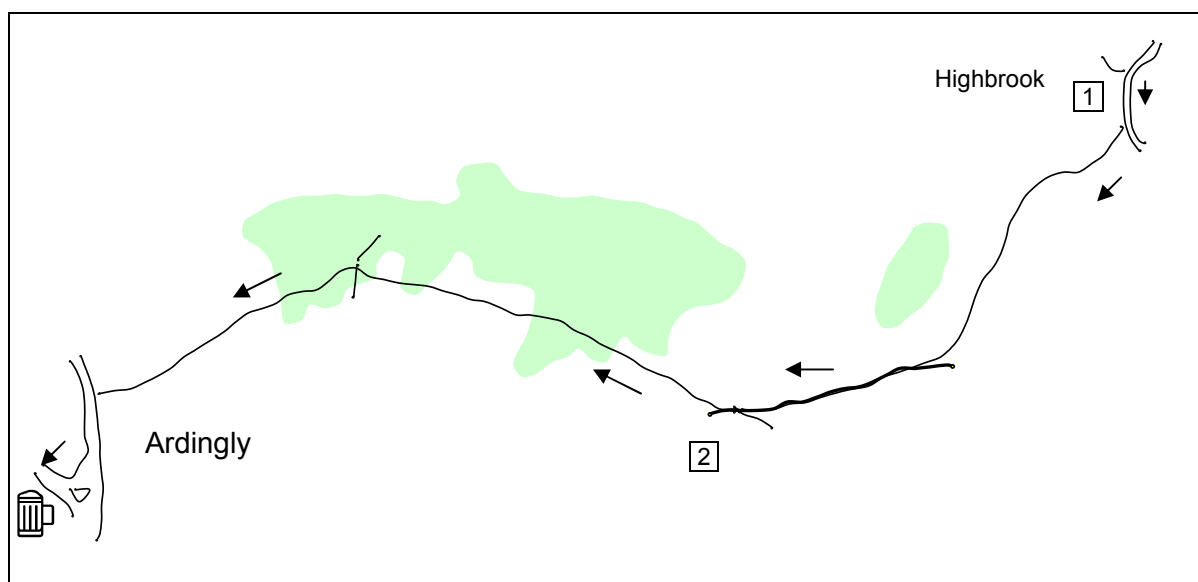
*All Saints Church, Highbrook is a late-Victorian construction built from local sandstone, its spire visible from all around. Each of the windows inside contains a fine piece of Victorian stained glass and the all-round effect is deeply affecting. The church also provides a do-it-yourself hot drinks service.*

Turn **left** on the road. Just before Hammenden Farm on the right is a footpath sign.

**Decision point.** If you are doing only the short **Eastern Loop** and want to loop back through the woods to West Hoathly, jump to the section **Highbrook to Chiddinglye Wood** near the end of this text.

## Leg 2: Highbrook to Ardingly 2km=1¼ miles

- 1 See map overleaf.** Continue on the road, ignoring the footpath on the right. Just past a wonderful property called *Battens* and a village sign for Highbrook, turn **right** over a stile on a footpath. Go to the opposite corner of the small meadow, over an unneeded stile in a rather overgrown patch and along the right-hand side of a large field. Before a farm building with a large chimney, turn **right** over a stile, across the corner of a field, over another stile and straight ahead on a track lined with eucalyptus, between a field and a cow and sheep pasture.



*It's rare to see sheep and cattle together in a field. In fact they coexist quite happily. But when a heifer wants a prime spot, she gently nudges the sheep to their feet one-by-one with her muzzle.*

- 2** The track curves right at the next meadow and reaches a metal gate. Here, go through a smaller wooden gate down beside woodland. The path goes over a flowing stream via a brick bridge and through a kissing gate. Go straight uphill by a fence, ignoring a footpath left, then up into woods through a little metal gate. Go over a stile, along the left-hand side of a meadow, over a stile and an area of grass, through a kissing gate and along a lane to the main road in Ardingly. The Post Office opposite is also a tiny general store. Turn **left** on the main road and take a **right** fork to reach the *Ardingly Inn*, a large pub with a small garden.

*Ardingly is a small town and parish famous for its college, its lake and its showground. The showground hosts an amazing variety of events from agricultural shows to antiques. One of the pupils at Ardingly College, and head boy, was Ian Hislop of *Private Eye* and TV fame.*

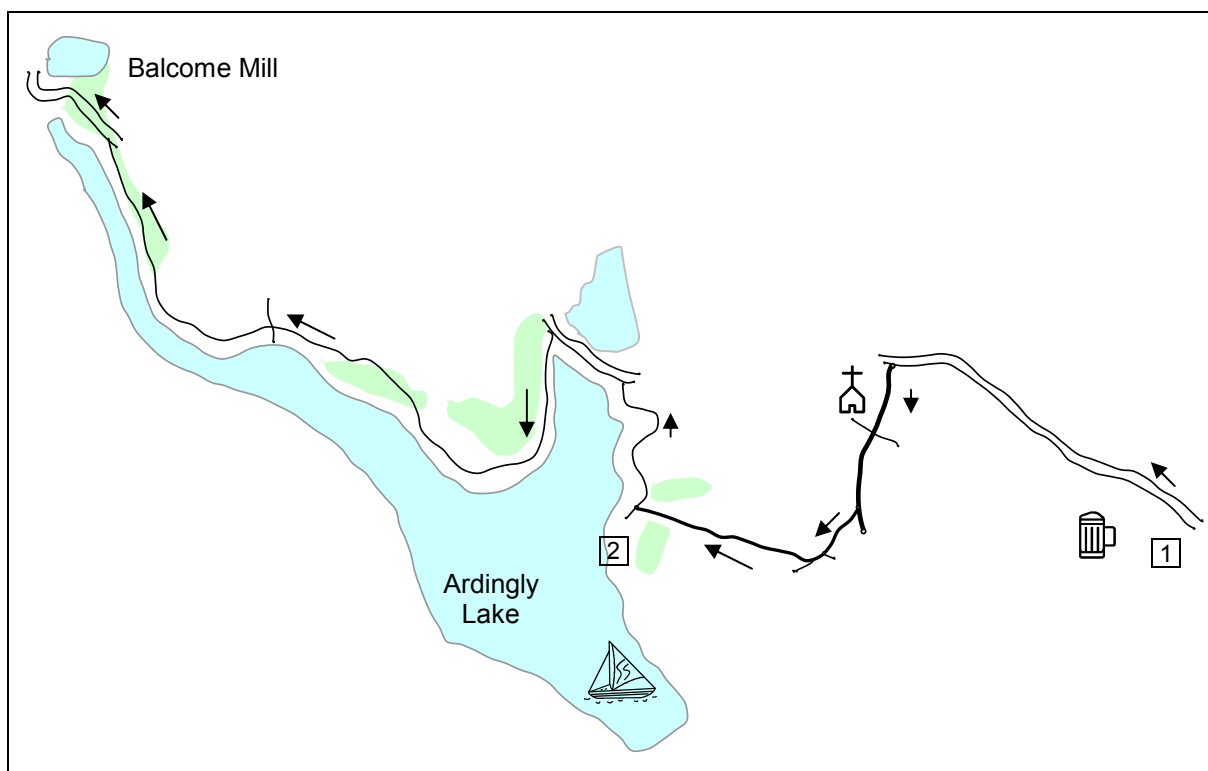
## Leg 3: Ardingly to Balcombe Mill 5km=3 miles

- 1 See map overleaf.** Turn **right** on the road in front of the Ardingly Inn, go past the bakery, past the *Oak Inn* (Harveys) and continue along the road, past the showground and a school, and finally turn left by the church.

*The fine old Norman Church of St. Peter contains some of the most splendid medieval brass memorials anywhere in England, the most important being the Culpeper brasses. If you would like to visit the church, there is a 'phone*

*number posted on the door and the vicar will be happy to let you in and uncover the brasses.*

Keep along the lane with the church on the right, ignoring footpaths right and left. Fork **right** on the lane by Old Knowle Cottage and follow the lane round to a junction of tracks by a barn. *From this high vantage point you have a magnificent view of the lake.* There are usually a whole flotilla of colourful sailing dinghies on the water. Turn **right** and go past the barn on a farm track. Where the lake comes into view, fork **left**. Go down the right-hand side of a pasture, later over a rickety stile, down to the waterside and turn **right** there.



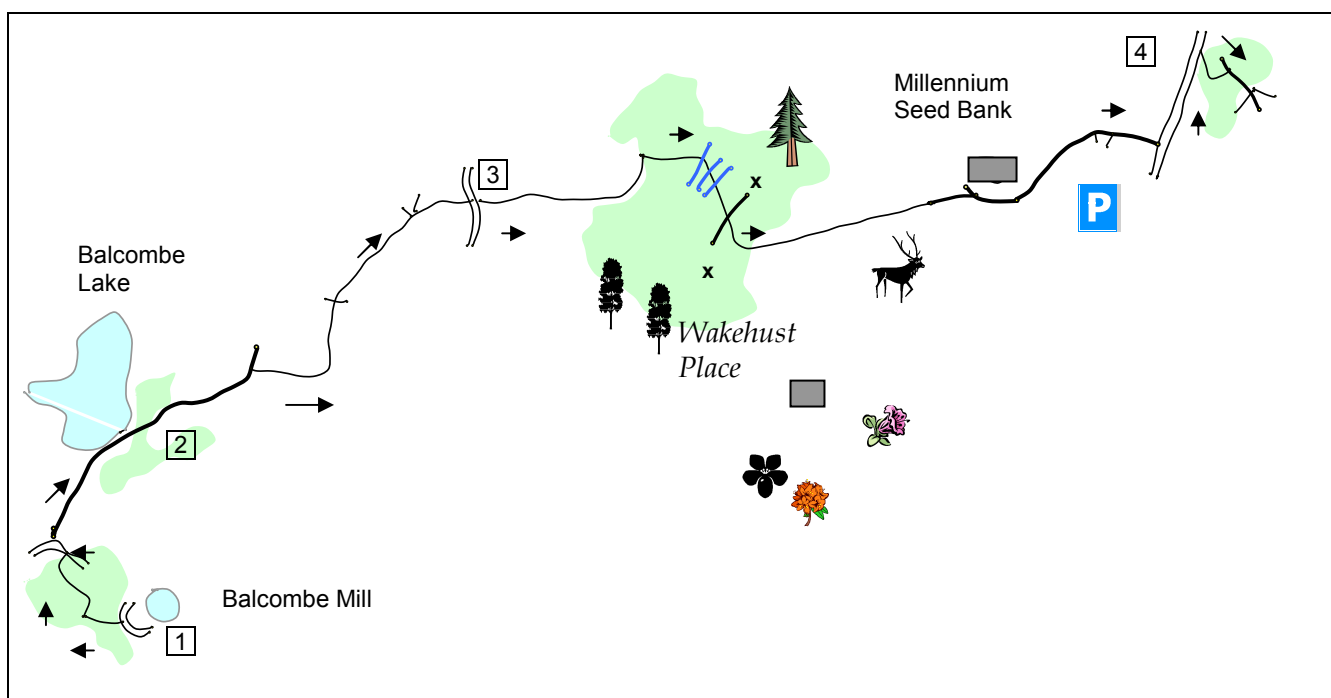
*Ardingly Reservoir (it's called a 'lake' in this text because that's more poetic) is a massive centre for outdoor activities, not to mention its vital use as a source of fresh water. It covers over 80 hectares and was created during 1976-79 by damming the River Ouse.*

- 2** After a stroll along the waterside you find yourself on a fenced path that snakes round to the road. Turn **left** on the road. Where the road approaches the dry land again, take the first path **left** along the waterside again. You are now going south and have the lake and dam and sailing club in view. The path gradually turns north-west sometimes close to the bank, at other times hidden from it in woodland. At a junction, ignore a bridleway right and continue through some fine woods. Finally the path comes out to a road. Turn **left** on the road, Mill Lane. The road leads to Balcombe Mill an unexpected delight.

*Balcombe Mill, situated on what is now the top of the lake, was for centuries one of the most efficient water mills in the South East, producing four sacks of flour a day. Today the original mill house looks much as it did in the working days with a few other equally appealing properties along the waterside. This site is one of the joys of this region.*

## Leg 4: Balcombe Mill to Chiddinglye Wood 4½km=3 miles

- 1 After passing a white boarded house and just before reaching the mill house, turn **left** on a marked footpath steeply up steps. Half way up there is a seat by a floor made from a millstone. On the left there is a rock formation of a type so common in these regions. At the top, go through a swing-gate into a large meadow and immediately **right** through a small metal gate into woodland of tall ash, beech and poplar. Turn **left** on reaching a road. In 70m, at a junction, turn **right** on a drive to Woodward's Farm.



- 2 Soon on your left is the wide expanse of Balcombe Lake. Keep straight ahead on the drive, avoiding several paths off. About 400m after the lake, just after the drive curves left, at a fingerpost, go over a stile on the **right**. Don't miss this turning! Go along the left-hand side of a field and, at the end, over a stile on the **left** and straight ahead across a pasture. In the far right corner, go through a small metal gate and along the right-hand side of a field (usually of maize). At a junction of tracks, continue straight ahead and reach a lane. Go **right** on the lane for 10m, **left** over a stile.
- 3 Go down the right-hand side of a large grassy meadow. At the bottom, wheel **left** along the far side and, in the corner, go through a metal gate and experience at once a vast change in atmosphere. You are now in the dark woods of the Ardingly Brook valley. Go over a plank bridge, then another over the fast-flowing Brook, then another plank bridge with a boardwalk made out of more planks to keep you dry. Next, go through a kissing gate into the verdant territory of Wakehurst Place next to a tall redwood.

*Wakehurst Place belongs to the National Trust and is an extension of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, providing more space for the vast collection. Like its town cousin, it is not only a place of great natural beauty and a banquet for the senses but also a place of plant conservation and research. It boasts being the Trust's most visited property. The hilly landscape makes the gardens highly varied, comprising every kind of terrain and micro-climate, including grouped species from every part of the world, natural woodland, a large water garden, a*

lake, formal gardens and at the north side trees famously growing from the rocks. There is also the original Elizabethan house.

You need to keep strictly to the footpath through the garden as it is unfenced. *If you wish to visit the gardens you must wait until you reach the entrance.* Go directly ahead over the main crossing path and through a wooden gate onto an enclosed path to Havelock Farm. After some metal gates, the path widens and you will see pasture for farmed deer. After another metal swing-gate, keep ahead on a track, later a drive. Soon on your left is a large modern building, the Millennium Seed Bank.

*Kew's Millennium Seed Bank is the largest ex-situ (i.e. away from natural habitats) plant conservation project in the world. Plant life from every part of the world is saved from the threat of extinction and the seeds of plants of most value to the future are conserved. The Seed Bank passed a milestone recently by successfully banking 10% of the world's wild plant species. It is open to visitors.*

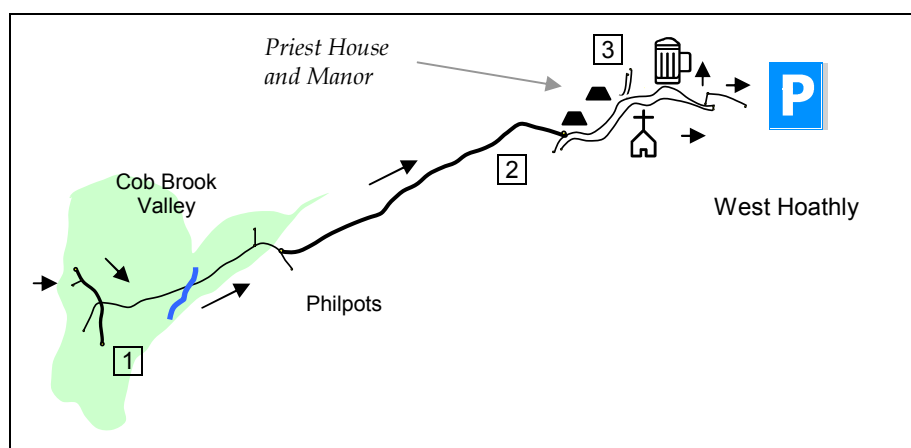
The drive veers left and soon passes the car park on the right. Continue to the main road, cross it and turn **left**.

- 4 Just after Beech Cottage, turn **right** on a bridleway. *Note the sandrock crags on your right.* The bridleway bends **left**, then **right** on a track. Soon you reach a 4-way junction with a private garden of Stonehurst ahead.

**Decision point.** If you are doing only the short **Western Loop** and want to loop back through the woods to Ardingly, jump to the section called **Chiddinglye Wood to Ardingly** near the end of this text.

To continue the full walk, turn **left**. and continue with Leg 5 below.

#### Leg 5: Chiddinglye Wood to West Hoathly 2½km=1½ miles



- 1 The uphill path runs between woodland and a reedy area on the right and into the deep valley of the Cob Brook. *The reeds conceal the waterfalls in the pleasure grounds of Stonehurst. There are also a millpond and two mills. The Cob Brook valley has a microclimate that is mild in winter and moist even in the driest summer. Consequently a wealth of interesting moisture-loving ferns and unusual flowering plants can be found here.* The path rises gently, crosses the stream, then steepens. At the top, fork **right** as indicated. *If you divert left, you reach some notable sandrock crags.* The path comes up to Philpots Farm. Go straight ahead and then fork **left** by the farm at a fingerpost onto a drive. The drive goes past Philpots Manor, now a Rudolf Steiner special education school.



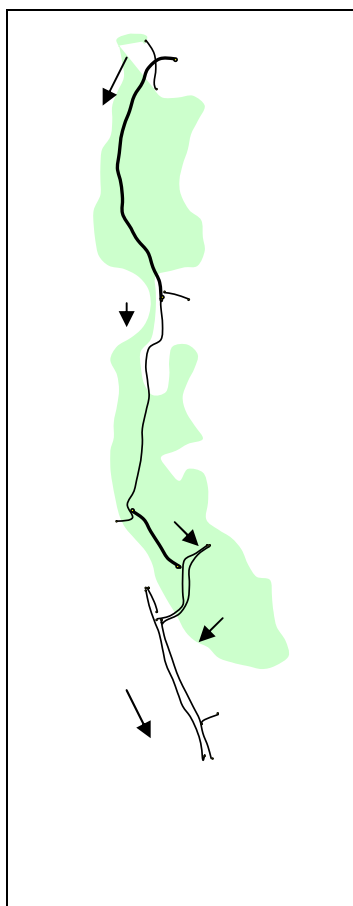
metal gate and immediately **left** down the pasture and under wires. Go over a stile into woodland, over a bridge and up steps. The path then goes through a metal gate, along the left-hand side of a large meadow and then over a stile (or through a rather hazardous metal gate). You then traverse the left-hand side of a pasture and, at the far end, go over a stile and veer **right** on a drive opposite Holly Farmhouse, past two fine old cottages. Next, veer **right** at a junction onto a wide drive and, at the end, veer **right** again, this time on a country lane.

- 2 Just after the entrance to Ludwell House, turn **left** through a metal gate, go along the right-hand side of a meadow, through an open gate and down the next meadow. In 20m, at the corner of the meadow, keep ahead in a faint line across the centre. Continue down the long meadow, veering slightly left, and at the other side go round the corner of the wood to find a wooden gate (really a half gate). Through the gate, go down into woodland, over a sturdy bridge crossing the full-flowing stream and then uphill. On meeting a track at a T-junction, turn **right**. In 30m, avoid a right fork which is private and keep to the lovely wide level path. The path passes several tall redwoods. It then goes downhill to a 4-way junction with a private garden on the right.

The walk now resumes from [Leg 5](#).

Chiddinglye Wood to Ardingly 3km=2 miles

This short cut is taken if you are doing only the Western Loop.

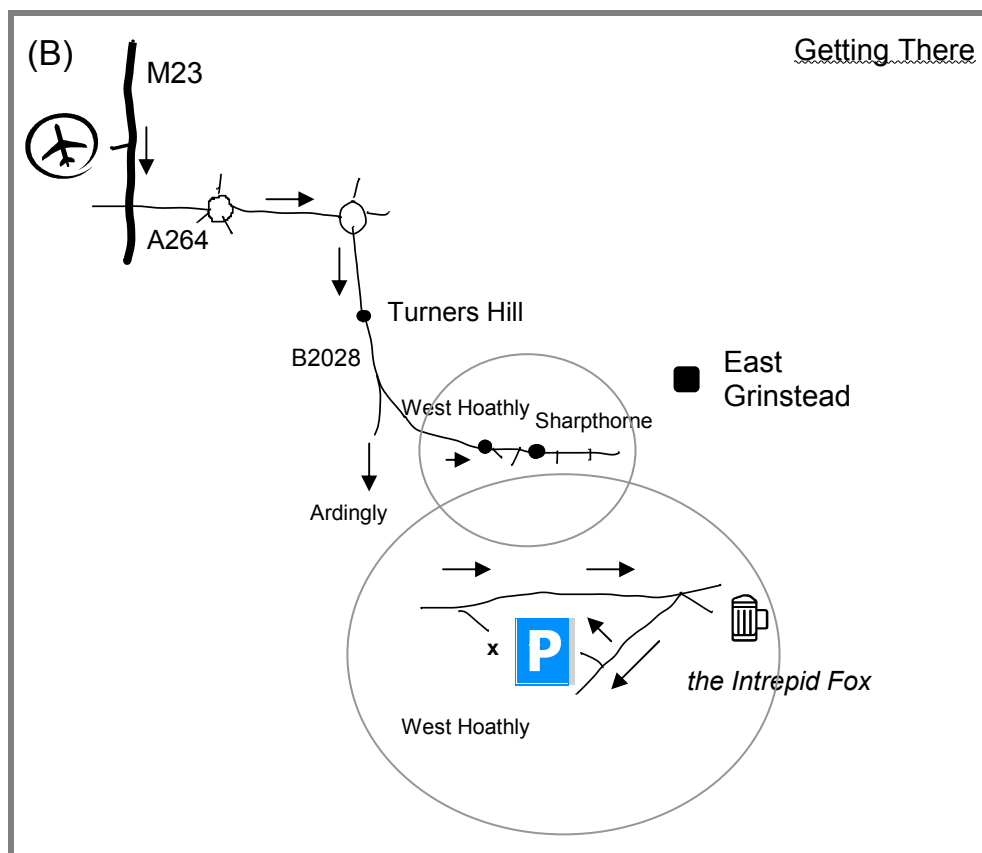


Turn **right** at the 4-way junction uphill. This lovely wide path passes several redwoods. When the path finally comes out into the open, ignore a path left at a fingerpost. Keep ahead on a narrow enclosed path that skirts the pastures of *Fulling Mill Farm*. (At the time of writing you have to go under a fallen birch.) [Aug 2011: walkers report that this section may be overgrown with ferns and brambles; you need to persevere for a while.] The vegetation changes abruptly as the path re-enters a woodland of tall conifers. Just as a house comes into view on the right, turn **left** at a fingerpost. (If you are a bit tired and want to avoid another down and up, you can keep right to the road, cross it and turn left on the wide grass verge into the village.) The bridleway follows a route steeply down with a descending slope on your left. At the end, turn **right** on Cob Lane uphill. The lane bends right to a road. Turn **left** on the road. Soon you reach the houses of Ardingly and continue to the point where the walk began.

## Getting there

By car: The full walk starts at the **Finche Field** car park in West Hoathly. If you are coming from the **west** side of the M25, with easy access to the M23, the following route is recommended (see the Map). Take the M23 past Gatwick Airport and turn **left** at the next junction, the A264 (*East Grinstead*). At the second roundabout, turn **right**, signposted *Turner's Hill*. A mile after Turner's Hill the road forks. Take the **left** fork sign-posted *West Hoathly and Sharpthorne*. Ignore the first right turn in West Hoathly (signed for the Priest's House). On reaching the *Intrepid Fox*, turn sharp right. The car park is a little further on the right. If you are approaching from Sharpthorne, fork left at the *Intrepid Fox*.

For Ardingly and the Western Loop, ignore the left turn after Turner's Hill.



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