



Four Counties

Distance: 16½ km=10½ miles

easy walking

Region: W.Sussex, Surrey, Kent, E.Sussex

Date written: 25-mar-2017

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Last update: 8-oct-2020

Refreshments: Ashurst Wood

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest) and 147 (Sevenoaks)
but the maps in this guide should be sufficient

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

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High rocks, woodland, grassy meadows, historic house, water, bluebells

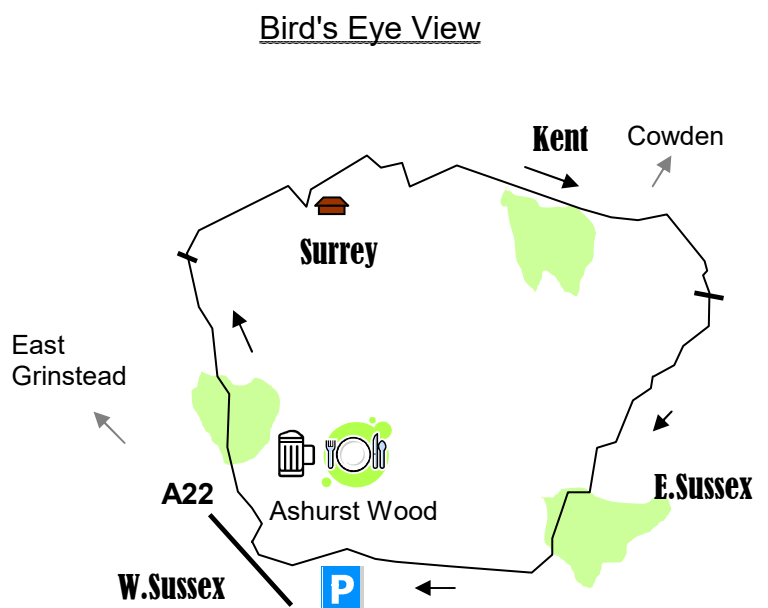
In Brief

A short walk through four counties! This sounds improbable but the area near East Grinstead contains a point where these four counties almost meet. Apart from that novel idea, this is a delightful walk through gentle countryside, including several surprises along the way. You will be following paths which are probably unknown to many regular walkers.



There were no nettles when this walk was done in late March but in high summer there are some nettly patches making shorts inadvisable. A hiking pole is useful for occasional swishing. Boots are recommended because this is a fairly long Wealden walk. One or two of the stiles have no obvious dog gap, making the walk unsuitable for a large (and heavy) dog.

The walk begins at the village of **Ashurst Wood**, just southeast of **East Grinstead, West Sussex**, postcode **RH19 3TJ**, grid ref TQ 415 368. There is a bag of room further along the Hammerwood Road. You could also park strategically near the *Maypole Inn* 400 yds up Maypole Road (post-code **RH19 3RE**) or in a layby near Holtye (grid ref TQ 461392). For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

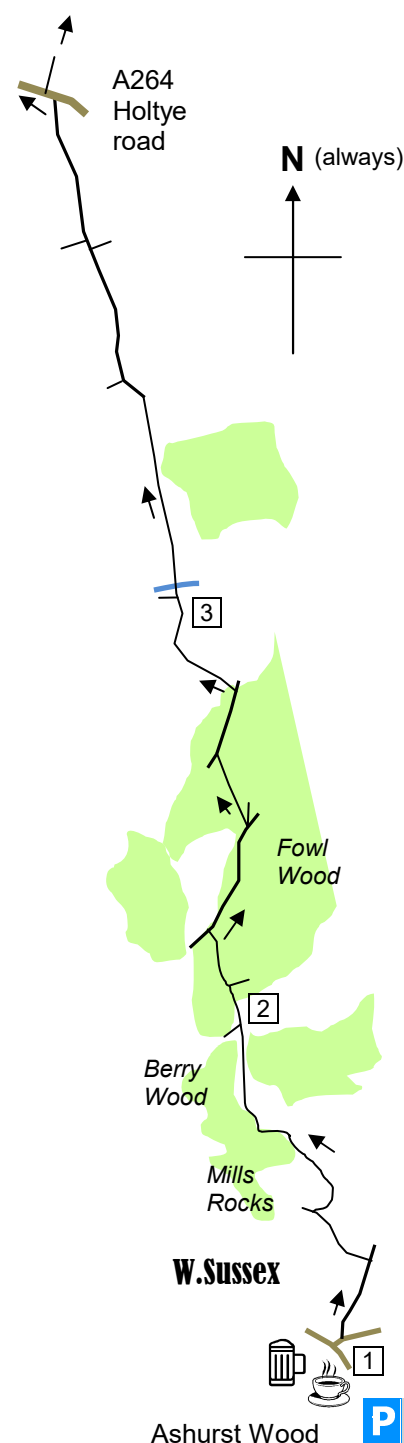


The Walk

Leg 1: West Sussex into Surrey 3½ km=2 miles

Welcome to the *People's Republic of Ashurst Wood Nation State* or **PRAWNS** for short! This village declared independence on 1 Jan 2000 from "taxation and British oppression". The revolutionary committee mounted checkpoints on the road and wrote to the Queen and Tony Blair. A historical justification was given. In about 1015, King Ethelred was taken ill here. The local people presumed the king was dead and prepared a great funeral pyre. But as the king was placed on the pyre and torches were ignited, he suddenly rose up crying: "Stop!". So relieved was he to be alive that he granted the village immunity from taxation thereafter. This legend should be taken with a pinch of salt because at that time Ashurst Wood was just that – a wood.

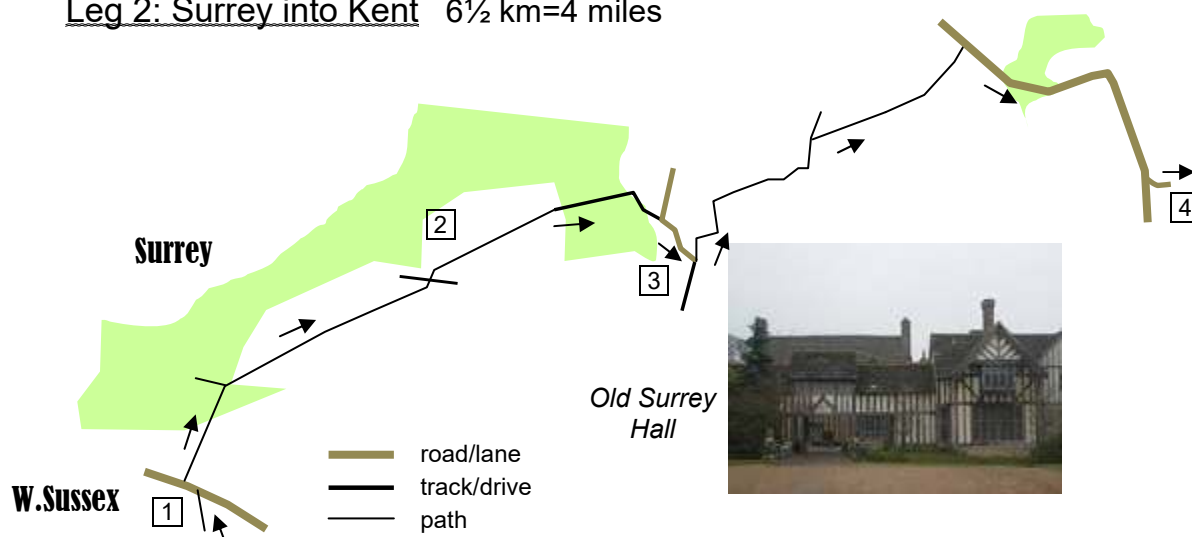
- 1 Take a road opposite the *Three Crowns* pub, passing the demeaningly named *Frugal Cottages*, and immediately fork **left** in the direction of "*Ind. Estate*". Continue ahead on a tarmac drive, ignoring all side turnings, until you approach the gates of the *Ind. Estate*. Just before the gates, turn **left** on a shingle track for Cherry Garden Farm, passing an unneeded wooden swing-gate. As the track bends left, you meet a 3-way fingerpost. Turn sharp **right** here on a path leading downhill beside the fence of a house and garden on your left. Your path curves left uphill between fences and you pass the first of a series of sandstone crags known as *Mills Rocks*, a feature so typical of this region (see the walk "*A Way Through the Rocks*" in this series). Your path winds its way past Berry Wood and several more wooded outcrops. Much work is in progress on both sides of the path to preserve this Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), indicating possible future leisure use. The path rises to a 3-way fingerpost.
- 2 Ignore the permissive path on the left here (except possibly for a breather on a rustic bench, looking down on Berry Wood) and keep straight on through a swing-gate. Your path descends through woods where in late spring you will catch your first sight of bluebells. The path descends to a 3-way fingerpost. Ignore a stile on your right and keep straight on. In another 100m, ignore a (broken) fingerpost and keep straight on to turn **right** onto a bridleway next to a rustic seat. (The official footpath diverts **left** at the fingerpost and sharp **right** onto the bridleway but none of the locals use it.) Follow this nice wide path for 200m or so till it bends right into the depths of Fowl Wood. **Leave** the bridleway here by going over a stile on your **left** (easily avoidable a little to the right). Go straight ahead but, in 15m, take the **left** fork which leaves the wood. (The right fork with its yellow markers is part of a new nature trail.) A pleasant grassy path takes you gently down to join a wide farm track. Where the track meets a metal gate, fork away to the **left** as



directed by a fingerpost, going over a flat bridge. Immediately after the bridge, stay on the **right**, passing an entrance to Bridle Wood, following a line of pink-topped posts. (If this path is very muddy, you can instead take the narrow **left** fork after the bridge through scattered birches, turning **right** after 80m just before a plain wooden post.) You meet two fingerposts. Turn **right**, as directed. The path leads you down to a stream and a bridge.

- 3] Avoiding the tantalising woodland path on your left, cross the footbridge and take a path across the centre of a long meadow. Part way, your path goes past a broken gate and finally, at the top, you come through a modern kissing-gate. Continue straight up the left-hand side of a horse pasture, then through a small metal gate onto a narrow path between fences, leading into the yard of Fairlight Farm with its fine timbered houses. Keep ahead on a concrete drive, passing stables. After the farm, keep ahead on a tarmac drive. As you pass another house, avoid footpaths on your right and left. *You have now joined the Sussex Border Path (SBP), a long distance path which orbits the borders of both Sussexes.* The drive leads out to the main A264 Holtye Road.

Leg 2: Surrey into Kent 6½ km=4 miles

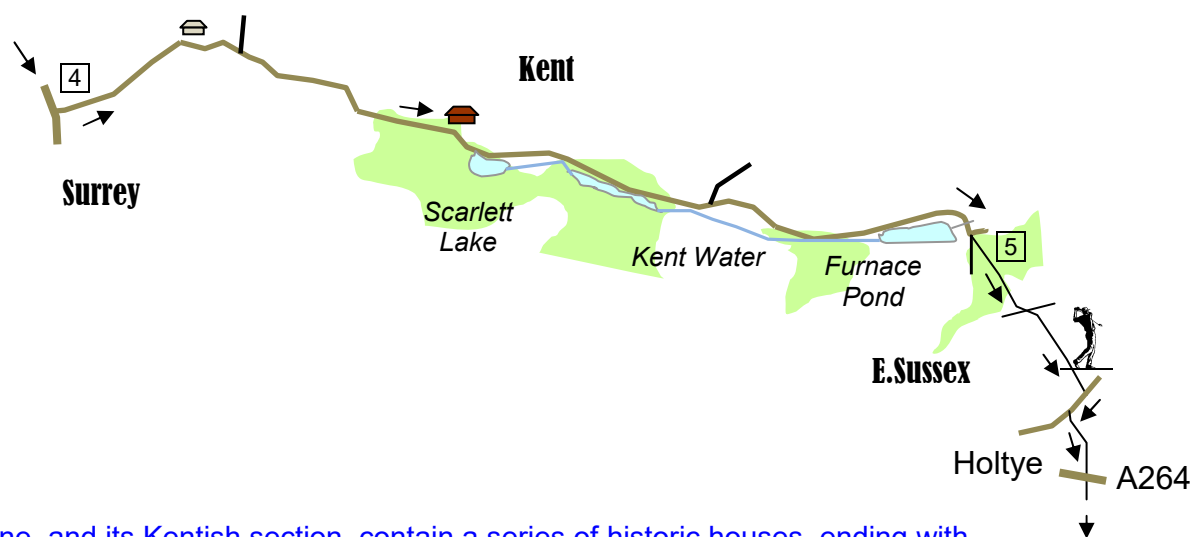


- 1] Turn **left** on the main road for 20m and cross it to a fingerpost and a narrow footpath, still on the SBP. Go through a wooden gate and straight down the right-hand side of a meadow. Keep straight on down some (overgrown) steps, directly across a long narrow meadow, down more steps and straight ahead on a path through birches, to reach a 3-way fingerpost. Keep ahead through this bluebell wood to negotiate a 2-plank bridge and stile into a green meadow. **Welcome to Surrey!** Your route is straight along the centre of this long meadow, on a faint path. At the far end, just on your left, go over a stile (or through a large metal gate) and cross diagonally over a farm track. Go ahead over a stile (or through a large open metal gate) into a large pasture.
- 2] Take a diagonal path across the pasture, going over the top of a rise. You pass an enclosure on your right, used for growing crops. **There was evidence of livestock but none visible at the time of writing: at any rate, there is plenty of room in this large field to keep a wide berth if you wish.** At the far end, go over a stile next to a metal gate [2017: broken! take care] and keep ahead on a wide forest track. After going over a stream, the track bends right. You come out of the wood, past a metal gate, to a tarmac lane

where in early spring there is a stunning display of daffodils. Bear **right** on the lane, passing *Middlewick* on your left, rapidly approaching the great 15th-century timbered house, *Old Surrey Hall*.

There's no recorded date for the building of Old Surrey Hall, but it's usually placed in the latter half of the 1400s. The two side wings were added in the 1900s in the same style, to make a kind of quadrangle. It is the largest of the medieval open-hall houses of the Weald and may once have been even larger, with a double courtyard. The moat that surrounds the house is served by a spring from the north side. The earliest recorded owner of the manor was Richard Gaynesford, followed by his brother John who was high sheriff of Surrey. The Gaynesford family sold the property in 1679 and it fell into decline until resurrected in the 1900s.

- 3 Walk towards the house until just before the first building on the left and its driveway. Turn **left** here up a shallow grass bank on a narrow path. The path curves right round the side of a garden to meet a track at a bend. Turn **left** on the track. It joins a driveway coming from the left and, in 20m, bends left. **Leave** the track here by turning **right** on a sunken path, made dark by young oaks and hollies. The path rises into the open by some fields and curves left. As you pass under power lines, you see a stile on your right [2019: broken]. This walk tries to make concessions for comfort, especially for dog owners and bluebell lovers. Since the next two stiles are rather high, and the path rather nettly, it is perfectly ok to continue on the main sunken path which elbows right in 150m, turning **right** when you reach the road. Otherwise... Go **right** over the stile and straight over the pasture to go over another stile, heading for a thatched cottage. Follow a wire fence to go through a large wooden gate and follow the drive to the road and turn **right** on it. Stay on the road as it runs between high banks and goes round a right-hand bend. As the road begins to descend, fork **left** on much quieter Smithers Lane, following the *Vanguard Way* sign.

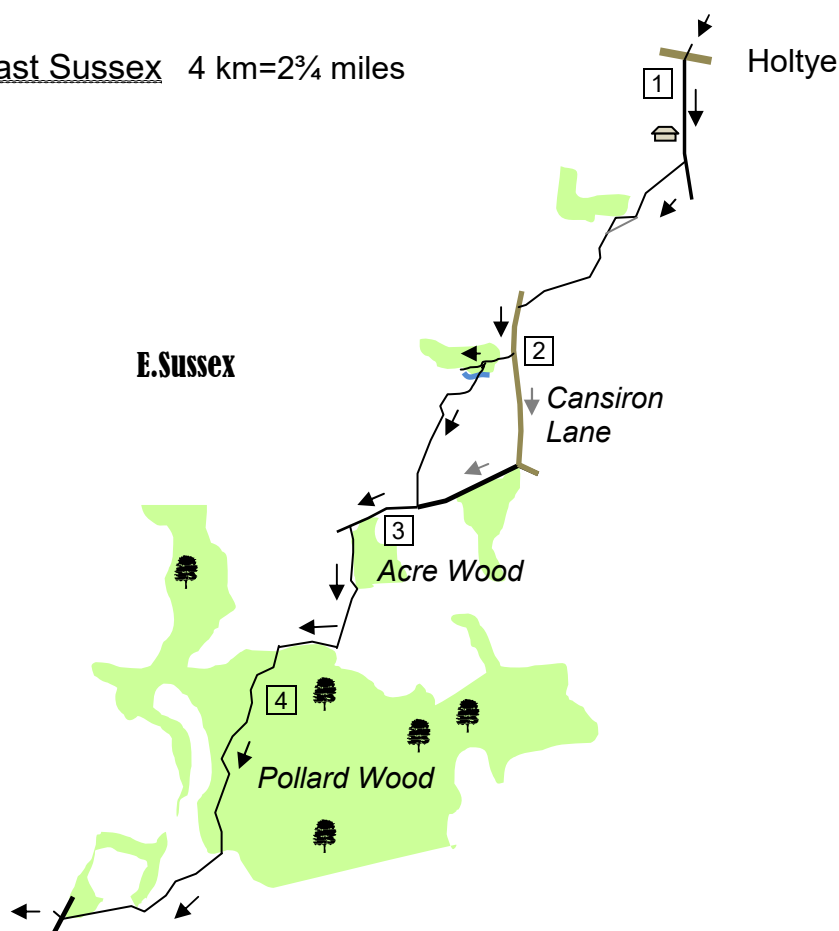


- 4 This lane, and its Kentish section, contain a series of historic houses, ending with a mill house, after a distance of 2¾ km= 1¾ miles. Despite the distance, there is so little traffic that this can be the most agreeable part of the walk. The first house, after 500m, is *Smithers*, red tilehung with a colourful garden. Shortly after, the tarmac temporarily vanishes. **Welcome to Kent!** The lane goes over a stream where wild garlic are evident in spring. You pass Lower Basing Farm and various satellite buildings. The historic house *Basing* is down below on your right. Soon on your right is a string of wetlands and lakes formed from the Kent Water river. You cross a bridleway near an old fishery hut. (A quick excursion **right** enables you to take a quick view of the lake.) The next big house is *Scarletts*, still sadly in need

of expensive restoration (2017). The lane is now Furnace Lane, named from the lakes and the old water-powered industries that subsisted from them. Ignore a footpath on your left (*used on the "Cowden" walk in this series*). Water gardens are on your right, then a sandstone cave on your left, followed later by a bench seat in an alcove. Finally, as the Furnace Pond ends, the lane bends right. Down on your left is *Furnace Mill* with its upstairs entrance. You have now crossed another county border: **welcome to East Sussex!**

- 5 Where the lane bends left, leave it by going **right** at a fingerpost through a wooden barrier. Immediately take the **left** fork, the narrower, less muddy option. This rather jagged path leads up to one of the greens of the Holtye Golf Course, near a comfortable bench, ideal for watching players taking their shots. Cross straight over between shallow banks, watching out for flying balls. In 40m, go straight over at a crossing path on the other side of the first green. (*By turning left, you could reach the picturesque village of Cowden in 1½ km, as described in the "Cowden" walk in this series.*) Keep ahead on a path under trees, gradually uphill. At the top, having re-joined the golf course, keep to the right-hand side and finally veer **left** to a fingerpost and a tarmac lane. Turn **right** on the lane for 50m. Opposite a terrace of cottages, go **left** at a signpost and follow a narrow path to a small wood, full of white wood anemones and (later) bluebells in spring. Keep to the left of the wood and cross straight over another fairway to a fingerpost by the main A264 road in Holtye.

Leg 3: Through East Sussex 4 km=2¾ miles



- 1 Cross the main road onto a tarmac drive, also marked as a footpath. In 300m, after the garden of *Parrot House* and a small meadow, go **right** over a nice solid stile into a horse pasture. Cross it diagonally, passing the corner of a wooden fence on your right. At the far end, go over two stiles

and straight ahead beside a large crop field on your left. In only 50m, go **right** past an unneeded stile towards a little grassy meadow, probably used for grazing horses. *The official footpath crosses the meadow diagonally but new fencing has changed the route as follows.* Keep **right** on a wide path, keeping the little meadow on your left. In 70m, wheel **left** between fences, passing a shed on your left and meeting the second stile. Now veer **right** through a band of trees into another pasture. Cross straight across the right-hand corner of this big pasture, leading through a wide gap only 80m away, into another big meadow. Bearing a little to the right, continuing ahead on a faint path, up to the brow of a low hill. You pass a copse on your left, going under wires, then through a hedgerow, down steps and across a little bridge to a tarmac lane, Cansiron Lane. Turn **left** on this very quiet lane for 130m as far as a fingerpost on your right, just after *Old Stables / Old Dairy*.

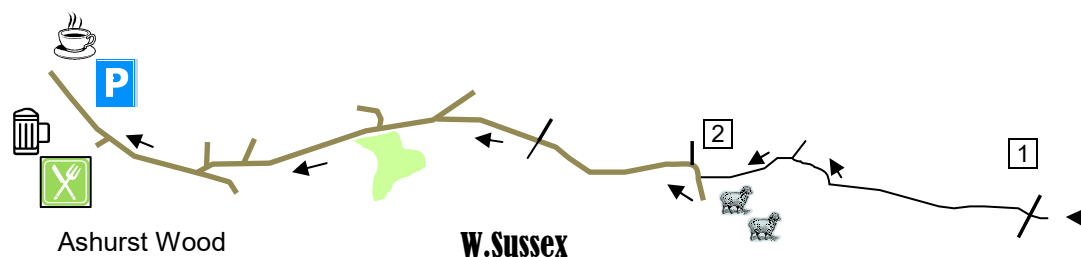
2 *Another short stretch of wild adventure continues now, but almost everyone will simply stay on the quiet lane for 350m, where the tarmac lane bends left, and turn right there on a drive, re-joining the route after another 350m. Otherwise...* Turn **right** at the fingerpost and keep **left** on a brambly path into woods. You need to get across a fallen tree and skirt a short very muddy section. *(Have you changed your mind? That's the worst part over.)* Your path runs through more sparse trees and shrubs and veers **left** over a bridge with rails. It crosses under power lines, through more trees, to reach a crop field. Turn **right** along the edge of the field and go over a small bridge in the corner into another field. Turn immediately **left** up the left-hand side of the field. *It's unclear which side of the hedge the path runs, but it makes no difference. It's possible that the path goes through a gap in 60m to switch to the left-hand side of the hedge.* After 250m, the crop field changes to grass, heading for some houses. You reach a fingerpost where you meet a wide surfaced track opposite a dark huge-windowed barn conversion. Turn **right** on the track.

3 Keep straight on along the track, passing houses, sheds and garages. The track becomes a dirt drive, passing Acre Wood on your left. The woodland comes to an end and you come out into the open with the spire of St Stephens Church just visible on the horizon. Go **left** here over a 2-plank bridge and stile (both avoidable using open gates a little further on) and go up the left-hand side of the field with the wood on your left. At the far end of the wood, turn **left** with the farm track but only for 5m. Now take a narrow path on the **right** across the crop field, thus regaining your original direction, heading for a big distant wood. After 200m, you reach the other side. Turn **right** along the edge of the field. In 200m, roughly 50m before a corner of the wood visible ahead, look for a marker post and turn **left** here on a path into the wood.

4 You are in the great Pollard Wood, although it really should be called "Coppice Wood" because of the ancient trees on both sides cut down to the roots. At first your path veers **right** uphill. It then winds its way for 700m through the depths of the wood, with a fine show of bluebells in late spring. Finally the path runs through a quite precipitous section of the forest and takes you over a stile, leading up into a meadow. Keep **right** on a narrow path up over the brow of a hill, with great views of Ashdown Forest on your left. Your path veers right again, up to the highest point, heading towards woods and a transmission tower. It then veers left to skirt the wood with even better views. Keep **right** to go through a large metal gate (or over a stile if the gate is closed). Keep straight ahead, close to the woodland on your right, avoiding a path that forks left down across the meadow. At the far side, go over a new stile to meet a track.



Leg 4: West Sussex again 2½ km=1¼ miles



- 1 Cross straight over the track to go over a stile (*just* squeezable) and keep to the left-hand side of this undulating horse pasture, avoiding the steep part on your right. On the other side, go through a large metal gate (better than the flimsy disappearing stile), being sure to close it if there are horses. Keep to the right-hand side of a long meadow. In 300m or so, go over stile leading into a large sheep pasture. Turn immediately **right** and follow the edge of the pasture round to the left, steeply down the side (*you can also use an unofficial path direct from the stile, heading through a gap in the hedge*). At the bottom, head through a gap in thorn bushes and ignore a stile sharp right. Keep straight on along the right-hand side of the sheep pasture and, at the far end, go over an easy stile to a tarmac lane. **Welcome back to West Sussex!**

- 2 Turn **right** on the lane and keep **left** on the tarmac, avoiding a track on your right. This is another Cansiron Lane, this time a pleasant residential lane of houses, mainly set in their own grounds. Ignore a footpath on your left, opposite a private road on your right, which is also a footpath. As you come out at a junction, on your left is Ashurstwood Abbey, a country mansion built in the late 1800s by a wealthy diamond merchant, now a block of luxury apartments. Continue ahead on Hammerwood Road, soon gaining a footway on your right. Finally you reach the little shop / tearoom and, opposite it, the *Three Crowns* where the walk began.



The Three Crowns, dating from 1725, has opened and closed more than once during the last year to the bewilderment of the locals when the manager upped and left after a disagreement. [Closed again in 2019, and it looks terminal; hurray for the “Maypole Inn” (see page 1).] The lease owner has promised to run it himself and make innovations, including a menu! Just like you today, he has now made great strides. But don’t expect too much: any time spent with a pleasant drink and possibly a bowl of chilli will be an extra bonus.

Getting there

By car: for most walkers, coming from the London area, Ashurst Wood is reached from the A22, through **East Grinstead**. Follow the signs. The village is signed as a left fork off the A22.

By bus/train: buses 261, 270 and 291 run from East Grinstead to Ashurst Wood. Bus 270 also runs from Brighton, Burgess Hill and Haywards Heath. Bus 291 also runs from Crawley and Tunbridge Wells. Check the timetables.

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