



Bepton, Chilgrove and the South Downs Orchid Hillside, Hooksway

Distance: 16½ km=10 miles
or 15½ km=9½ miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: West Sussex

Date written: 30-may-2014

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Refreshments: Chilgrove, Hooksway

Last update: 26-mar-2024

Map: Explorer 120 (Chichester) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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Orchids, hills, views, woodland, burial site, country inns, church

In Brief

Here is another Downland walk that you will remember long after for its beauty and originality. A Norman church, a secret orchid hillside and a Bronze-Age burial site are among the surprises, along with two excellent country pubs. (To book at the *White Horse*, ring 01243-519-444; for the *Royal Oak*, 01243-535-257.)



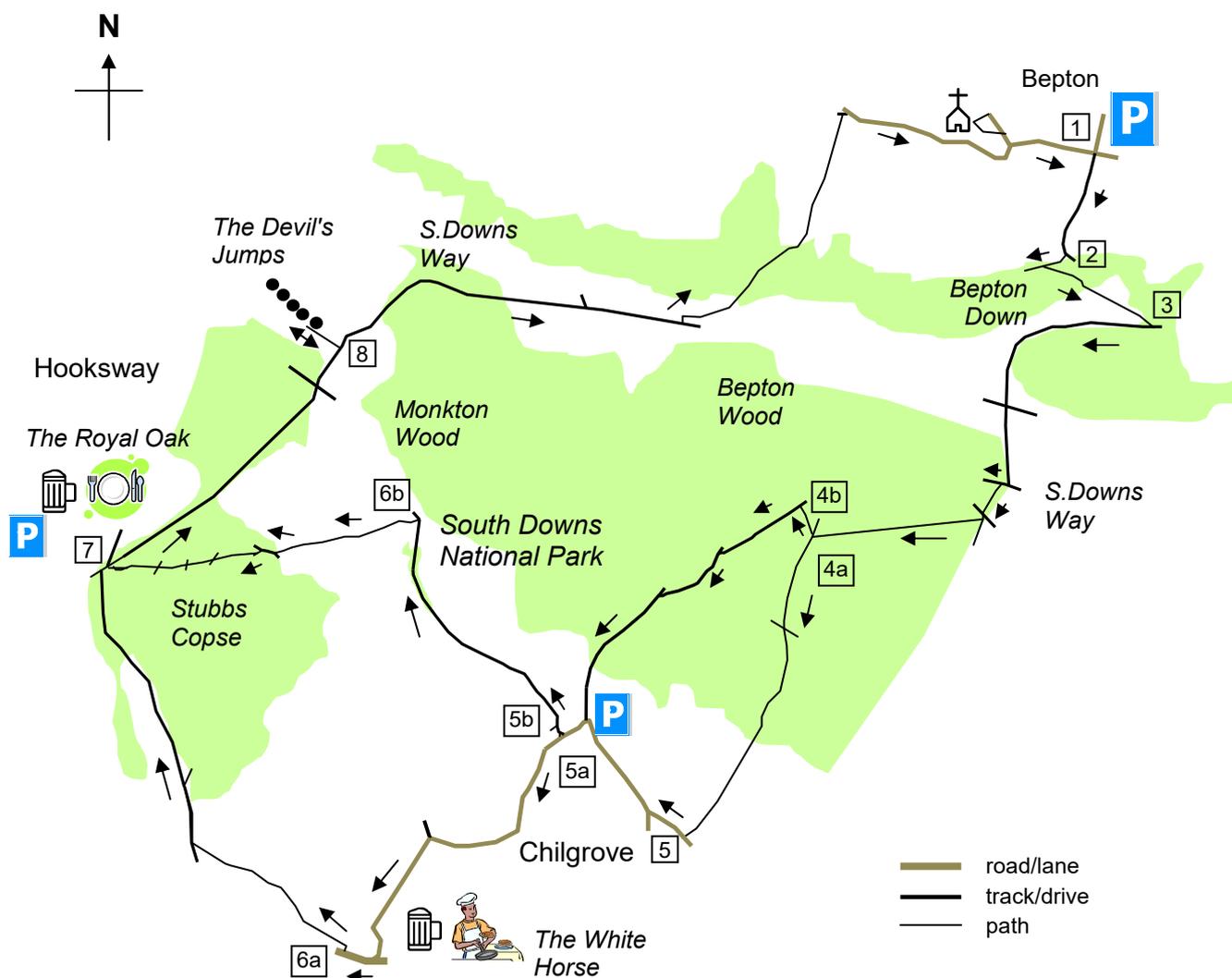
There are just a few nettles on the approach to the orchid hillside. Although this walk can be done with good walking shoes in the drier months, you will be glad to be wearing boots on two or three of the tracks. Since the few stiles on this route have left a gap, your dog can come too and can run free for much of the way.

*In 2019, the starting point for this walk was changed from Church Farm to the nearby crossroads, which is directly on the walk. The space at Church Farm is available for people visiting the church (which is a *must see!*).*

The walk begins at the road junction near **Bepton**, West Sussex, **postcode GU29 0HX**, grid ref **SU 860 182**. This is approached from the village of Cocking just south of Midhurst and the day's adventure really begins here as you follow a narrow country lane under an old railway bridge and through the best Sussex farm land to an ancient village hidden beneath the South Downs.

For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

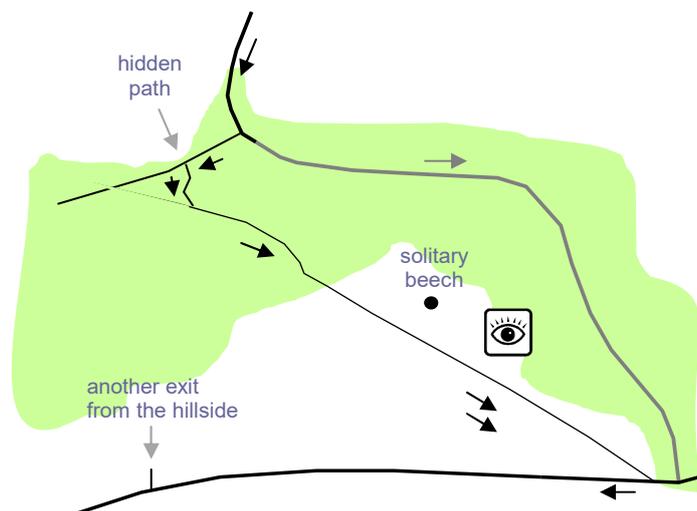
The Walk



Bepton is named after Babo, a Saxon chieftain who arrived in the year 480, hence 'Babintone', the settlement of Babo's people. A wooden church stood here for 500 years from the time of St Wilfrid of Selsea. Its stone font is all that remains. The new church was built by the Normans in 1185 with walls from local flint and chalk, 3½ feet thick. It was left almost unchanged till Victorian times. Near the side entrance is a mass grave of victims of the Black Death of 1340.

- 1 At the road junction, opposite the lane into Bepton (the normal starting point for this walk), go straight over on a signed byway. Follow this stone-lined path for 500m. *If you encounter some mud here, it should soon be gone and should not return until just before the end.* As the path curves left into trees you come to a marker post on your right.

2 What follows here is a remarkable route to the orchid hillside and you will need to concentrate, although in 2019, the route has become easier. **See adjoining mini-map.** (If you do not wish to visit Bepton Down, simply keep straight on for another ½ km and turn **right** at a T-junction, skipping the rest of this section.) Turn **right** at the marker post, as indicated by the blue arrow, steeply uphill. In 30m you go under a tall beech and a yew tree. 20m after the yew tree, you pass on your left a metal water trough. The path flattens and, 30m after the water trough, you will see a narrow unmarked path on your left. Turn **left** here and follow the zigzagging path for 50m to meet a T-junction. Turn **left** here on a wide green path which runs straight up a long gently rising contour. This path was obviously once a major trackway; now it is overgrown with green vegetation threaded through by a narrow path. After 170m, your path comes into a lighter area of shrubs and curves right up to a metal gate. Go through the gate onto Bepton Down.



Bepton Down is a place that walkers usually pass unnoticed, known only to a few local people. The meadow is a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) because of its rich content of wild flowers, especially several varieties of orchid. Hundreds of pyramid orchid are on display, ranging in colour from pink to magenta, also common spotted and early purple orchids.

Keep ahead up the sloping meadow on a faint path, but keeping just to the left of the brow of the hill so that you get the best advantage of the fine views to your left. You pass a solitary round beech about 30m on your left. The views are of Black Down and Bexleyhill. Keep following the path into the far corner where there is a large metal gate. Go through a wooden swing-gate beside it and turn very sharp **right** on a broad track.



3 The grassy slope of Bepton Down, with fine views beyond, is now on your right, with steep woods on your left. Stay on this chalky path, soon avoiding an unmarked path on your left. The path curves left, flattens out and runs between fields, leading to a 4-way fingerpost. The crossing track here is the South Downs Way. Cross straight over on a grassy bridleway and, in 350m, at a 3-way fingerpost, turn **right**. In 25m, turn **left** on a horse track slightly downhill. *Muntjac deer roam these woods and you may be lucky enough to see them.* In 150m, go straight over a wide forestry track on what may be a rather muddy patch. In just 20m, leave your straight downward path by forking **right** on another wide forestry track through Bepton Wood. You shortly pass a 2-way fingerpost, confirming that this is an official bridleway. Your path descends gently, then more steeply and afterwards suddenly up again between plantations. You reach a junction of several paths, including a signed bridleway, by a 3-way fingerpost.

There are **two** possible routes through the forest. Choose **4a** or **4b** below.

4a This option takes you through West Dean Woods nature reserve and is especially attractive, although there is slightly more quiet lane walking afterwards. Turn **left** on the signed bridleway and follow this stony path for 450m where the bridleway goes over a crossing path near a wooden gate on your left. *Note the grassy fringe on your left is another haven for orchids.* You shortly pass notices for Sussex Wildlife Trust's West Dean Woods and a rather worn picnic corner. On your left is a long wattle fence. After an inspirational walk, you emerge by open fields with views ahead. Tall oaks and ash trees are your escort along narrower grassy path. Finally our path ends at a wooden gate beside a large metal gate. Turn **right** here on a tarmac lane. At a road junction, veer **right**, signposted *Chilgrove*, passing Staple Ash Farm and its thatched farm house. At a sharp left bend by a drive and wooden gate, keep **left**, staying on the lane. Skip to **5** below.

4b This option takes you through a deep pine plantation with some great views; there is no tarmac. Turn **right** on the signed bridleway and immediately fork **left** on a straight unsigned path leading through tall pines. Remember, by the time you do this walk, there could have been felling and replanting anywhere, changing the landscape and possibly even blocking your route. In 170m, the path leads out to a vast open cleared space and a T-junction. Turn **left** here, slightly downhill, on a wide chalky path down the left-hand side of the open space. In 400m, at a 2-way fingerpost, your path joins an even wider path coming down from the right. Turn **left** here. In 350m, you come down to a junction with a wide forester's path. Turn **left** onto the main path in the open, possibly edged with timber stacks. You immediately arrive at a 4-way junction. Turn **right**. In 800m you enter trees. In a further 200m, you slip past a large wooden gate to meet a tarmac lane. Turn **right** on the lane.

5 In 150m, just before *Yew Tree Cottage*, you see a fingerpost [Mar 2024: grounded] indicating a footpath on your right.

There are **two** possible routes to the Royal Oak at Hookway. Choose between **5a** and **6a** or **5b** and **6b** below.

5a Ignore the footpath on your right. Your undulating lane goes under grid lines and curves right: avoid a footpath on the left here. At a 3-way fingerposted junction ignore a drive on the right for Brooms Farm and keep left passing several picturesque houses and cottages with their gardens. Note that the trophy fingerpost in the garden of no. 11 is for ornamentation only and does *not* indicate a right-of-way! Soon the lane zigzags left-right and reaches the *White Horse* in Chilgrove.



The White Horse is not really a rambler's inn as most of its clientele are the Chichester and Goodwood set (it even has a helipad), but it proclaims itself a "community pub", if this scattered village of studs and country seats can be called a "community". The patio and the small garden are a delight and the garden-level wide-bedded rooms named after game birds are superb. Food is comforting rather than adventurous and the prices just a little above average. Worth considering, in tune with the rustic setting, is the "grazing" menu, rather like English tapas.

6a After a refreshment break, continue to the main road and turn **right**, using the grass verge. In a short distance, at a fingerpost, go through a metal gate on your right and turn immediately **left** on the grass parallel to the road. As the meadow opens out, veer slightly **right** to go through a metal kissing-gate and straight across a crop field. A drive and another kissing-gate lead you along the right-hand side of a pasture. After a line of trees,

you are walking beside another pasture similarly. At the other side, go through a swing-gate by a fingerpost and veer **right** onto a bridleway. At a fork with two large wooden gates, take the **left** fork as indicated. After a pleasant 500m, keep ahead at a diagonal crossing path by a 4-way fingerpost. Eventually, 1 km after the fork, you reach the hamlet of Hooksway opposite the *Royal Oak*. Skip to **7** below.

- 5b** Turn **right** at the fingerpost on a stony track, passing houses on your right and avoiding a driveway on your left. At a fork, keep **left** between hedges. This wide sheltered path goes over a crossing track after 300m. You now have a gentle ascent for 500m. Avoid a tempting right fork into a large green sloping meadow (you will meet it again shortly). Finally you come out into a wonderful grassy hillside, a perfect spot for a picnic. Follow the track down to a junction by a desolate flint cabin, part of Monkton Farm, part of a medieval crofter's village.



It's unimaginable but someone might be too hard pressed even to call in at the second-chance pub. The route would be straight on on the wide track, **left** in 600m at the corner of a fence and **right** at a 4-way crossing onto the South Down Way.

- 6b** Opposite the cabin and a 3-way fingerpost, go **left** steeply up a grassy slope on an unclear path, passing on your right a large oak, a hazel and a maple. Continue into the corner, under an ash tree, go over a stile and resume along the right-hand side of a cereal field with terrific views south. After a belt of shrubbery, continue beside a second field. At the other side, go over a farm track, straight through a small wooden gate, on a path down into woods, following a yellow arrow. In 100m, your path goes over a crossing track and joins a wide track coming from the left. In 50m, fork **left**, as indicated by the yellow arrow, on a grass path and immediately fork **right**. This luscious green path [Apr 2022: churned up by forestry work] will lead you in 500m or so down to the hamlet of Hooksway. You go over three crossing paths (two diagonally) and finally come down through a dark beech wood. At the end, your path leads down by an unneeded stile and **right** to a junction of tracks close to the pub. Your route is the first track very sharp right, but first you will want to visit the *Royal Oak*.



The Royal Oak is one of the celebrated pubs of the area. As well as food and drink, it has quite a history. For details see the pub walk in the series "the Royal Oak at Hooksway". Another walk in this series "Harting Down" also calls at Hooksway.



- 7** After your break, facing the pub, turn **right** and keep straight on avoiding a bridleway through the car park on your left. There are now three possible routes ahead. Avoid the footpath by the wooden gate on your right and the track curving off to the left and take the **middle** option, passing a sign for a *restricted byway* uphill. Your path continues on a straight course, gradually uphill. After more than 1 km, you reach a 4-way fingerpost: keep straight ahead, thus joining the South Downs Way (SDW). You will be following the SDW for most of the rest of the way. Soon there are meadows visible on either side as you go under large beeches. Soon, on your right is a sign for the *Devil's Jumps*, a Bronze Age monument and a short diversion not to be missed.



The Devil's Jumps tumuli rise like five small islands in the surrounding country, the largest linear barrow formation in West Sussex. This Bronze Age cemetery consists of five large bell barrows running south-east to north-west, apparently oriented to the setting sun on Midsummer Day. There are two smaller outlying barrows. Their construction is dated at roughly 3,500 years ago.

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Continue along the SDW and shortly ignore a metal gate by a fingerpost on your left. You are now on a beautiful wide path through a luxurious woodland of tall ash trees. The path curves right imperceptibly. Suddenly you are out of the woods with terrific views on both sides. At the end of the long meadow on your left, ignore a bridleway sharp left. The path rises with a view of Linch Down ahead. At the end of a fence, just after a 3-way fingerpost, turn **left** on a byway that curves **right** down into trees (*don't miss this turn!*). The path makes a shallow descent down the side of the hill with Didling Hanger on your left. The path becomes sunken under beeches and ash. **Watch out for mountain bikers on these paths!** At a junction of paths near a meadow on your left, keep straight on downhill. The path continues between banks and you finally arrive at a drive in front of Linch Farm, through a large metal gate. Turn **right** and veer right on a tarmac lane, Bugshill Lane. After some houses, the church comes into view on your left. The lane bends left under maple and beech.



The cul-de-sac lane on your left leads to Bep-ton 12th-century Church. This little church is usually open and is definitely worth visiting. You can access it via a small gate on the left or from Park Farm at the end of the lane. You can also park there to visit the church.



Continue on the Lane, passing the *Old Rectory* and a farm to reach a junction in 400m with Bep-ton village on your left where the walk began.

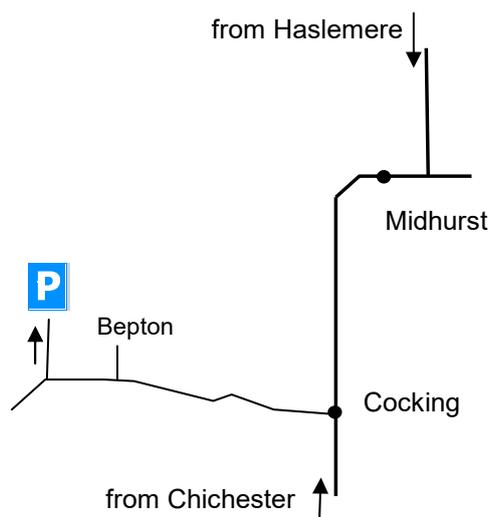


For final refreshments after the walk, the "Greyhound" just south of Midhurst serves good food.

Getting there

By car: If coming from the north, take the A286 through Haslemere and Midhurst, following signs for *Chichester*. Bep-ton is signed west from the A286 Midhurst-Chichester road in the centre of Cocking, just before the *Bluebell Inn*. Follow the narrow winding lane for 1¼ miles. At a 3-way junction signposted *Didling, Harting*, turn right and park immediately on the dirt strip on the right. The church is also a **must-see** and can be visited by continuing straight on at the 3-way junction for another ¼ mile where you will see a right turn for Bep-ton Church. Go to the end and park thoughtfully in the space provided by Church Farm being sure not to obstruct farm or construction vehicles. This space is for short-term parking only.

Alternative starting points are: (a) Hooksway (b) on the grass verge at the tight bend in the lane just east of *Yewtree Cottage*, grid ref SU 837 155.



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