



West Hoathly and Gravetye Manor

Distance: 8½ km=5½ miles or 7 km=4½ miles

easy walking with one gradient

Region: West Sussex

Date written: 29-oct-2016

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Last update: 28-nov-2017

Refreshments: West Hoathly

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest) *but the map in this guide should suffice*

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

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Long woodland trails, country house, historic village, green meadows, views

In Brief

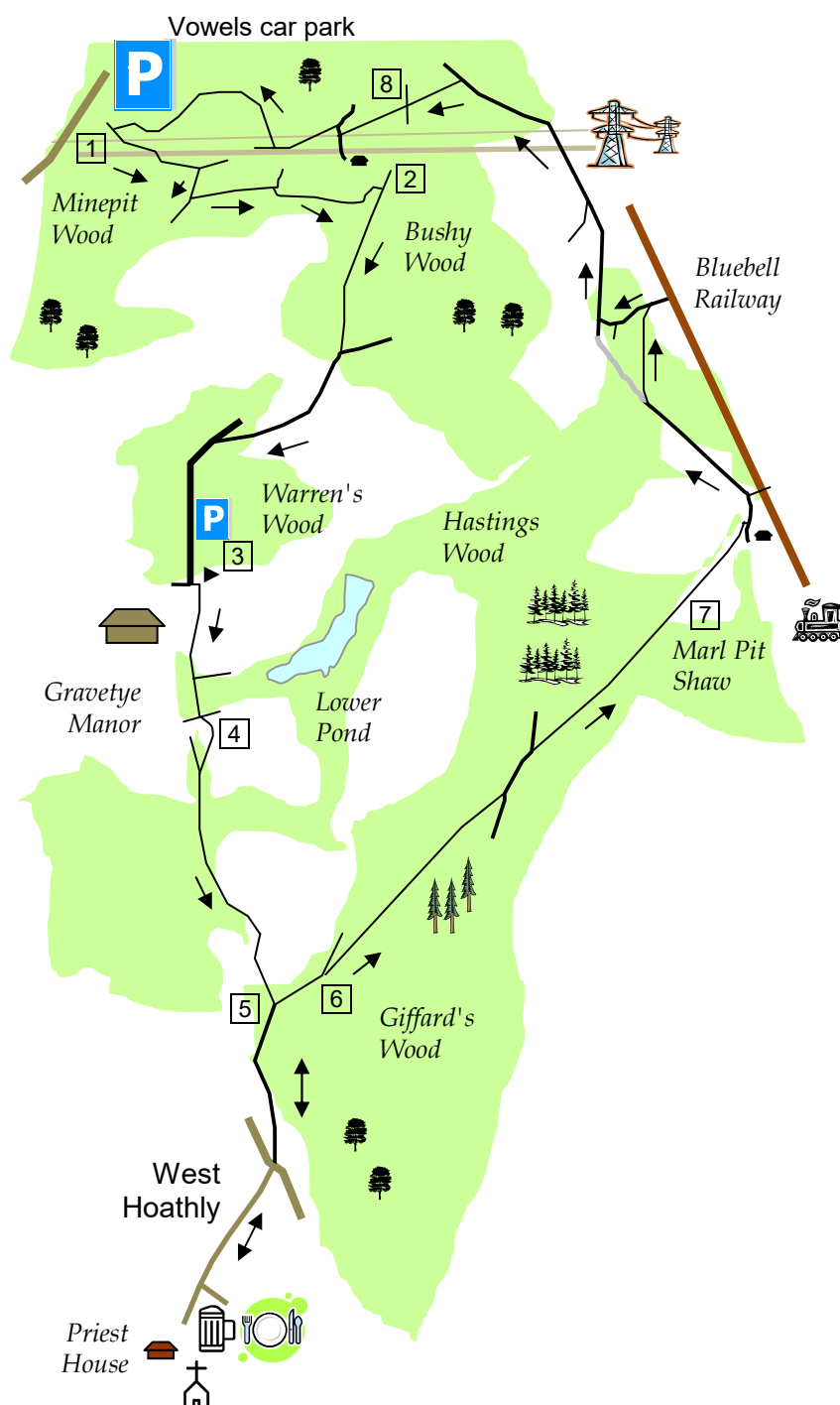
The village of West Hoathly is much loved for its Manor, *Priest House*, church and pub, but this walk takes an unusual approach from a distant clearing in the woods. On the way, you pass one of the greatest country houses in the south of England, with its (literally) groundbreaking “wild garden” that made history (open Tuesdays and Fridays). The different woods you pass through all have their distinct character and contain almost every imaginable local species of tree, with sudden breaks to give you views over the hilly East and West Sussex countryside.



There are no nettles to speak of on this walk. All the paths are well-made with very little undergrowth to worry bare legs. There was no mud when this walk was researched in October but, because of the prevalent woodland, there could be some muddy patches in the wetter seasons. Your dog can certainly come with you on this adventure.

The walk begins at the **Vowels car park** on the Gravetye Estate, off Vowels Lane, near East Grinstead, West Sussex, grid ref TQ361350. The nearest postcode, of the houses nearly ½ mile before (if coming from the Ardingley / Turners Hill direction), is **RH19 4LL**. Note that the car park closes at 5.30. [Mar-Jul 2017: on some mornings, the gates of the Vowels car park were still closed, obviously an oversight; there is room to park a few cars before the gate and on a dirt patch opposite. The car park is run by the Forestry Commission and you can contact Ian.Bromley@forestry.gsi.gov.uk for information.] For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1** This first section of the walk, through the complex Minepit Wood, needs extra concentration so that you don't lose your way. Starting in the Vowels car park, go to the far end where there are some large wooden gates but do *not* go through them. Instead, turn **right** on a narrow path across grass and under two lines of wires. This path passes a metal bar into woods and under power lines. Follow the winding route through a forest of oak and maple for only just under 100m, where you come to a definite 3-way junction beside a triangular patch of grass, overgrown in summer. Turn **right** here on a wide path which immediately curves away to the right, through more maple, chestnut and oak. In only 70m you meet another wide path coming from

the left. Turn sharp **left** on this path, almost doubling back. After 150m or so on this wide woodland path, you can see the path bending away to the left ahead. 10m **before** this bend, turn **right** on a rather rough path which goes steeply down and over a bridge across the Vowels Gill. Keep straight ahead on this path, now with a meadow visible on your right, taking care not to stray off the main path which is narrow but quite distinct, despite the undergrowth. This path gets narrower and on your right there is a stand of tall conifers. Finally, after 150m or more, the path weaves left and right to meet a T-junction with a prominent straight well-surfaced path.

- 2 You have reached an official footpath which also happens to be part of the High Weald Landscape Trail, a long-distance path. Turn **right** on this ascending footpath, going beneath a dense canopy of maple trees. In 200m, the path elbows left, becoming a wide track and passing some log stacks. It leads through a metal barrier by a fingerpost and joins a semi-tarmac drive leading to the scattered houses of Home Farm. Stay on the drive, passing the buildings on your left. At the top of a rise, you meet the main tarmac driveway to Gravetye Manor. Ignore the rough track ahead and turn **left** on the drive. You pass a car park used by garden visitors and soon you are face-to-face with the gate columns of Gravetye Manor, a grade-I country mansion.

Gravetye Manor was a wedding present. The Infield family of West Hoathly became wealthy from iron smelting and Richard built this fine Elizabethan house in 1598 for his bride, Katharine Compton. You can see the initials "R" and "K" inside and outside the house. It stayed in the family for a century. Later, the Manor was used as a smugglers' hideout and its ironworks manufactured cannon for Woolwich Arsenal until 1769. But Gravetye's most celebrated owner was the revolutionary "wild gardener", William Robinson, of which more below. The most recent owner, Peter Herbert, saved Gravetye from neglect in 1958 and revived Robinson's house and garden. It is now a Country House Hotel with a restaurant run by Michelin-starred celebrity chef George Blogg.



- 3 At a fingerpost, turn **left** in front of the entrance. Your path immediately bends right and runs between the garden of the manor and a meadow on your left with great views. The path descends past an open wooden gate. On your right is an entrance for visitors to the garden. *The garden is open Tue and Fri only and is a treat for all the senses.*



The revolution in English garden design came from an Irishman. William Robinson (1838-1935) grew up hating the marked-out beds planted with roses or sham Mediterranean blooms raised in a greenhouse, so favoured by the Victorians. He brought the "cottage garden" onto the wider landscape, with natural-looking perennials, rock gardens, native shrubs and climbers, so dense that they completely hide the soil underneath. The effect was as if the garden flowed from the external wilderness without a break. He used the fortune he made from his books "The Wild Garden" and "The English Flower Garden" to purchase Gravetye Manor in 1884. This mature, charming garden has been restored and is full of impulsive photo opportunities that show the wild garden tumbling down into the more traditional laid-out areas, with a stunning view of the countryside beyond.

You pass on your left a circular route round the Lower Pond. *This path is open to visitors, except in winter when they allow a break to stop erosion. It's a good 1 km round – worth a peek at least.* Keep straight ahead past these temptations, going over a double stone bridge, through a wood-and-metal swing-gate and following a path that bears **left** up into a meadow.

- 4 The path goes up steeply and veers **right** along the edge of the meadow beside a fringe of gorse on your right. At the corner, cross a farm track and go straight ahead over a stile. In 50m, a footpath joins from the right. The path becomes stony and gnarled with roots and takes you up some rough steps into another large attractive sloping meadow with a small copse in the middle. Keep to the right-hand side and, when you are directly opposite the copse, veer **right**, as indicated by a black-on-yellow arrow, under oak trees and through a band of holly into the adjoining meadow. Veer **left** uphill, turning round at the top to take in the view. The path leads down to a sunken track.



Decision point. If you would prefer *not* to make an excursion to the village on this occasion (a very worthwhile 750m to the *Cat Inn*, the church and the Priest House), turn sharp **left** on the sunken path and skip the next section.

- 5 Veer **right** on the track, passing in 50m through a metal kissing-gate. You come past a back garden and emerge by the West Hoathly Garage onto the main road. *West Hoathly Garage has an amazing collection of old Rolls Royces and Bentleys, plus other old cars, all immaculate, which can be seen from the outside of the garage.* Cross the road **carefully** (you need to shuffle to the right a bit to get a clear view round the blind corner). Go up North Lane, ignoring all paths off, until you reach the *Cat Inn* and the church.

The historic buildings in the village of West Hoathly are well described in another walk in this series "West Hoathly, Balcombe & Bluebell Railway". The early 15th-century Priest House is a special gem, not to be missed. The name of the village comes from the word for "heath" followed by the usual ending "ly" for "clearing". The Lewes and East Grinstead Railway used to have a station here, running through a tunnel between the village and Sharpthorne. The line was revived as the "Bluebell Railway" but unfortunately the old station is still disused. The "Cat Inn" has been given a makeover with a new menu. It is open every day from midday (closing at 5pm on Sunday).



After possible refreshment and a tour of this charming village, retrace your steps, down North Lane by the side of the *Cat Inn*, across the main road, down the track beside the West Hoathly Garage, through a metal kissing-gate. At a fingerpost, keep **right**, staying on the sunken path.

- 6 You meet a sign board for the Gravetye Estate and, immediately after that, a fingerpost. Fork **right** here on a path that runs gently downhill, passing a pond on your left. 150m after the fingerpost, you meet a wide crossing path: go straight over in the direction of a waymarker, on a good narrow straight path under tall larches, ash and oak trees. In ½ km, in a clearing, your path veers right and left as it meets a wide forest trail. *You may have heard the hoot of a steam train: this tells you how close you are to the Bluebell Railway. It is described in more detail in other walks in this series, e.g. "Horsted Keynes & Lindfield".* Turn **left** onto this wide forest trail. In 100m, leave the trail by turning **right** at a signpost. Follow this nice straight path through the deep woods. In 250m, your path crosses a track. Continue straight ahead on a path through young beeches. In a further 200m, your path leads you over a stile into a delightful meadow fringed on one side by ornamental trees.

- 7 Your path runs the length of the meadow down the centre. Soon on, your right, you see the colonial-style buildings of Birch Farm. Go over a stile and turn **left** on their driveway. Stay on the drive as it ascends, ignoring a footpath on your right just after a fence. *But if you would like a quick view of the Bluebell Railway, it is only 100m away on this path.* As the drive begins to

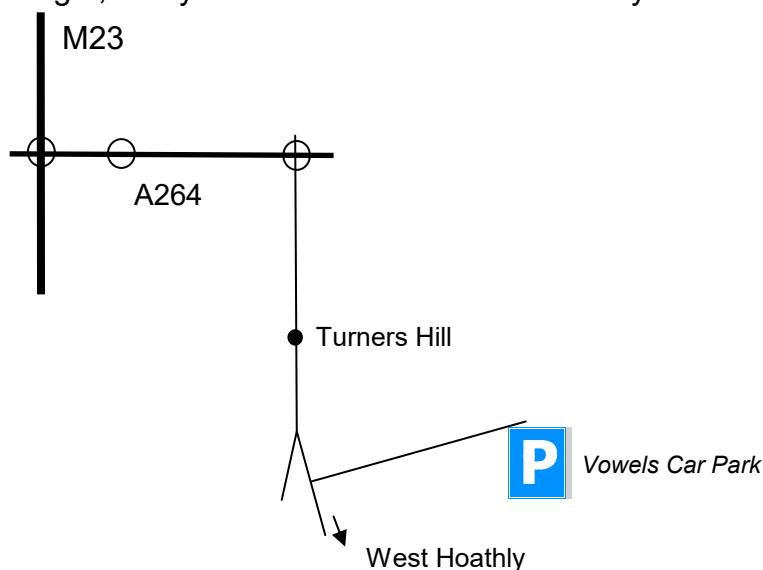


descend, opposite a large metal gate, fork **right** at a fingerpost on a footpath into trees. *Some walkers ignore this diversion and stay on the drive.* You come down to a tarmac drive just before an arch which carries the Bluebell Railway. Turn sharp **left** away from the arch and follow the drive, ignoring a footpath on your left, and bear **right** at another signpost, re-joining the original drive. You pass two cottages and you are joined from the left by a track coming from Home Farm. The driveway passes beneath power lines and curves left, going under two lines of wires. As you ascend a gentle slope, at the top, you meet a fingerpost. Turn **left** here on a beautiful straight footpath through beechwoods. *Don't miss this turning!*

- 8 In 150m you meet a wide crossing path where the fingerpost indicates a left turn. **Ignore** the left turn and keep straight on. Your path crosses under two lines of wires with a house visible on your left and reaches a T-junction. Turn **right** on this sandy driveway. Almost immediately, where the drive bends right, instead turn **left** on a narrow path. This path crosses under the wires again and runs beneath the power lines. Almost immediately, you reach a junction with a grassy space on your left and a path on your right. Turn **right** on this woodland path, away from the power lines. You are in a lovely mixed woodland of maple, birch, tall firs and ash. After more than 300m, as your path approaches the wires again, keep **right**, away from the wires. After a short final stretch in a canopy of red oak, the path leads you past wooden gates into the Vowels car park where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: If you are coming from the **west** side of the M25, use the following route. 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 signposted *West Hoathly and Sharpthorne*. Almost immediately, turn **left** at a junction. This is Vowels Lane. The car park is 1 mile on the right, 500 yds after the entrance to Gravetye Manor.



By bus: No. 84 from East Grinstead or Crawley to West Hoathly, except Sun. Check the timetables.

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