



West Hoathly and Gravetye Manor Bluebell Railway

Distance: 6¾ km=4¼ miles
minus 1½ km=1 mile missing West Hoathly
plus 1¼ km=¾ mile starting at Kingscote station

easy walking with one gradient

Region: West Sussex

Date written: 29-oct-2016

Author: Sackboot

Date revised: 23-aug-2020

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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Historic village, long woodland trails, country house and garden, green meadows, views, legacy railway

In Brief

The village of West Hoathly is much loved for its Manor, *Priest House*, church and pub, but this walk takes an unusual excursion to a distant part of the neighbouring 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 to patrons). 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.



In this 2020 revision, an extension has been added allowing you to arrive on the Bluebell steam railway.



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.

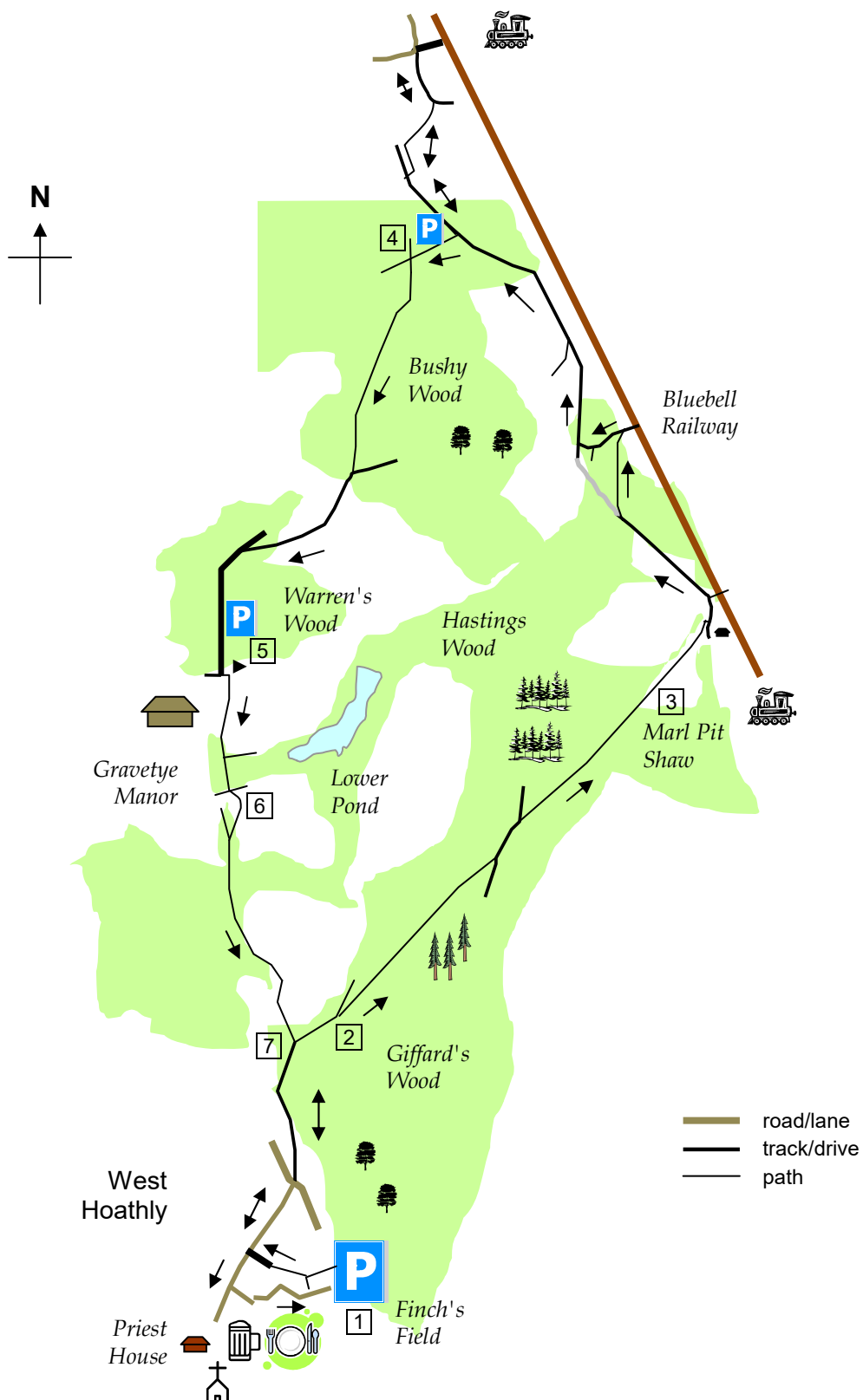


Your dog can certainly come with you on this adventure.



The walk begins at the **Finches Field** car park in West Hoathly, nearest postcode **RH19 4SJ**, **what3words: ///thud.trouser.charge**, grid ref TQ 366 326, or at the Bluebell Railway **Kingscote Station**. Another possible starting place for a motorist is not far from Kingscote Station, on a dirt strip alongside the tarmac drive to Kingscote Vineyard, **what3words: ///gifts.basically.youthful**.

The Walk



If you are beginning the walk at Kingscote Station on the Bluebell Railway, do as follows, Come out of the station to meet the main road (Vowels Lane) at a bend. Instead of joining the road, turn immediately **left** on a rough track marked *Private Road* (it is also a footpath). Where the track bends left towards a railway arch, go **right** at a signpost through a gap in the hedge and turn **right** along the edge of a grassy meadow. In the corner, go **left** and quickly **right** through a gap onto a tarmac drive. Turn **left** on the drive, soon passing a dirt strip used as an unofficial car park.

If you parked in this dirt strip, walk along the lane with the strip on your right.

At the end of the “parking strip” opposite a signpost in the hedge on your left, turn **right** on a beautiful straight footpath through beechwoods.

Now join the main walk from section **4**.

- 1** Starting in the Finches Field car park in West Hoathly, take a tarmac path leading away from the entrance, passing a picnic table and seats. Keep straight on past a round toposcope and, in the far corner, keep straight ahead to arrive at the cul-de-sac of a residential road. Follow this road to meet a major road of West Hoathly (North Lane). Turn **right** on this road, passing playing fields, to arrive at the main road opposite West Hoathly Garage. Carefully cross this very busy road and go down a wide tarmac track that runs down the left-hand side of the garage. *West Hoathly Garage has an amazing collection of old Rolls Royces and Bentleys, plus other old cars, all immaculate, which you pass.* The surface changes to dirt and, after 200m, you come through a metal kissing-gate. At a 3-way fingerpost, keep **right**, staying on the sunken path.
- 2** In only 40m, you meet another 3-way 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 black-on-yellow waymarker arrow, on a good narrow straight path under tall larches, ash and oak trees. In ½ km your path veers left and right 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 (*don't miss it!* it's set off about 10m from the trail). 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.
- 3** 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, look for a signpost, hidden in the hedge on the right. As a guide, you are at the start of a long roadside dirt strip which is used for parking.



If you parked here, the adventure is ended. If you are returning to Kingscote Station on the Bluebell Railway, do as follows. Continue along the driveway until you pass a grassy field on your right. Go **right** through a gap, **left** in the field, **right** in the corner and **left** in the next corner, out to a rough track. Keep **left** uphill to meet the main road. The station is on your right. Otherwise ...

Turn **left** here on a beautiful straight footpath through beechwoods. *Don't miss this turning!*

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In 150m you meet a wide crossing path. Turn **left** here in the direction of the fingerpost on a stone-lined path. You pass under two sets of wires, curving right through shrubbery. Your path goes down and crosses a stream between fences. The path begins to rise for some distance, passing a junction on the left and a 2-way fingerpost, beneath a dense canopy of maple trees. *Note that this footpath is part of the High Weald Landscape Trail, a long-distance path.* In 200m, the path elbows left, becoming a wide track and passing some log stacks. It leads past a metal barrier by a markerpost and joins a 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. 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.



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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. Where the path splits, it's best to keep **left**. 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 to those who are either staying in the hotel or eating in the restaurant.*



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.

- 6 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 by a redundant 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 did *not* park in West Hoathly and would prefer *not* to make an excursion to the village on this occasion (missing a very worthwhile 750m trip to the *Cat Inn*, the church and the *Priest House*), turn sharp **left** on the sunken path and re-wind to section 2.

- 7 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. Cross the road **very 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 and has a large garden with tables. It is open every day from midday (closing at 5pm on Sunday).

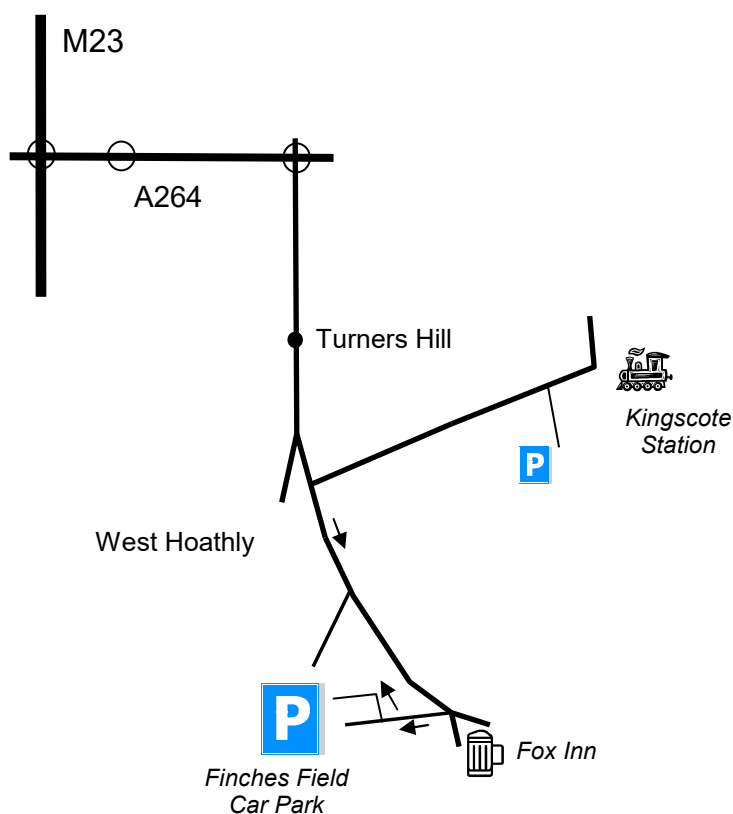


After viewing the village, turn **left** on the road past the pub with the church on your right. Follow the road round a curve past a whiteboard house and, in a further 100m, go **left** past a metal barrier, steeply up steps, and turn **right** at the top on a tarmac path back to the car park where 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 third 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*. Ignore a left turn shortly (*) (*Vowels Lane*). When you reach a junction opposite *West Hoathly Garage*, stay on the main road until you see the *Fox Inn*. Turn **right** and **right again** here on *Church Lane*. The entrance to the *Finches Field* car park is 100 yds or so on the right.

To park near *Kingscote Station*, take the left turn mentioned above (*), *Vowels Lane*. The station is in 1 mile. Just 130 yds before the station, as the road descends, opposite a converted farm building, you will see on your right a brown tourist sign for *Kingscote Vineyard*. Turn **right** here on a tarmac drive. In 400 yds or so you will find a long dirt strip on the right-hand side of the drive where you can park.



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

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