



Nymans, Staplefield, Balcombe

Distance: 12 km=7½ miles or 16 km=10 miles* easy-to-moderate walking

Region: West Sussex

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Staplefield, Nymans, Handcross, Balcombe

Map: Explorer 134 (Crawley) and 135 (Ashdown Forest)

but the map in this guide should be sufficient

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Woodland, streams, meadows, views, villages, historic garden

In Brief

This is a walk through fabulous country, ever changing from precipitous stream valleys and hidden woodland to high grassy meadows with distant views. Yet the people who live here say they see very few ramblers. So this walk lives up to the FFW motto and can be counted as an unknown delight.

The walk calls in at the village of Staplefield where there are *two* pubs, both serving really good food and ales. (To enquire at the *Victory Inn*, ring 01444-400463 or for the *Jolly Tanners* 01444-400335. To book at the *Red Lion* in Handcross, ring 01444-400292.) A perfect end to the walk is provided by an optional visit to the National Trust's **Nymans Garden** (entry charge for non-members, free to shop and café).

26 Apr 2023 for 21 days the tarmac drive from Staplefield (section 10) is officially "closed" by W/Sussex CC for replacement of a culvert(!). See text.

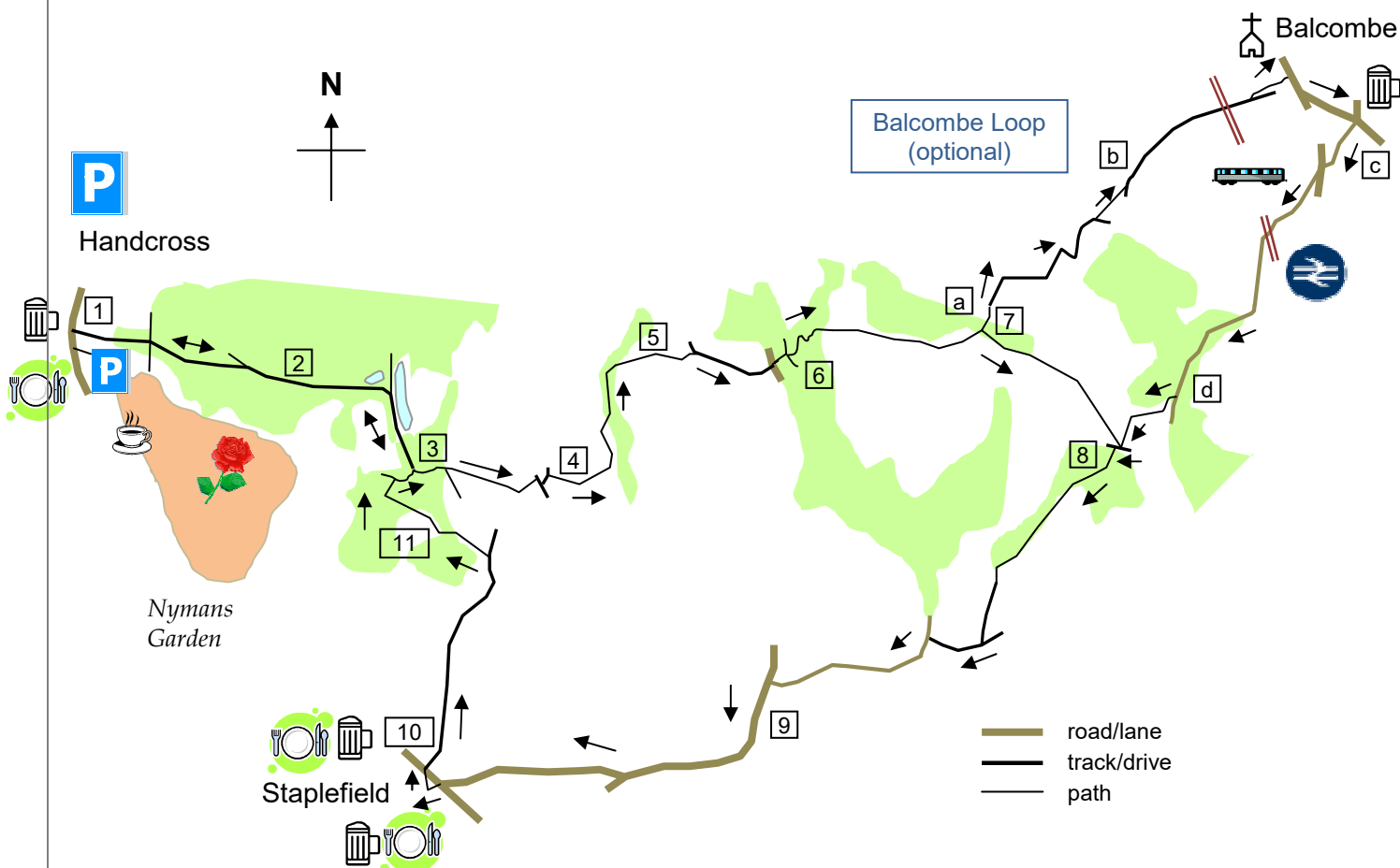


There were no nettles or brambles at all when this walk was planned in the very wet winter of 2014. At that time the mud was manageable, although thick near the start/end of the walk. So in wet conditions you need good ankle boots. The hilly terrain later in the walk keeps the soil fairly well drained. There is no problem in summer. Some stiles mentioned in the text are now gates. Your dog can certainly come too as all the stiles have a gap, intentional or otherwise. He is allowed in the shop and café areas but not in the Garden. (* The NT has temporarily? shut Tranquility Wood near the end reducing your walk to 9 miles.)

The walk begins in **Handcross**, near Haywards Heath, West Sussex postcode **RH17 6EB**. There are no parking restrictions in the village but you may have trouble near the shops, although you will certainly find spaces down the residential side roads. There are three spaces between the bus stop and the entrance to Nymans Garden. Of course, if you intend to visit Nymans Garden and it is *not* a busy day, it is probably ok to park in their large car park (closes 5pm). You can also start in **Balcombe**, postcode **RH17 6PA**, arriving **by train**, or easily parking in a side street, planning to reach Nymans and the *Red Lion* pub/restaurant at midday. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk



- 1 Beginning in Handcross, almost opposite the *Red Lion*, just next to a little village sign showing a coach and horses, take a signposted footpath, going past a National Trust sign for Nymans Wood. This wide path leads downhill with the car park of Nymans Garden on your right. (The field on your left is used as an overflow car park.) After descending through more woodland, 300m into the walk, you reach a level crossing track. Go straight over, down steps and onwards through the fine Cow Wood. On your right is a stream, soon crossed between wooden railings. With two more pairs of railings, your path is joined by a track from the left. Immediately after, avoid a track which forks right uphill. *Note that you are on part of The Sussex Ouse Valley Way, a 42-mile path, opened in 2005, which roughly follows the River Ouse from Lower Beeding (just west of here) to the sea near Seaford.*
- 2 You are in a narrow valley with a stream down on your left, under the beeches of Pookchurch Wood, with a wooden seat and some wooden sculpture. An avenue of tall pines with a wide sandy path is one of the best sections of this walk, one which you will experience again on the return leg. Stay on this path, avoiding all turn-offs, until the path curves right past a pond. A track joins from the left as you pass the Fish Pond. At the end of the large pond, as you pass a sluice, ignore a path on the left marked *Millennium Walk* (although the little lookout and view from the bridge are worth a tiny diversion). You pass another pond, more hidden, with a still-house. At a fingerpost, keep straight ahead beside the lake, ignoring a wide path that forks off right (to be used on the return leg).

- 3 Shortly after, at another fingerpost, your path turns abruptly **left** and takes you across a new (2021) boardwalk over another sluice. Your path goes steeply up steps, through a small wooden gate into a meadow. Immediately, at a fingerpost, keep straight ahead, avoiding a right fork. Your path goes over a driveway to *Old House*, visible on your left, and crosses the pasture, cutting the left-hand corner, keeping to the left-hand side after a jutting corner. At the other side, go through a small wooden gate, over a 2-plank bridge, into a small meadow and continue along the left-hand side. You reach a cinder track next to Dillions Vineyard on the left. Turn **right** on the track and, in 10m, turn **left** on a concrete track. Follow the track as it curves left towards Allen's Farm. *The tennis court on your left is now a chicken run.* About 20m *before* the entrance to the farm house, turn **right** up five steps and through a small wooden gate.
- 4 Go along the left-hand side of a small pasture, through a farm gate, continuing beside another pasture, going under grid lines. Immediately afterwards, turn **left** through a metal farm gate and go diagonally across the next meadow to a large wooden gate next to a post with a black-on-yellow arrow. Go over a new (2021) stile next to this gate onto a pleasant level path beside the deep birch woods of Sole's Coppice on your right. At a fingerpost, your path curves right downhill. The path winds through the wood, straight ahead at a 2-way fingerpost, crosses a 2-plank bridge with a handrail and immediately turns left uphill with the stream now down on your left. Natural shale steps lead finally up to a kissing-gate.
- 5 Go through the kissing-gate into a meadow with the great building of Ditton Place ahead. On your right as you proceed is Jarretts Farm. Go through a modern kissing-gate in the right-hand corner to join a drive coming from the farm. At a tarmac drive with Ditton Place on your left, turn **right**. *Ditton Place, built in 1904, was recently a school and has now been re-developed as luxury apartments.* The drive passes a pond and some houses and comes out between pillars to Brantridge Lane. Turn **left** on the lane and immediately **right** at a signpost on a footpath into woods [Aug 2019: [overgrown - don't miss!](#)].
- 6 In 40m, at a junction, look for a post with a black-on-yellow arrow (*don't miss! could be hidden in bushes*). The arrow points you along the **second** path from the **right**, going downhill through the mixed woodland of Northland Wood. Your path takes you steeply down using a handrail into a deep gulch carved by a gushing stream. Go over a 2-plank bridge and steeply up steps. At the top, your path goes **left** on a crossing path, then in 30m **right**, steeply uphill. A stile takes you into a large meadow, an exhilarating feature of this walk, part of an extensive grassy upland fringed with great oaks which will give you good views and a pleasant ramble for some distance. *Sometimes you will see some quiet cattle, easy to bypass if desired.* Keep to the left-hand side and go over another stile (or through a large metal gate) in the corner. You pass a sharp-sided valley on your right and, on your left, Bury Wood with ponds whose presence is betrayed by the honk of waterfowl. As you near the highest point, it is worth pausing to look back at the views to the South Downs. Here also you meet a 3-way fingerpost by a large metal gate on your left.


Decision point. If you would like to include the village of **Balcombe** in this walk, with opportunities to take refreshment, or if you began the walk there, skip forward to the last part of this text and do the **Balcombe Loop**. Otherwise continue with the next section.


7 Ignore the gate and the footpath on the left and continue in your original direction on a hidden path inside the fringe of trees, close to the top edge of the meadow. In the first corner, go over a stile into a small crop field, through a gap and into another large grass meadow. Keep straight ahead along a border between two large open meadows next to a thin wire fence and a shallow bank separating them on your left. Your path veers to the right of a pond circled by oak trees. After the oaks, veer slightly **right** to the next jutting edge where you will find a fingerpost. Turn **right** here, cutting across the centre of the meadow where you will see a small metal gate on the far side. Go through this metal gate, next to a fingerpost, onto a track on the edge of the woodland. Turn **right** on this track.

Here the **Balcombe Loop** re-joins the main walk.

8 In only 20m, turn **left** on a signposted path into Whitehouse Wood. The path is well-made with concrete and paving stones for most of the way. It runs beside a sheep pasture on your left with woods on your right. (If the path is waterlogged you can use a parallel path just inside the wood on your right which is extensively used and much drier.) As you approach a house, your path turns right and left on a fenced track between meadows, passing a farm on your left. You arrive at a T-junction with a tarmac drive, White-throat Lane. (Although your route is **right** on the lane, it is worth making a short diversion here by turning **left** on the lane to have a sneaky peek at the White House, a grade II listed Elizabethan building, with its pond and the public footpath running across the front yard.) Turn **right** on this quiet drive downhill. You pass the stony grass terrace of the *White House* heading for a lake. The lane here is fringed with daffodils in springtime. The drive winds its way over a bridge in Little Sion Wood (across the same stream you encountered earlier in the gulch) and goes gently uphill. Where, after the best part of 1 km, the drive finally bends right between wooden posts, **leave** it to continue straight ahead down a slope and down steps to a quiet lane, Brantridge Lane.

9 Turn **left** on the lane downhill, soon passing the tall metal gates of Old Hall. *Old Hall is a mock-Tudor castle built in 1842, now the home of Maurice Saatchi.* Follow the lane into the village of Staplefield, avoiding any minor turnings-off and keeping **right** at a fork after 700m. Notice the two tiny cottage semis on your left, *Jasmine and Heron still with their original doors.* Soon on your right you pass St Marks Church. *St Marks is a must-see; the lights go on as you enter and the beautiful illuminated chancel will prompt a gasp or two.* At the end, cross over the main road and the village green to the *Victory Inn*.

 *The name of the **Victory Inn** celebrates a legal victory (hence the bewigged judge) in being granted a licence in 1848 against vested interests. It is now the restaurant section that draws a regular crowd and you will find booking essential even on a quiet day. The front section is a cosy traditional pub serving Long Man, Harveys Sussex and other brews. Consumption in fine weather is at the front and through a log tunnel to the beer garden. Staplefield has another good pub: the **Jolly Tanners** is on the other side of the green, a short way up the road, a freehouse which is especially noted for its ales, varying between Cotleigh Tawny Owl, Butcombe, Keystone, Arundel, Sharps Autumn Red, Banks, Wychwood and Tring. The pub also serves an extremely good roast lunch at good value. It is open all day Fri, Sat, Sun but closes from 3-5.30 other days.*

 10 After a possible refreshment break, cross the green again, this time a little further up the main road, to locate a driveway by an old telephone box marked as a public footpath. [May 2023: The drive may be officially “closed” (to traffic?) to “replace a culvert”, although the footpath is not closed; walkers were

able to improvise.] (If you did not visit the *Victory Inn*, this is **right** along the main road for 80m.) Follow the drive, initially tarmac, later changing to concrete, as it rises past houses and hedgerows and then gradually descends in two gently sweeping curves. At the bottom, almost 1 km from the road, your track crosses a stream and meets a 3-way fingerpost. Turn **left** here, going through a new gate next to a cattle grid, on a concrete path across the meadow, *sometimes passing some docile young Frisians*. This path follows roughly the left-hand edge as it curves right. The “normal” route now would be to stay on the official footpath as far as the fingerpost in the meadow that you reached after the lake; but, in true FFW tradition, this walk takes a more interesting route, to give you a taste of the lesser-known paths in the Nymans estate (but see below).

- 11 In 100m, as the path straightens, look to your **left** and locate a small wooden gate at the edge of the woods. [2020-2023: still closed by the NT to allow recovery from ash dieback and as a sanctuary for wildlife: **ignore and stay on the original path, ignoring the rest of this section**. 2023: it is now suspected to be permanently closed as a protected nature reserve.] Leave the main path to go through this gate into Hillhouse (Tranquility?) Wood, part of the National Trust's Nyman's Estate. Your path goes over a footbridge and turns right alongside the stream. A plastic walkway over a marshy section is followed by a flight of steps and a bridge over a stream with a handrail on your right. You immediately arrive at a widely divergent fork. Take the **left** fork, the green wide uphill path. [Aug 2018: an estate worker directed walkers to the “main path”.] Follow this grassy strip uphill, keeping to the right to avoid any side paths on your left. In nearly 200m, the green strip ends abruptly. Turn **right** here on a narrow path. At a T-junction turn **right** again on a wide path [2016: negotiating a large fallen tree using a semicircular path in the woods on your left]. This path curves left downhill and comes to a 3-way fingerpost. If you began the walk in Handcross, this point will be familiar from your outward journey; otherwise, the next short stretch will be a new treat. The following section is identical to the first 1½ km.

If you did *not* begin the walk in Handcross and you do *not* wish to undertake the short double journey to the village and Nymans Garden, turn **right** at the fingerpost and resume the walk at section 3. Otherwise ...

- 12 At the fingerpost, veer **left** onto the main footpath, soon passing the lake on your right. Half way along the lakeside, fork **left** uphill and follow an avenue of tall pines. After 600m, veer **right** at a crossing path and, after a pair of wooden rails, fork **left** to regain your direction, going past more rails. In 150m, two flights of steps lead up to a wide crossing path.

Nymans is surely a candidate for the most beautiful garden in Sussex. The estate was bought in 1890s by Ludwig Messel, a German-born retired Londoner with a passion for gardening. He was succeeded by three more generations of Messels who established the garden you see today. Rare plants were brought in from abroad and many are specially-bred hybrids that are unique to Nymans. The house was built in the 1920s but was burnt to a shell in 1947, leaving a romantic ruin. Part of it has been rebuilt and a number of rooms can be visited. You can read more in the paperback “Nymans: The Story of a Sussex Garden” by Shirley Nicholson. Nymans is open daily from 10. It also has a restaurant, a tea kiosk and a shop. You may need to reassure the staff in the restaurant if you want to eat but don't have time to visit the garden, because the restaurant leads straight out into the garden, bypassing the ticket hut (a design flaw you might say).



WC

Cross straight over the track and continue to the road in Handcross where the walk began.



For final refreshments, the “Red Lion” opposite is a pub / restaurant, part of the giant M&B chain, but well spoken-of, with an oak-beamed dining room and seasonal food. On weekdays there is a fixed-price menu. The “Red Lion” has an interesting history as an old coaching inn, counting Horatio Nelson as a customer (his sister Catherine Matcham lived in the village). The “Red Lion” was the scene of hangings, such as of a notorious highwayman, and of travelling boxing matches: Bombardier Billy Wells, heavyweight boxing champion, who strikes the gong at the start of J. Arthur Rank’s films, was landlord during the 1930s.

Balcombe Loop 3¾ km=2½ miles

Do this extra section if you would like to visit the interesting village of Balcombe with the opportunity for refreshment, or if you begin there, possibly using the rail connection.

a Turn **left** at the 3-way fingerpost, going over a stile [2021: clambering over a recently-felled tree]. Follow a narrow path up into a large meadow and proceed along the left-hand side, joining a wide farm track running between pastures. In 150m the track bends right. Stay on the track through Westup Farm as it curves left and then right round the left-hand side of buildings. The path now bends left past the red-white tile-hung farm house. Just after a large duck pond, at a fingerpost, leave the track by forking left through a large metal gate. Your path runs across a large meadow, diverging at an angle from the left-hand edge. As a guide, you should find a groove cut in the grass. Head for a wood ahead where there is a stile.

b The stile leads into a wood. On coming out of the wood, keep ahead, passing a bench seat and joining a good tarmac drive. In 450m the drive crosses the railway. Less than 100m after the bridge, before the drive bends uphill to the right, fork **left** at a marker post on a narrow path uphill through pines. The path goes through a clearing and straight on up to a low stile and the main B2036 London Road in Balcombe. Your route is **right** along the road. *First, however, you may wish to visit the wide-aisled St Mary’s Church which is 100m to your left.* In 60m, fork **left** on Haywards Heath Road which quickly leads to the village centre, passing the old timbered *Catseye Cottage*. On your left is the *Half Moon Inn*, a traditional local offering non-nonsense lunchtime snacks, recently much improved.



The name “Balcombe” may be derived from Celtic, indicating a Romano-British mining settlement. The “Bal” of “Balcombe”, by the way, is pronounced as in “ball”. Mining - of a sort - has continued with oil and shale gas explorations in 2012, leading to vociferous protests and withdrawal of the plans. Past residents include actor Paul Scofield.

c With the pub on your left, turn **right** on Bramble Hill. You pass the Balcombe Tea Rooms which serves more than tea and cakes but opens unreliably. At the bottom, cross the main road diagonally and continue down narrow winding Rocks Lane which, as you will soon see, is well-named. The lane sinks and goes under a railway arch. Shortly after *Parkers*, at a junction, follow the **right** bend, ignoring footpaths left and right. *The footpath from the station joins here.* The lane, now more of a tarmac drive, carries on uphill, soon between rocky sides (hidden in undergrowth in summer), taxing your legs a little. When the gradient gets easier, about 50m before a house, fork **right** at a signpost onto a footpath.

- d Cross a track to a path opposite and immediately fork **left** to a stile into a large meadow. Turn immediately **right** up the right-hand side of the meadow. In 80m, at the corner of a wood with a fingerpost, turn smartly **left** to cross the grass heading for a metal gate and a fingerpost on the edge of woodland by a track. Go through the gate and turn **right** on the track.

Now join the main walk at section [8](#).

Getting there

By car: Handcross is easily reached from the M23/A23 London-Brighton road. Follow National Trust oak leaf signs for *Nymans*. Balcombe too is reached from the M23 via the B2036 at exit 10A. Keep left at the roundabout and follow signs for *Balcombe*.

By train: begin the walk at **Balcombe station** (First Capital Connect). Exit the station through the car park (facing the tunnel, this is on the right) and, at the point where the station approach joins the main road, turn **right** on a footpath. This meets the walk at the point marked *in blue* in section [c](#).

By bus: Metrobus routes 271 and 273 stop near Nymans, roughly hourly from Crawley station and Brighton, and two-hourly from Burgess Hill.

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