



St Leonard's Forest: shorter walks

Distance: 9 km=5½ miles or 4¼ km=2.7 miles

easy walking

Region: West Sussex

Date written: 2-feb-2013

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Refreshments: Colgate

Map: Explorer 134 (Horsham) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Woodland, stream, ford, heath, views

In Brief

This walk takes you through some well-known and much lesser-known paths of St Leonards Forest near Horsham. In the wet midwinter of 2013 the author found a lot of mud on the forest paths but the lane and the wide sandy tracks were much drier. At the centre, the *Dragon* pub is a worthy resting place (for enquiries, ring 01293 851286). You can also start the walk near the *Dragon* and optionally shorten it to 7½ km=4½ miles (turning right at point [7], details missing from the text).



There are no nettles and only three stiles. In the damper months, boots are essential and you need good footwear to ford the stream. A hiking pole may be useful to help you over a couple of high stiles. Your dog is welcome although the three stiles will be more difficult for a large one.



The walk begins at the **Roosthole car park**, nearest postcode **RH13 6PG**, grid ref TQ207299, www.w3w.co/planting.static.browser. An alternative starting point is the *Dragon* pub in Colgate, postcode **RH12 4SY**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).



The Walk

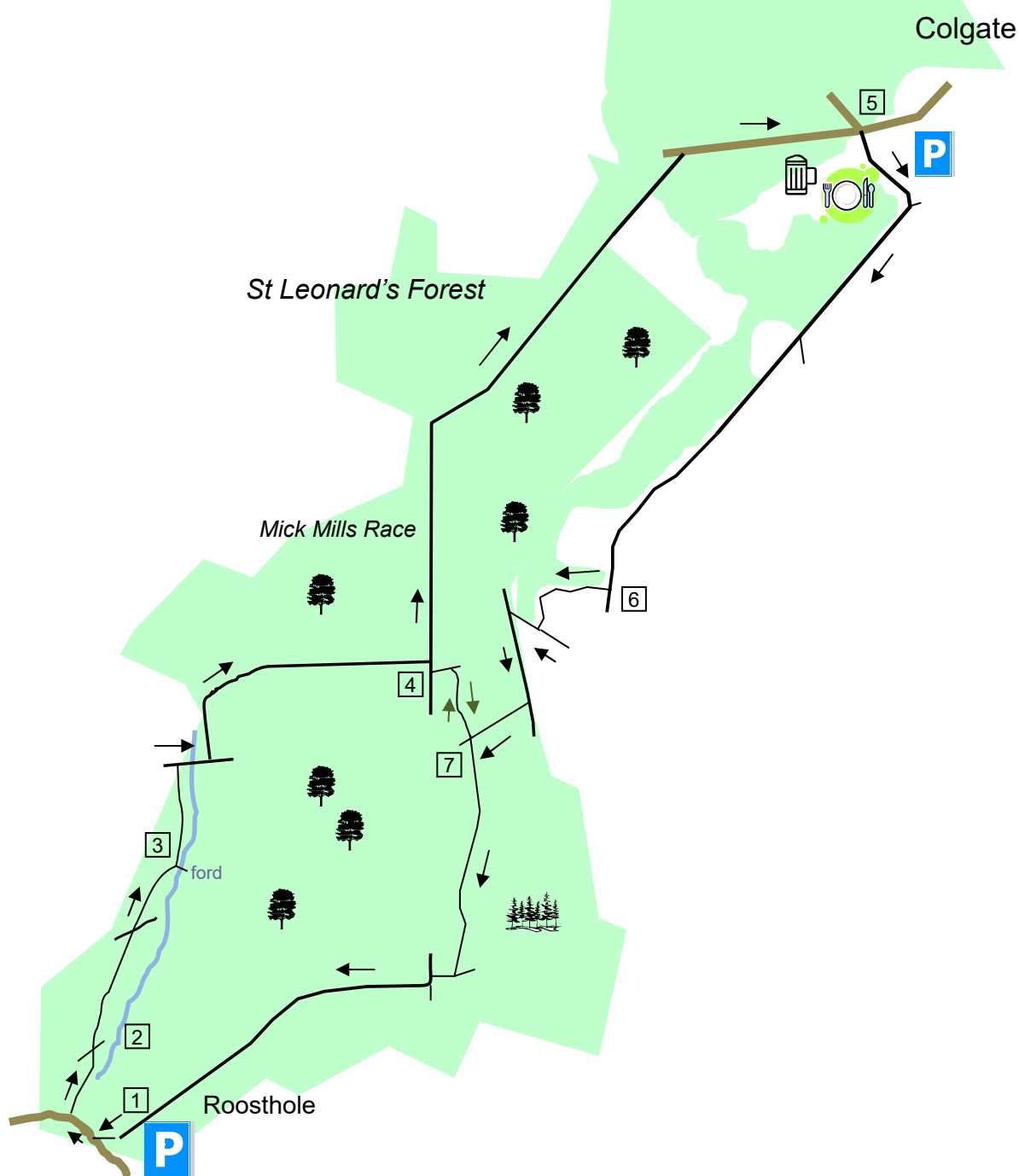
St Leonard's was once the western end of a huge forest that spread along the central ridge of the Sussex weald. Archaeological digs have revealed how people lived here in ancient times, hunting wild animals and later smelting iron ore assisted by water power from the many hammer ponds. After the Norman Conquest it was a hunting forest and more open than now. During the Civil War St Leonard's supplied iron to arm the Royalists, causing Cromwell to send a taskforce here to destroy the ironworks. In the 1700s the forest was a haven and half-way-house for smugglers bringing their contraband from the sea to London. The forest is now managed by the Forestry Commission (FC).

St Leonards is awash with legends; in fact the name comes from a 6th-century French hermit who killed a dragon here. During his tussle with the monster, the saint's blood is said to have fallen to the ground from where white Lilies sprang

forth in an area still known as the Lily Beds. He also prayed for snakes to be banished (as St Patrick did in Ireland). Dragons still roam here apparently, although this may be a story concocted by smugglers to discourage prying visitors.

In 2018, the steep path down to the Sheepwash Gill was closed by the FC for "conservation" reasons. The route of this walk was consequently changed at the start to go out to the road very briefly to pick up the high path from there. This has the advantage of avoiding a very tricky section, putting this walk into the "easy" category.

- 1 Starting in the Roosthole car park, take a narrow path up a bank in the top corner. (This is at the far left-hand end of the wooden boundary fence.) In 5m fork **right** and continue out to the road. Turn **right** on the road downhill for nearly 100m to where the road curves left between steel crash barriers. Keep to a narrow path just to the **right** of the crash barrier, **parallel** to the road. In 20m, turn **right** on path leading uphill into woods.





2 The path climbs and winds through thick forest with a deep gully developing down on your right. In 200m or so, your path goes over a diagonal crossing path coming down from your left. You will be following this forest path for another 1 km. Down below on the right is the Sheepwash Gill stream. The path winds its way on a fairly level course, with patches of mud in wetter seasons that you need to skirt around. 400m after the previous crossing path, your path crosses another path, this time a wide track. (This wide sandy track veers away down to your right to cross the stream but it has now (2018) been fenced off by the FC.)

3 In another 200m or so, you pass another junction on your right with a ford over the stream. As the fingerpost shows, you have joined an official footpath. Ignore the ford and continue straight ahead uphill regardless, with a short two-plank bridge with handrail helping over one of the muddier sections. Finally you see a meadow on your left and a tree plantation ahead as you reach a T-junction with a fingerpost. Turn **right** at the T-junction, passing a small pond on your left, and, in 100m, opposite a small marker post, turn **left** on a nice wide unmarked all-weather sandy forestry path. Your path curves right in stages. Ignore all paths leading off until, in nearly 1 km, you reach a T-junction with a very wide straight track known as *Mick Mills Race*.

This wide path is exactly one mile long and a legend is associated with it. Mick Mills was one of the local smugglers. One day he met the Devil who told him his time was up and he must surrender his soul. Mick Mills cunningly challenged the Devil to a race along this long straight track, the prize being that he could keep his soul. Needless to say, Mick Mills won the race. (He had probably included some illicit substance in his contraband.)

Decision point. If you would like to shorten the walk to **4¼ km=2.7 miles**, missing the refreshments at Colgate, do as follows. Turn **right** on the wide track and, in just 20m, opposite a 4-way fingerpost, turn **left** on a wide path. In 40m, fork **right** on a narrow path which immediately curves right. Your path winds its way through trees to meet, after 200m, a wide grassy crossing track. Cross straight over to a narrow path opposite. Now resume the walk from section 7.

4 Turn **left** on this wide straight track. At the end of the straight section, the path bends right, opposite *Forest Grange* which is private, and passes a fingerpost [May 2020: gone?] in a location mysteriously known as *Knights Strength*, where there is a fine wooden bench seat carved in the form of a dragon and bearing a plaque inscribed *Lord Louie*. Here a number of wide paths meet, but stay on the main track which continues in the same direction. In another 700m, you come out past a barrier and a cottage onto a tarmac stretch, and finally out to a road. Turn **right** on the road and proceed for 500m to reach the *Dragon* pub.

5  *The Dragon in Colgate is the star of a pub walk in this series and you will find more information there.* After refreshment, go down the private lane, Springfield Lane, that runs beside the pub and its car park. Where the lane shortly bends right, stay on it, with a house and fields on your left, woodland on your right. Ignore a footpath on the left, soon passing barns on the left and right, where the lane becomes gravel.  *You now have good views ahead to the left.* You pass *Upper Warren Farm* and *Springfield Farm*, with their peacocks, and a new house under development (2017). 50m before the gates to *Old Springfield Farm*, at a 3-way fingerpost, go **right** over a



stile (*do not miss this stile!* the fingerpost is hidden behind vegetation and cannot be seen until after the stile is passed, and the stile itself is not very conspicuous).

- 6 The path runs near the fence on the left and crosses a long 2-plank bridge over the watery terrain. There are some low branches here (take care!) and a number of springs and you may find the ground squishy: it will improve soon. Another small bridge [2017: with a broken plank, take care!] leads on to a fingerpost. Go **left** over a (very high) stile here and along the right-hand side of a meadow through trees, with the Frenchbridge Gill flowing free on your left. In the corner, go over a stile (a second stile is now redundant) to join a wide path and turn **right**. In 100m, at a T-junction, turn **left** on a wide track popular with riders (and hence somewhat churned up, but only for a short spell). Ignore a marked footpath on the right and, after a further 150m on the track, turn **right** uphill on a wide unmarked forestry track. Avoid a very small path just before the top but, when you are at the very top of the slope, turn **left** on a narrow but distinct crossing path.

- 7 In 300m, the path goes over a crossing path and becomes pleasantly grassy and sandy. After another 300m of a more-or-less straight level hike, you reach a T-junction. Turn **right** here on a wide track to reach a T-junction in 70m with that straight very wide track *Mick Mills Race*. Turn **left** on this track and immediately keep **right** as it bends right, avoiding a wide path straight ahead. Follow this easy wide highway, probably meeting many families with their children and dogs, for 1km where you are suddenly back at the Roosthole car park where the walk began.

If you love this area and want to try a more challenging walk, try the 15-mile St Leonard's Forest walk in this series starting in Slaughtam.

Getting there

By car: if coming from Horsham, take the St Leonard's Road and turn off, at a signpost for Doomsday Green, on Hammerpond Road. The car park is 1¼ miles=2 km on the left.

If coming from the north on the A23 (M23), come off at Handcross (also signed for *Nymans Garden*), follow the Handcross Road (direction *Horsham*) west and turn right after 1½ miles at Ashfold Crossways (just before the *Wheatsheaf*) signposted *Bucks Head*. The car park is 2 scenic miles on the right.

If coming from the south on the A23, do as above, but come off at Slaughtam and follow the Staplefield Road straight through Ashfold Crossways.

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