



West Hoathly, Balcombe & Bluebell Railway *Steam and Seed Bank*

Distance: 18 km=11 miles
or 2 walks of 9½ km=6 miles and 12½ km=8 miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: West Sussex

Date written: 8-jul-2010

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Date revised: 6-jun-2015

Refreshments: Ardingly, West Hoathly

Last update: 1-feb-2026

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

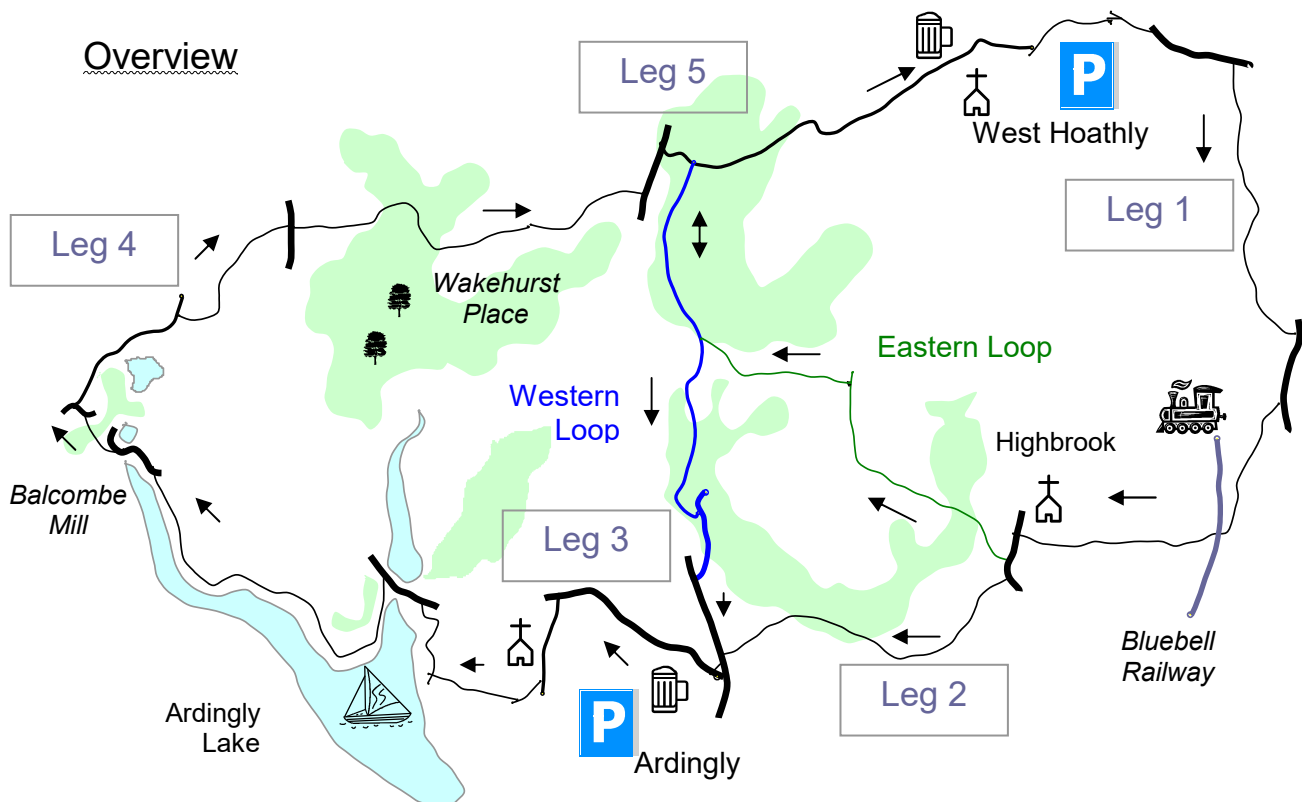
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Lakes, village, woodland, hills, botanical garden, steam railway

In Brief

This circular walk between small Sussex towns is notable by its sheer variety. It runs close to the famous Bluebell steam Railway, the spectacular lake at Ardingly and the botanic gardens of Wakehurst Place.



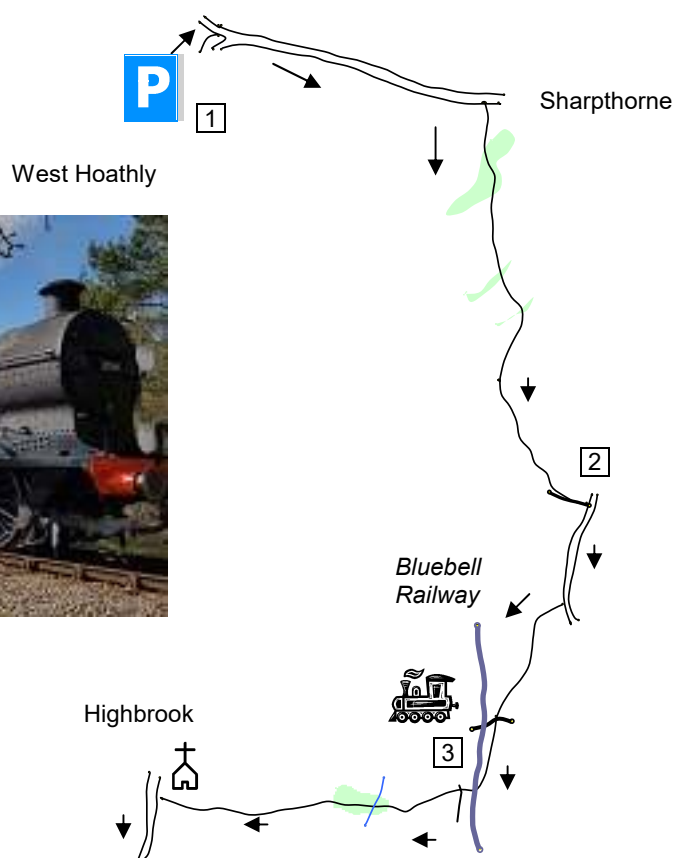
This walk can be split into two separate circular walks: the **West Hoathly-Bluebell Railway** ("Eastern Loop") walk (10 km=6½ miles) and the **Ardingly-Wakehurst** ("Western Loop") walk (12½ km=8 miles).



There are some small patches of nettles and thistles so shorts are inadvisable. The terrain is easy, so good walking shoes are adequate, except perhaps in the wetter seasons. The stile count is moderate around West Hoathly and better later. Your dog can certainly come on the Western Loop – and on the Eastern Loop too if he is not too large because some stiles have only a gap to squeeze through.

The main walk begins at the **Finche Field** car park in West Hoathly, nearest postcode **RH19 4SJ**, grid ref TQ 366 326, www.w3w.co/thud.trouser.charge. The Ardingly - Wakehurst walk begins in Ardingly, **RH17 6UA** (begin Leg 3). For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Leg 1: West Hoathly to Highbrook 4 km=2½ miles



- 1** From near the entrance to the car park, take the concrete footpath beside some allotments. Turn **right** at the bottom on the main road into Sharpthorne. *As you pass a small grassy area on the left, notice the ventilator chimney of the Bluebell Railway that runs in a tunnel here.* Soon on the right is a garage and small supermarket. Turn **right** here onto a footpath just before the Sharpthorne Club and turn tight **left** at the corner of the building down a narrow fenced path that leads through a modern kissing gate out into a grassy open hillside. *Suddenly a magnificent view has sprung up like a jack-in-the-box and you have a good view of the South Downs and the gentler hills of the Weald of Sussex.* You are on part of the Sussex Border Path (SBP), the part that



runs down to the sea between East and West Sussex. Up on the right is the distinct spire of Highbrook church, your next destination. Go along the left-hand side of the meadow and, at the end, through a band of trees via a small metal gate. Go straight across the next meadow in the same direction and, on the other side, go through a small metal gate and over a stile in a line of trees. You are now in a long meadow at one corner of Moon's Wood. Go diagonally **right** uphill past a lonely hornbeam. In the far top corner, go over a stile on the left, straight across the middle of the next meadow and through a small metal gate in the hedge [Feb 2022: there is an old *footpath closed* sign on the gate but it appears to be redundant as the path continues to be well used and there is no similar sign on the wooden gate at the end of this section near Claverdale]. Go diagonally **right** across the centre of the next meadow and, in the far corner, go past an unneeded stile and through a small wooden gate in the hedge. Keep right round the fenced-off edge of the meadow and, at the end of the next meadow, go through a small wooden gate. Turn **left** on a track by Claverdale.

- 2 At the end of the track, turn **right** on a road. The path on the left just before *Tanyard* is the SBP but this route leaves it here. Stay on the road and turn **right** by *Vaex End* on a concrete track and grassy path. The path turns **left** at the end and **right** over a stile. Go along the left-hand side of the meadow and through a metal gate in the corner, then along the left-hand side of the next meadow, over a stile, along a fenced path beside the next meadow and through a (usually open) metal gate. The bridge on the right crosses the Bluebell Railway but this route stays on the same side, through a metal gate (or over a stile) and along a meadow with the railway on the right. Half way down, turn **right** over a stile and carefully across the railway. If you hear a hoot, this indicates that a train will pass by soon and it may be worth waiting a while. During the summer a train should pass six times a day at 11.20, 12.20, 1.50, 2.50, 4.05, 5.05.

The Bluebell Railway is one of many heritage lines in Britain. It runs on a part of the old East Grinstead-Lewes line that was axed in the 1950s and is operated by volunteers. It runs from East Grinstead to Sheffield Park with a stop at Kingscote and Horsted Keynes. The company maintains a large number of steam locomotives as well as the stations and lines with all their original paraphernalia, decorations and advertisements. As you may imagine, the railway has made star appearances in films and TV.

- 3 Go over a stile ahead, ignoring a path left that runs beside the railway. [2017: one walker reports an over-friendly dog.] Pass a small pond, go through a large metal gate (or over a stile), across a sheep pasture and over a stile in the bottom left. The path goes down steps in a beautiful wide band of woodland in a stream valley and over a bridge. It then goes through a metal gate, up the right-hand side of a meadow, over a stile (or through a metal gate: untie/retie the string), beside another meadow and, at the top, through a gate and along an enclosed path that becomes a driveway. On the right is Highbrook church and on the left a well restored smokery.

All Saints Church, Highbrook is a late-Victorian construction built from local sandstone, its spire visible from all around. Each of the windows inside contains a fine piece of Victorian stained glass and the all-round effect is deeply affecting. The church also provides a do-it-yourself hot drinks service.

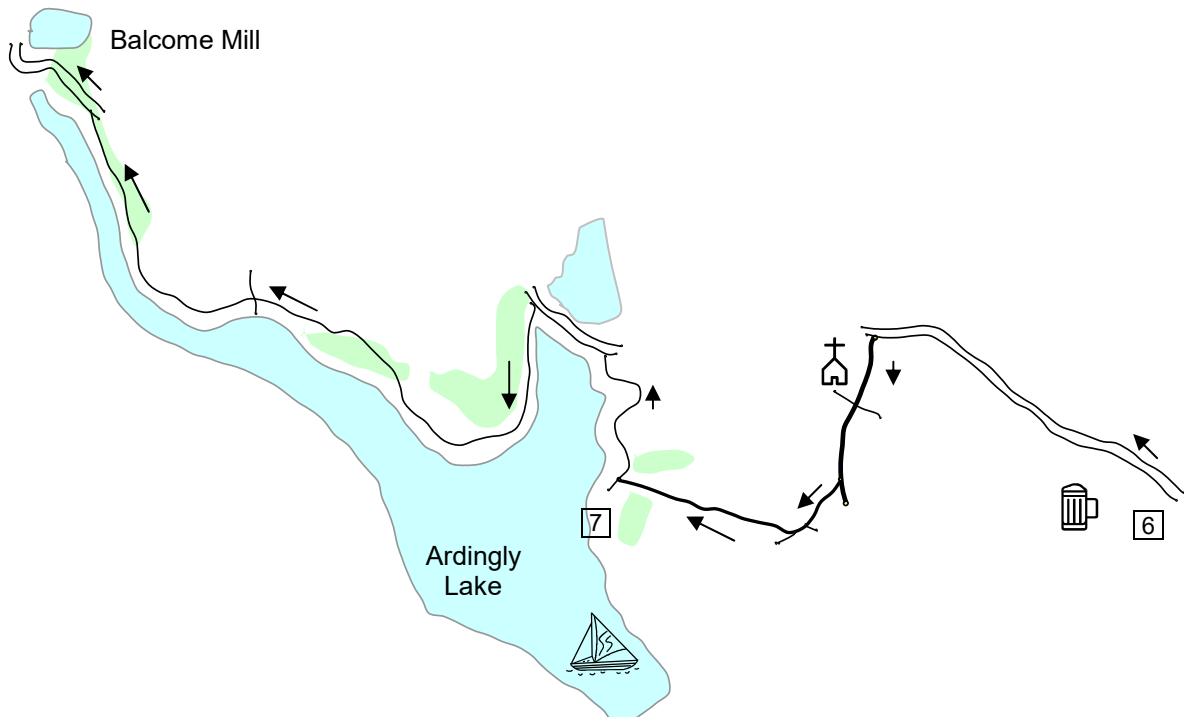
Just past the church look out for the repurposed red telephone kiosk containing a Huggett & Browne mechanical contraption (a kind of "breakfast machine"). Turn **left** on the road. In 100m, just before Hammenden Farm, on the right is a stile and footpath signpost.



The fine old Norman Church of St. Peter, which is usually open, contains some of the most splendid medieval brass memorials anywhere in England, the most important being the Culpeper brasses. The brasses can be viewed in the chancel floor or sanctuary area.



Keep along the lane with the church on your right, ignoring footpaths right and left. After 350m, fork **right** on the lane by *Old Knowle Cottage* and follow the lane round to a junction of tracks by a 4-way fingerpost. From this high vantage point, through gaps on the left, you have magnificent views of the lake. There are usually a whole flotilla of colourful sailing dinghies on the water. Continue straight ahead on a farm track. Where the lake comes clearly into view, fork **left**. Go down the right-hand side of a pasture, as directed by a marker-post, later going past an old collapsed stile and a (grounded) 2-arm fingerpost. Continue down to the waterside via a stile to arrive at a 3-arm fingerpost. Turn **right** here.



Ardingly Reservoir (it's called a 'lake' in this text because that's more poetic) is a massive centre for outdoor activities, not to mention its vital use as a source of fresh water. It covers over 80 hectares and was created during 1976-79 by damming the River Ouse.

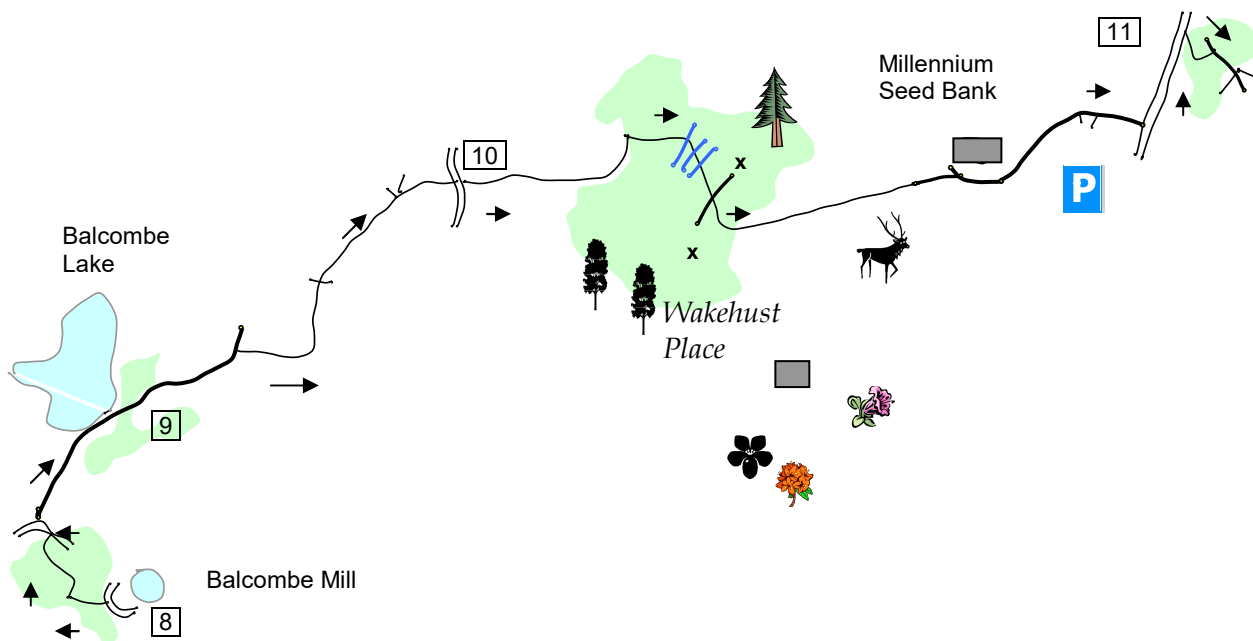
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After a stroll along the waterside you find yourself on a fenced path that snakes round to the road via a metal kissing-gate. Turn **left** on the road. Where the road approaches the dry land, take the first path sharp **left**, through a wooden gate, along the waterside again. You are now going south and have the lake and dam and sailing club in view. The path gradually turns north-west sometimes close to the bank, at other times hidden from it in woodland. A short muddy section can be skipped using the field on your right. At a junction, ignore a bridleway right, later going continue through some fine woods. After 2 km total, the path comes up through a small wooden gate out to a road. Turn **left** on the road, Mill Lane. In 250m, the road leads to Balcombe Mill an unexpected delight.

Balcombe Mill, situated on what is now the top of the lake, was for centuries one of the most efficient water mills in the South East, producing four sacks of flour a day. Today the original mill house looks much as it did in the working days with a few other equally appealing properties along the waterside. This site is one of the joys of this region.

Leg 4: Balcombe Mill to Chiddinglye Wood 4½ km=3 miles

- 8 After passing a white boarded house and just before reaching the mill house, turn left onto a footpath that rises steeply up steps. Halfway up there is a seat by a floor made from a millstone. *On the left there is a rock formation of a type so common in these regions.* At the top, go through a swing-gate into a large meadow and immediately turn **right** at a 3-arm fingerpost into woodland of tall ash, beech and poplar. On reaching a road, turn **left**. In 70m, at a junction, turn **right** on a drive to Woodward's Farm.



- 9 As you go over a weir, on your left is the wide expanse of Balcombe Lake. Keep straight ahead on the drive, avoiding several paths off. About 400m after the lake, just after the drive curves left, turn **right** over a stile with two yellow arrows. *Don't miss this turning!* Go along the **left**-hand side of a field and, at the end, by a 2-arm fingerpost, turn **left** over a stile. Continue straight ahead across the length of the pasture. In the far right corner, turn **right** on a long chalk farm track and along the **right**-hand side of a crop field. On leaving the field, continue straight ahead for 100m along the track to reach a tarmac lane. Go **right** on the lane for 10m and **left** over a stile.
- 10 Go down the **right**-hand side of a large grassy meadow. At the bottom, by a marker post, wheel **left** along the far side and, in the corner, go past on old redundant wooden gate to experience at once a vast change in atmosphere. You are now in the dark woods of the Ardingly Brook valley, thick with bluebells in late spring. Turn **right** downhill. About halfway down the valley turn **right** again and go steeply downhill (ably assisted by a sturdy wooden railing). At the bottom go over a plank bridge, then another over the fast-flowing brook. Another plank bridge follows, then a boardwalk made out of more planks to keep you dry. Next, go through a kissing gate into the verdant territory of Wakehurst Place next to a tall redwood.



Wakehurst Place belongs to the National Trust and is an extension of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, providing more space for the vast collection. Like its town cousin, it is not only a place of great natural beauty and a banquet for the senses but also a place of plant conservation and research. It boasts being the Trust's most visited property. The hilly landscape makes the gardens highly varied, comprising every kind of terrain and micro-climate, including grouped species from every part of the world, natural woodland, a large water garden, a lake, formal gardens and at the north side trees famously growing from the rocks. There is also the original Elizabethan house.

You need to keep strictly to the footpath through the garden as it is unfenced. [If you wish to visit the gardens you must wait until you reach the entrance.](#) Turn **right**, but in only 10m turn **left** uphill as directed by a yellow arrow. Now go through a small wooden gate and onto a well-worn path, through the centre of the field to Havelock Farm. As the path widens you may see pasture for farmed deer. At the very top of this large field go through a small wooden gate and keep ahead on a track, later a drive. Soon on your left is a large modern building, the *Millennium Seed Bank*.

Kew's Millennium Seed Bank is the largest ex-situ (i.e. away from natural habitats) plant conservation project in the world. Plant life from every part of the world is saved from the threat of extinction and the seeds of plants of most value to the future are conserved. The Seed Bank passed a milestone recently by successfully banking 10% of the world's wild plant species. It is open to visitors.



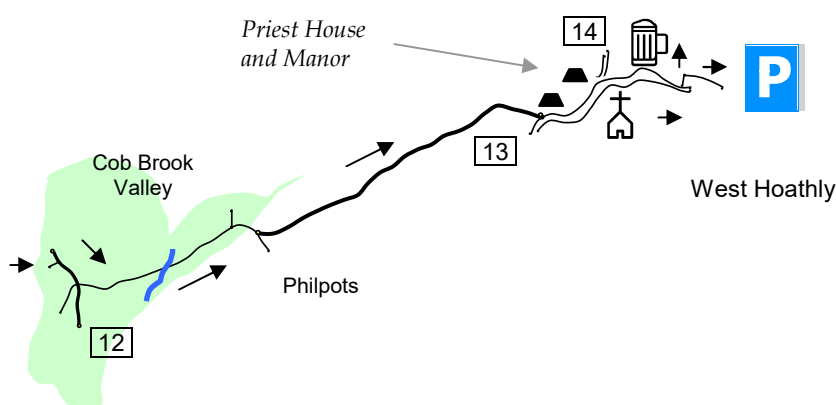
The drive veers left and soon passes the car park on the right. [The teasshop / restaurant, through the car park, should be open without the need to buy a ticket.](#) Continue to the main road and turn **left** on it using the high grassy path.

- 11** In about 250m, just after *Beech Cottage*, cross the road and turn **right** on a bridleway. *Note the sandrock crags on your right.* The bridleway bends **left**, then **right** at a 2-arm fingerpost next to a T-junction with a track. Soon you reach a 4-way junction with a private garden of *Stonehurst* ahead.

Decision point. [If you are doing only the short Western Loop and want to loop back through the woods to Ardingly, jump to the section called Chiddinglye Wood to Ardingly near the end of this text.](#)

To continue the full walk, turn **left** and continue with Leg 5 below.

Leg 5: Chiddinglye Wood to West Hoathly 2½ km=1½ miles



12 The uphill path runs between woodland and a reedy area on the right and into the deep valley of the Cob Brook. *The reeds conceal the waterfalls in the pleasure grounds of Stonehurst. There are also a millpond and two mills. The Cob Brook valley has a microclimate that is mild in winter and moist even in the driest summer. Consequently a wealth of interesting moisture-loving ferns and unusual flowering plants can be found here.* The path rises gently, crosses the stream, then steepens. At the top, by a fingerpost, fork **right**. **If you divert left, you reach some notable sandrock crags in about 300m.** The path comes up to Philpots Farm. Go straight ahead and then fork **left** at a grey residential block, by a fingerpost, onto a drive. The drive goes past Philpots Manor, now a Rudolf Steiner special education school.

13 After nearly 1 km, the drive bends right and enters West Hoathly at a bend in the road. Go straight ahead through the village past some remarkable buildings. On your left are the *Priest House* and the *Manor House*.

The Manor House was built in 1627 as a Dower House for nearby Gravetye Manor. The much older Priest House is an early 15th-century timber-framed hall-house in a traditional cottage garden. West Hoathly was administered from the Priory in Lewes and the Priest House was built as a kind of local estate office but in 1524 it became a family home. When Henry VIII seized Lewes Priory's property, the estate was given to Thomas Cromwell and, after his fall, to Anne of Cleves (ironically, as she was the reason for his fall). The Priest House was originally an open hall, with a few small rooms off, an open hearth and a thatched roof. In 1560 the Priest House and the estate were sold to new owners who virtually rebuilt the house in the 1600s. After centuries of neglect, it was bought in 1905 by John Godwin King of nearby Stonelands who restored the building and opened it to the public. In 1935 he presented the house to the Sussex Archaeological Society. The House still contains a wonderfully varied collection of 17th- and 18th-century rustic furniture, together with ironwork, embroidery and ornaments displayed in furnished rooms. The garden has a small formal herb garden containing over 170 types of herb. The house is open to the public most days outside the winter months.

On your right, you pass the church with its fine tall pointed spire.

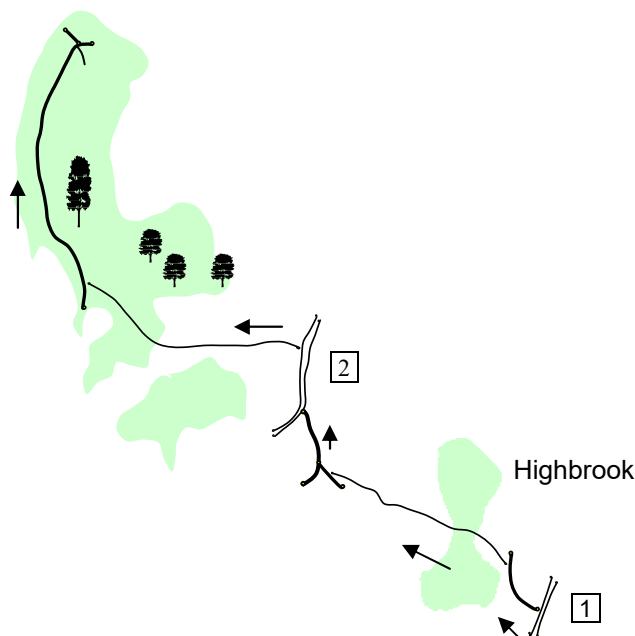
The church of St Margaret of Antioch was founded around 1100, the tower appearing in the 1400s. Inside are an ancient font, a possibly 12th-century wooden chest, and a 17th-century pendulum clock.

Ahead is *The Cat Inn* a free house and restaurant dating from the 1500s and offering a notable choice of real ales.

- 14 Turn **right** in front of *The Cat Inn* and follow the road as it curves left and right. As you come to some railings on the left, go **left** up some steps and **right** at the top on a tarmac path, back to the car park where the walk began.

Highbrook to Chiddinglye Wood 3 km=2 miles

Take this short cut if you are doing only the **Eastern Loop**.

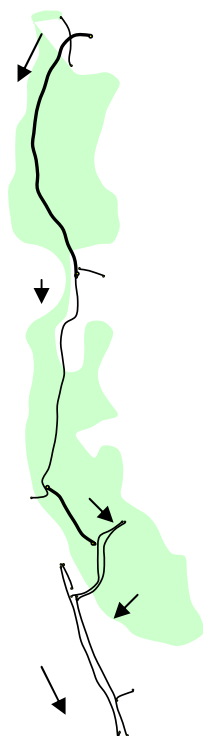


- 1 Turn **right** at the footpath sign, through a large metal gate, on a concrete track through an untidy part of Hammenden Farm and, at a fingerpost, proceed down a track, through a metal gate and immediately **left** down the pasture and under wires. Go through a small wooden gate into woodland, over a bridge and up steps. The path then leads you over a stile beside a small wooden gate, along the left-hand side of a large meadow and through a gap next to an unneeded stile and metal gate. You then traverse the left-hand side of a pasture and, at the far end, go over a stile and veer **right** on a drive opposite Holly Farmhouse, past two fine old cottages. Next, veer **right** at a junction onto a wide drive and, at the end, veer **right** again, this time on a country lane.
- 2 Just after the entrance to Ludwell House, turn **left** through a metal gate, go along the right-hand side of a meadow, through an open gate and down the next meadow. In 20m, at the corner of the meadow, keep ahead in a faint line across the centre. Continue down the long meadow, veering slightly left, and at the other side go round the corner of the wood to find a wooden gate [2018: broken and on the ground] beside a larger metal gate. Through the gate, go down into woodland, over a sturdy bridge crossing the full-flowing stream and then uphill. On meeting a track at a T-junction by a fingerpost, turn **right**. In 30m, avoid a right fork which is private and keep to the lovely wide level path. The path passes several tall redwoods. It then goes downhill to a 4-way junction with a private garden on the right.

The walk now resumes from **Leg 5**, section [12](#).

Chiddinglye Wood to Ardingly 3 km=2 miles

Take this short cut if you are doing only the **Western Loop**.

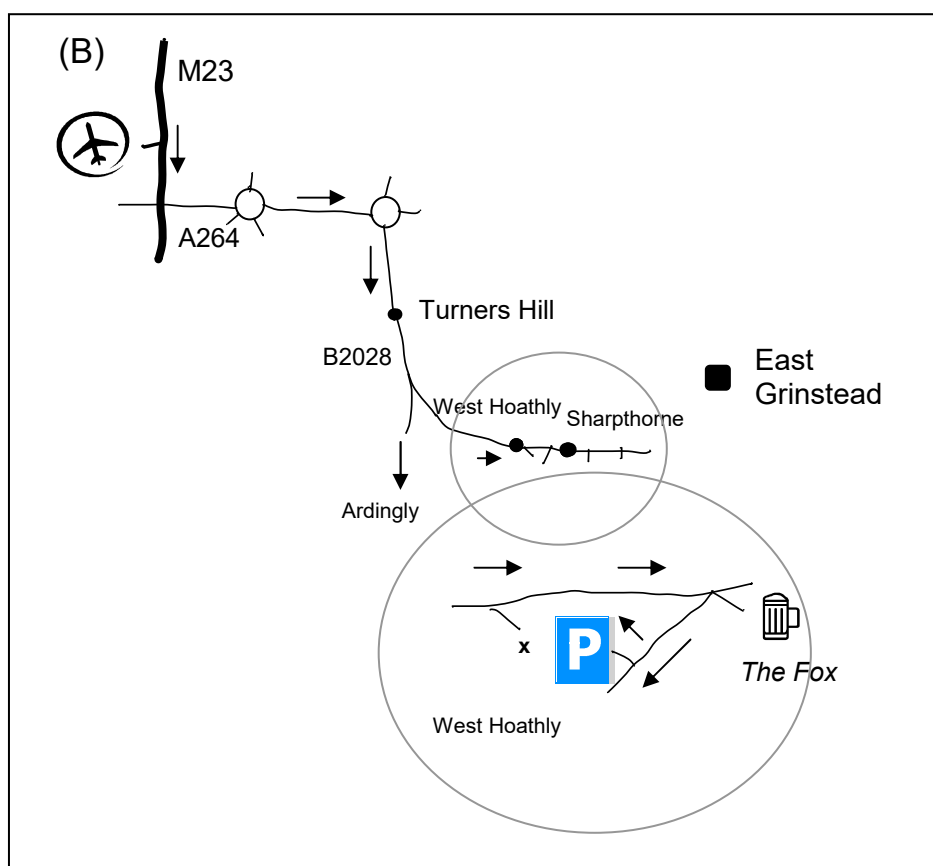


Turn **right** at the 4-way junction uphill. This lovely wide path passes several redwoods. When the path finally comes out into the open, ignore a path left at a fingerpost. Keep ahead on a narrow enclosed path that skirts the pastures of *Fulling Mill Farm*. The vegetation changes abruptly as the path re-enters a woodland of tall conifers. Just as a house comes into view on the right, turn **left** by a new fingerpost on another path [don't miss this unobvious turn!]. (If you are a bit tired and want to avoid another down and up, you can keep **right** to the road, cross it and turn **left** on the wide grass verge into the village.) The bridleway follows a route steeply down with a descending slope on your left. At the end, turn **right** on Cob Lane uphill. The lane bends right to a road. Turn **left** on the road. Soon you reach the houses of Ardingly and continue to the point where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: The full walk starts at the **Finche Field** car park in West Hoathly. If you are coming from the **west** side of the M25, with easy access to the M23, the following route is recommended (see the Map). 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 the first right turn in West Hoathly (signed for the Priest's House). On reaching the *Fox Inn*, turn sharp right. The car park is a little further on the right. If you are approaching from Sharpthorne, fork left at the *Fox Inn*.

For Ardingly and the Western Loop, ignore the left turn after Turner's Hill.



By bus: No. 84 from East Grinstead or Crawley to West Hoathly, except Sun. No. 272 from Crawley, Burgess Hill or Haywards Heath to Ardingly. Check the timetables.

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