



Seven Sisters, Forest and Villages

Distance: 17½ km=11 miles or 15½ km= 9½ miles moderate walking

Region: East Sussex

Date written: 25-jun-2010 & 15-jun-2015

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Refreshments: Cuckmere Haven, Birling Gap, East Dean, Jevington

Map: Explorer 123 (Eastbourne)

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

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Downland, villages, river, seashore, high cliffs, woodland

In Brief

For some people, a walk over the Seven Sisters is a lifetime adventure. This coastal and woodland walk over the those famous chalk cliffs also goes through the great Friston Forest. Along the way you visit some historic downland villages with a iconic pub stop at East Dean. The route over the Seven Sisters will tax your legs because of the up-and-down nature as well as the distance itself. Typical of this site, the walk takes you on a long hidden woodland path.



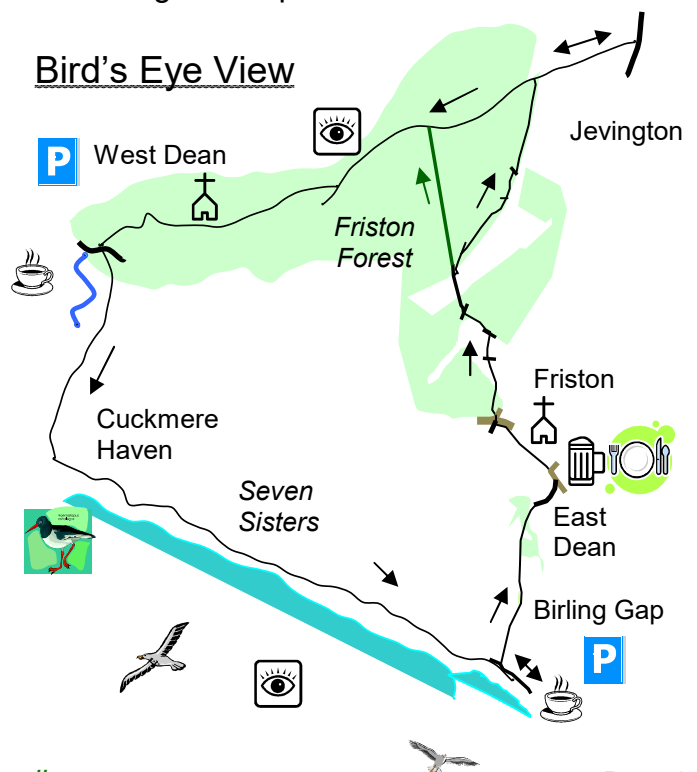
There were some patches of mud, nettles and brambles along the forest paths in the wet summer of 2021. (See intro to Leg 3 Section 6.) Otherwise the paths are dry, so all-in-all any kind of clothing and footwear should be fine. There are three stiles on the route which might be a problem for a very large dog.



This walk is also the beginning of the **Seven Sisters – Beachy Head Big Zipper**.

The walk begins at the free car park on the west end of the village of **Jevington**, postcode **BN26 5QB** (23 – not 2 hours limit! someone removed the “3” and Wealden Council are awaiting delivery of new number “3”s). The car park is small, so arrive early! Other possible starting points are Cuckmere Haven (pay and display) and Birling Gap (pay and display), which save 2 km=1½ miles. For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

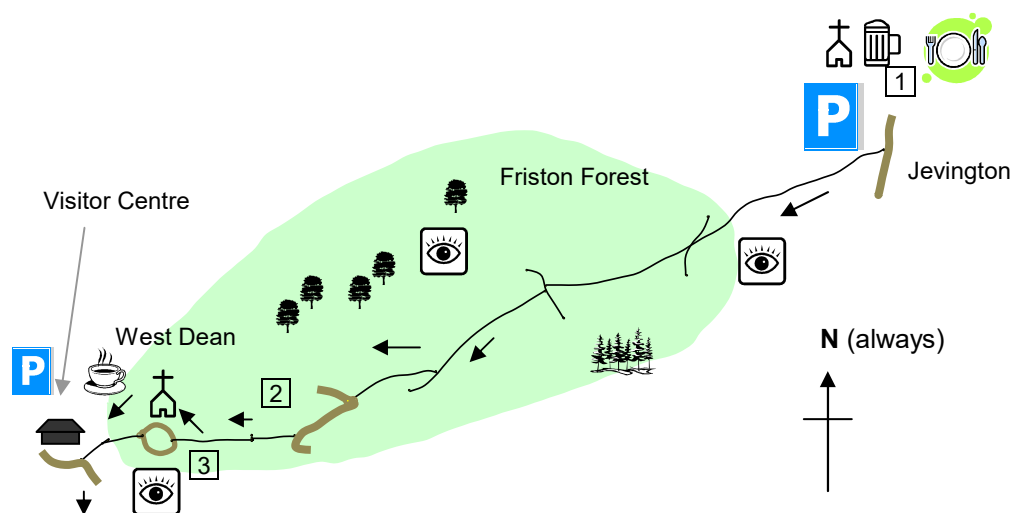
Bird's Eye View



The Walk

The village of Jevington is a delightful place to start a walk with its cottages of local stone. The name means 'homestead of the people of Geoffa'. The Eight Bells pub / restaurant is nearer the east of the village. If you decide to walk from there to the church of St Andrews, you pass through an unusual wooden swivel gate. A rare elm grows in the grounds.

Leg 1: Jevington to Cuckmere Haven 7 km=4 miles



- 1 Turn **right** out of the car park, without going back to the road, onto a chalky path indicated by a blue arrow. Continue straight across by some gates, uphill. After 1 km, at the top, go over a crossing path and keep straight ahead through Friston Forest. **(a)** After 200m or so, your path crosses a track obliquely. 600m after that, ignore a right fork for *Charleston Bottom* [2016: not marked?]. 200m later, the path goes over a crossing path with a signpost [2016: missing?]. **(b)** 700m after the crossing, the path forks. Ignore the wide but rougher path left and take the **right** fork, the grassy and narrower one. Just before you reach a gate, look ahead to the right and you will see a White Horse on the downs.

The Litlington White Horse was cut in 1924 by three men overnight so as to startle the locals. East Sussex County Council re-scoured it in the 1980s and changed the position of the legs from standing to prancing to help prevent slippage of the chalk. It was acquired by the National Trust in 1991.

Go through the gate and cross a grassy area with fine views to the right over the South Downs. Go through a gate and take a grassy path downhill. On meeting a track at a hairpin, keep straight ahead. You are on part of the Forest Walk.

- 2 Where the track begins to curve left uphill, leave it and take the grassy and chalky path that forks **right**. Go past a metal barrier and join a dirt road which soon becomes tarmac. Welcome to the unique village of West Dean! *West Dean Manor* is on the left.

The Saxon village of West Dean was used by Alfred the Great as a site for a palace and naval base. After 1066 the village was acquired by William the Conqueror's half brother Earl Mortain. The Black Death and French raids decimated the village and it was abandoned in the 1400s. In the 1800s the area was used by smugglers, especially the Alfriston gang.

- 3 Take the next road on the **right**, going past the church and the parsonage.

The 12th-century West Dean church of All Saints, with Saxon traces, is the most ancient in the Cuckmere Valley. The unusually squat gabled spire looks rather like a monk's cowl. The next-door Old Parsonage is the oldest priest's house in England still in occupation.

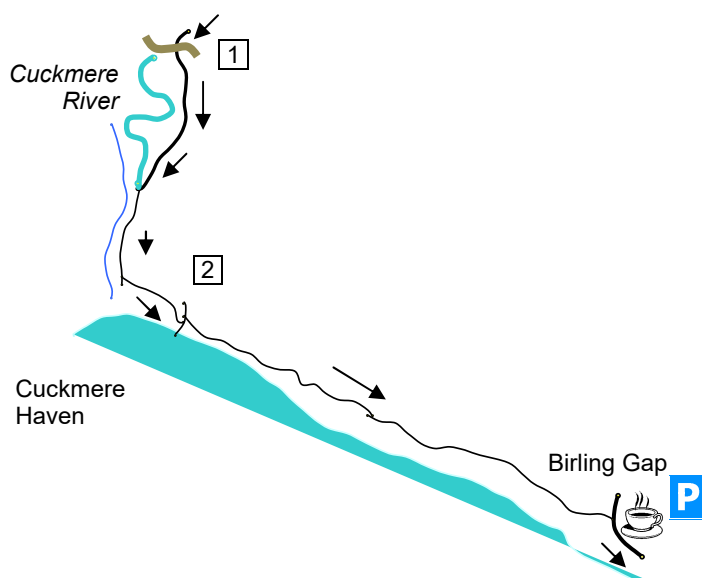
Follow the road round to the left and at a road junction keep ahead on a stony path up some steps. [Feb 2023: steps were under repair; instead, walker took the right-hand well-made path just before the bottom of the steps, at the crossing path; it also goes to the Visitor Centre, a little longer than the stepped route.] This is a long procession of steps, numbering more than 200, but the reward is great. At the top, keep ahead to a wall and pass through the gap. Below you is an amazing sight: the Cuckmere River with its wide meanderings down to the distant sea. There are two seats here in case you need to rest to take it all in. After admiring the view, go ahead down the grass and, at the bottom, go through a wooden gate to the main A259 road. The Seven Sisters Visitor Centre is on the right.



The Visitor Centre of the Seven Sisters Country Park is a converted 18th-century barn containing models, maps, pictures and artifacts connected with this area and its wildlife. There is a shop, a small restaurant / teahouse (the Exceat Farmhouse) and a garden (the Europe Garden). The car park (NB) is pay-and-display.

There is a wide choice of routes from here but the text gives you the best chance to see wildlife, the cliffs from below and, if you like, dip a toe in the ocean.

Leg 2: Cuckmere Haven to Birling Gap 4½ km=2½ miles



- 1 Cross the main road, go through a gate by a cattle grid and keep ahead on a concrete path. After about 1 km take a footpath **right** that runs between two lagoons. *There is so much wildlife to see or hear from the waterside: you are almost certain to see heron and different geese, with a good chance for oyster-catchers, fulmar and redshank.* The path goes through a wooden gate and runs between the river and the shallows. Finally, as it nears the beach, turn **left**. You can use the brassica-strewn beach or, more comfortably, the path through the shrubs, avoiding the higher ridges where there are nesting birds. On reaching a fence by a noticeboard, go through a gap and go steeply up.

- 2 From this point, your route is self-guided and you are likely to be among many other trippers and hikers all taking the same obvious route to Birling Gap and onwards to Beachy Head. The terrain is undulating and rather strenuous and there always seem to be more than seven sisters to conquer. The Belle Tout lighthouse that you can see in the distance is *after* Birling Gap, your next rest spot. After a stile you join the South Downs Way (SDW). A National Trust sign indicates *Crowlink*, an isolated village inland from your route. Later there is a ladder stile and a commemorative monument and finally you reach Birling Gap where you meet a track at a 3-way fingerpost. Unless you parked in Birling Gap, your route from here is sharp **left** on the track, resuming at point (c) in the next section. But first you will want to turn **right** down past bungalows to the facilities and a welcome respite.

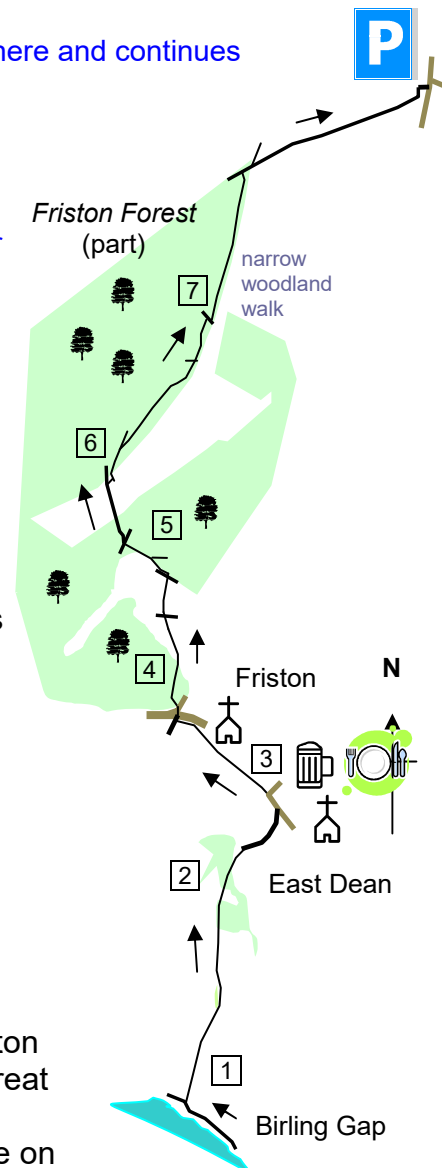


Birling Gap is a coastal hamlet owned by the National Trust. Erosion has removed some of the fishermen's cottages dating from 1878 and rendered others uninhabitable. The café / tea room was once a bit scruffy but it has now been modernised. There is a staircase leading down to the award-winning pebble beach from which you can take good photos of the Seven Sisters cliffs. Beware at high tide!

The **Seven Sisters – Beachy Head Big Zipper** leaves here and continues from Leg 2 of the Beachy Head walk.

Leg 3: Birling Gap to Jevington 6½ km=4 miles

- 1 If you did not park in Birling Gap, the first part retraces your steps back to the 3-way fingerpost. With your back to the sea, turn **left** on a track past bungalows, then uphill on a stony track. At the end, go through a large (open) wooden gate, quickly reaching a 3-way fingerpost. Keep straight ahead, thus leaving the SDW. (c) Go through a wooden gate, past a NT sign for *Went Hill*, onto an open sheep pasture. Go up the right-hand side and through a small wooden gate onto a very large sloping hillside with more sheep. There is a wide grassy path ahead, but the best way is to diverge a fraction to the right over the rough grass, aiming just to the right of some thorn bushes visible up ahead. When you have passed them, aim for a hut with a pink roof, passing to the left of it. You pass an electric sheep fence (2021) which corrals you through a metal gate. Keep straight on along a very faint path (avoiding the wide curving path). Continue, staying near the trees on your right, at the edge of the hillside. Soon you will see a waymarker post.
- 2 Fork **right** at the marker post on a narrow sandy path through woods with the villages of East Dean and Friston spread out below, soon passing a bench seat with a great view. Continue downhill on a straight path shaded by hawthorn. Your path takes you through a wooden gate on a narrow path beside woodland on your left, then out through a wooden gate onto open pasture. Keep straight



on by a flint wall to go through a large metal gate and keep ahead on a tarmac lane, passing *Underhill House*, coming out to a junction by the village green in East Dean. *An off-piste diversion very sharp right here will take you to East Dean church, definitely worth a visit.* There are two restaurants in the street. *On the left-hand side of the green a blue plaque identifies the house where Sherlock Holmes spent his last years as a bee keeper.* The *Hikers Rest* coffee and gift shop is in the right-hand corner. The big attraction on the green must be the *Tiger Inn*, the pride of Beachy Head.



This 16th-century inn speaks for itself even before you arrive – the location could not be more perfect. You will have competition from the less hardy types who use the ample car park next door. The lunch menu is simple and tasty, the deep plates of soup and the gourmet Tiger burgers being notable. Beer is brewed next door, in the Beachy Head Brewery who produce Original, South Downs and LightHouse ales and a rather alarming brew called ‘Legless Rambler’. In case you can’t stagger on, the Tiger has five bedrooms.

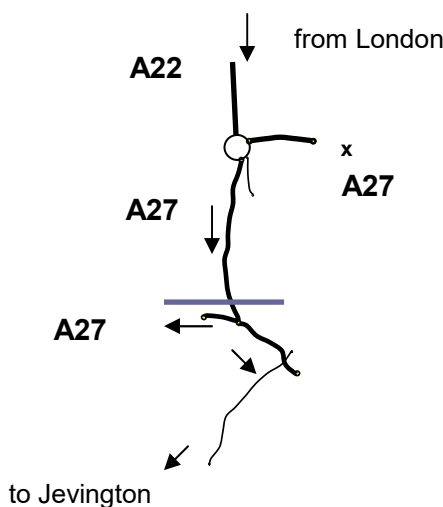
- 3 Follow the road to a bend and here go straight ahead up a concrete drive, through a wooden gate by a NT sign for *Hobb’s Eares*. Ahead now is the long sweep of the green-swathed valley of buttercups ahead – a stunning picture. On reaching the top, go through a wooden swing gate, beside a wooden fence and through another swing gate into the churchyard of Friston Church of St Mary the Virgin. *This little 11th-century church is definitely worth a visit, with so many features from various times in history; this church was completely remodelled – in the 14th century!* Exit the churchyard through the swivel gate. Ahead is *Friston Pond*, beautifully restored in 2013. Turn **right** on the lane, carefully cross the main road and veer slightly left on a path across a triangle of grass. Cross a side road to enter the woods by a post with a yellow arrow [Jun 2021: missing]. Go through a small metal gate and immediately turn **right** on a woodland path.
- 4 Your path descends and goes down two flights of steps. Go over a (rather dog-unfriendly) stile and follow a diagonal path down a sheep pasture. When you reach the bottom corner by a flint wall, go **right** through a large wooden gate (or over a stile), cross a tarmac drive and go up six steps into a sheep pasture within the walls of *Friston Place*. Cross the pasture diagonally left and, at the other side, go through a small wooden gate in the wall. Go down three steps and cross a tarmac drive to a path which immediately bends left, parallel to the drive.
- 5 Soon a wider path joins from the right. Continue uphill to meet a wide crossing path with a metal barrier on your right. Cross straight over, veering right, uphill. Your path emerges from the woods onto the open downs. Go straight ahead over the hill on a faint path. At the top, you reach the edge of the trees of Friston Forest. **Leave** the bridleway here, which heads straight into the forest. (If you did *not* start in Jevington, it is possible to shorten the woodland trail here, without missing the views by doing the *Friston Forest Direct* route near the end of this text.) Instead, turn **right**, staying on the open hillside, but only for 25m. Opposite a flat wooden Forestry Commission post, turn **left** on a very narrow path into the deep woods.
- 6 You will be following this narrow path, **just inside the wood**, for 1.7 km. To your right are the open downs. There are parallel paths on the open downs that you can use, as many people do who find long stretches of woodland dreary (and sometimes muddy and nettly) and love the views. The only drawback is that these paths are sometimes used to exercise racehorses and you don’t want to get in their way or risk injury. After 150m on this woodland path, you meet a

Getting there

By car: to get to **Jevington** from the North take the A22. After passing Hailsham, about 5 miles (8km) from Eastbourne, you reach the big roundabout by Polegate Services. Go **straight ahead** at the roundabout, ignoring the major left turn for Eastbourne, on the road signposted *Brighton, Newhaven A27, Lewes, Alfriston, Willingdon*, the Polegate Bypass. Soon the road splits, with the right-hand lane signposted *A27 Brighton Newhaven Lewes*. Keep to the **left** lane as for *Polegate, Willingdon*. The road goes over a railway, curves left, and passes that sharp right turn for the A27. Soon after, you reach a crossroads with traffic lights. Turn **right** on the Wannock Road signposted *Wannock Jevington East Dean*. Follow the road for 4 km = 2½ miles into the village of Jevington. The car park is at the far end of the village on the right, just past the (closed) *Hungry Monk* and two minor roads on the left. It is marked with a white-on-blue **P**.

There are only about 14 places in the car park and it is popular with mountain bikers, so arrive in good time! If it is full, you could park by the church (go back and take first left) or past the *Eight Bells*.

Alternative starting points are Cuckmere Haven Visitor's Centre (pay and display) and Birling Gap.



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