

Medieval landscape

A self-guided walk from Burwash in Sussex



Explore the deeply rural landscape of the High Weald
Encounter ancient woodlands and wildflower-rich meadows
Find out about those who first lived and worked in these ancient forests
Learn how to spot archaeological features and local building styles

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**the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks**



Created in collaboration with





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Cover image: Field patterns and forests © High Weald AONB Partnership

Wealden landscape

Step back in time and discover the High Weald

“Unless a man understands the Weald, he cannot write about the beginnings of England.”

Hilaire Belloc

The High Weald is something of a miraculous survival. While much of the rest of Britain has witnessed huge change in the past 700 years, this intricately folded landscape has kept its character astonishingly intact in so many ways.



The word ‘weald’ comes from an old word meaning ‘wood’ related to the German word ‘Wald’. Trees are the key to so much here, and you’ll see some splendid examples. From the Neolithic period onwards, farmers brought in pigs to graze in the oak woods, and the first settlers must have had a titanic struggle on their hands clearing the forests to create little fields. The trees were used for timber and fuel, as well as heating furnaces for smelting iron from the local iron ore. The Wealden iron industry lasted for many centuries, and its archaeological relics pepper the countryside.

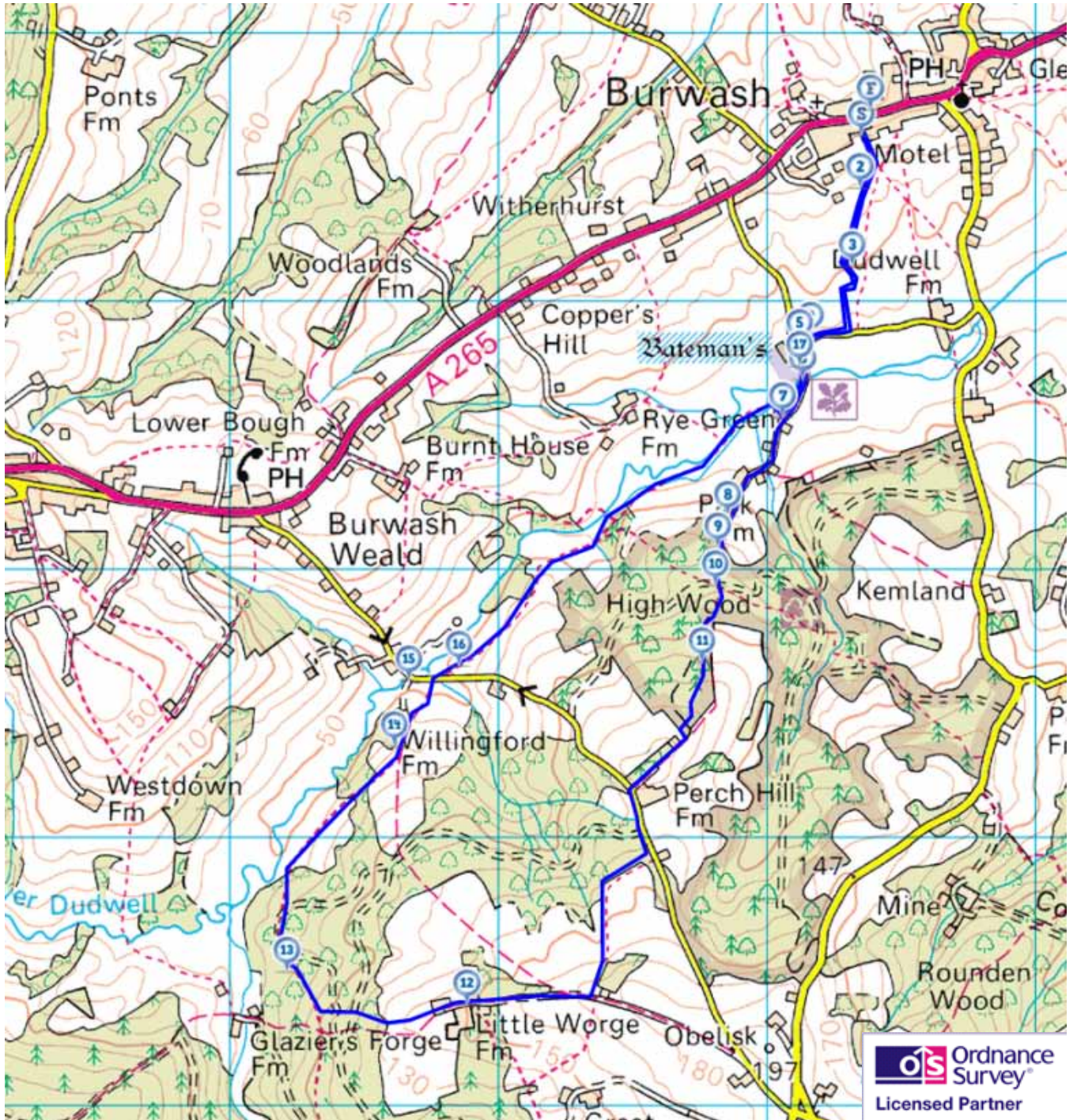


This route reveals many of the classic features of the High Weald, taking you into the picturesque Dudwell Valley, past typical Wealden buildings and through ancient woods, fields and flower meadows.

On the way you’ll find out why this special, evocative landscape has changed so little through the passage of centuries.

Top: Burwash and the Dudwell Valley Bottom: weathervane atop oasthouse © High Weald AONB Partnership

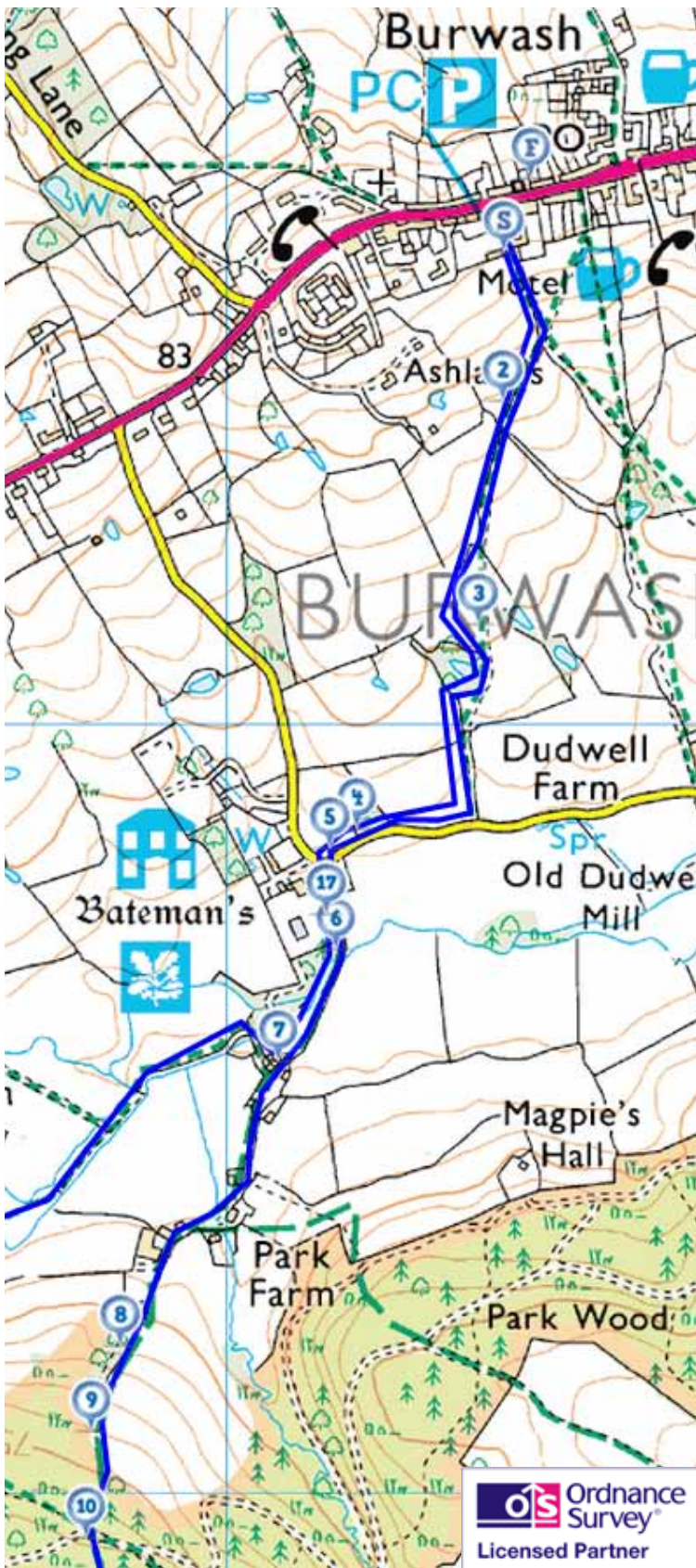
Route map



Practical information

Location	Burwash, East Sussex, Southeast England
Getting there	<p>Car – Burwash is on the A265 between Heathfield and the A21 at Hurst Green.</p> <p>Bus – Burwash is served by Compass Buses service 318 (Heathfield to Hurst Green), 6 services a day on weekdays, 5 services on Saturdays; no Sunday service.</p> <p>Train – The nearest station is Etchingham, 3 miles northeast, from where you can take bus 318 to Burwash.</p>
Start and finish	Footpath behind The Bear Inn, High Street, Burwash TN19 7EX
Walk distance	6 miles
Level	Moderate – some ascents and descents
Terrain	Fields, woodland tracks and paths, quiet lanes and farm tracks
Conditions	Woodland can be muddy after wet weather
Best time to visit	Late spring and early summer are the best times for the wildflower meadow; spring is the best time for bluebells and wood anemones. Avoid trying the walk in wet weather, especially in winter, when the route can be very muddy.
Suitable for	Families; the climbs are fairly gentle but the walk is quite tiring and there are a few stiles
Refreshments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The Bear Inn (start and end)– Rose and Crown (near start and end of route)– The Lime Tree Tearooms (near start and end of route)– Cafe at Bateman's (Stop 17)
Toilets	Car park by Bear Inn (start and end of route)
Places to visit	Bateman's (Rudyard Kipling' house) is owned by the National Trust and is open seasonally (free for National Trust members); Bateman's Lane, TN19 7DS tel: 01435 882302, www.nationaltrust.org.uk/batemans .
Tourist information	Yesterday's World, 89-90 High Street, Battle TN33 0AQ tel: 01797 229049

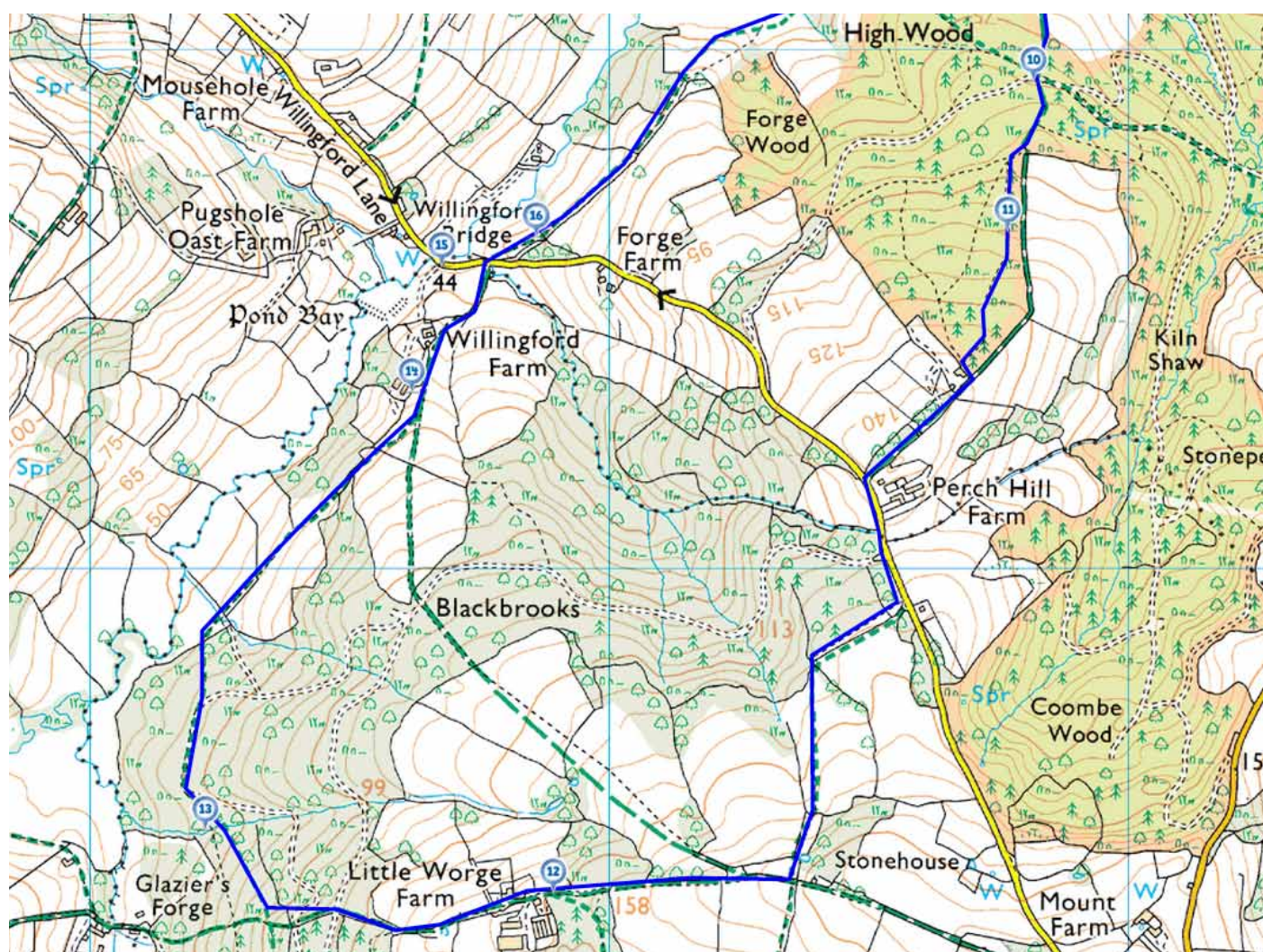
Start and end sections of the route



Stopping points and grid references

- Start.** Footpath behind The Bear Inn, Burwash (TQ675247)
- 2.** Stile into the third field (TQ674244)
 - 3.** Fields near Burwash (TQ673241)
 - 4.** Sandstone quarry near Bateman's (TQ672238)
 - 5.** Oak tree opposite Bateman's (TQ671238)
 - 6.** Bridge over River Dudwell (TQ671237)
 - 7.** Group of buildings just after Bateman's (TQ670235)
 - 8.** Woodland shaw after Park Farm (TQ668232)
 - 9.** Second area of woodland after Park Farm (TQ668230)
 - ...
 - 17.** Bateman's, Bateman's Lane (TQ671238)
- Finish.** Burwash High Street (TQ675247)

Middle section of the route



Stopping points and grid references

- 10.** Sunken woodland track (TQ668227)
- 11** Raised bank inside High Wood (TQ668226)
- 12.** Sugarloaf Oast at Little Worge Farm (TQ658213)
- 13.** Wooden footbridge over gill (TQ653214)
- 14.** Solitary red tiled house (TQ653219)
- 15.** Entrance to Willingford Farm (TQ656226)
- 16** First meadow from the road (TQ658226)

Directions to the start of the walk

From The Bear Inn car park, follow the path to the left of the scout hut. Enter the field for a view of the classic secluded Wealden landscape with the Dudwell Valley below.

1. Welcome to Burwash and the High Weald

Footpath behind The Bear Inn, Burwash (TQ675247)

Welcome to Burwash in the High Weald. From this viewpoint you can begin to appreciate the wonderfully secluded Wealden landscape and the Dudwell Valley below. Yet nestled between the dramatic North and South Downs, the High Weald can sometimes be overlooked.

It's not an easy place to travel across and understand all in one go; you can't see all of it from one grand viewpoint; fly over it at night and it merges into inky darkness compared to the bright lights of much of the rest of the Southeast.

But this area of Southeast England has more elusive qualities: by exploring a small section of it on foot, you'll get a strong sense of its particular features and topography – from its high sandstone ridges to mazes of crooked lanes and ancient sunken tracks used by pig-farmers centuries ago.



Burwash was once the centre of the Wealden iron industry
© Tim Locke



Haymaking in the High Weald
© Caroline Millar

Look closer and you'll encounter a remarkably preserved medieval landscape of small fields lined with hedges and shaws, of ancient oaks and coppiced woodland, of relics of an iron industry that spanned some 1,700 years, and displaying a great wealth of historic building styles.

On the way you'll see some of the easily missed features that make this such a special and evocative landscape that has changed astonishingly little through the passage of centuries.

Rudyard Kipling, whose house you'll pass shortly on this walk, was among numerous writers and artists to hold this kind of rural Wealden scene close to his heart.

This walk has been created in partnership with the High Weald AONB. The High Weald covers 1461 kilometres (564 square miles) at the heart of the Southeast. It was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) by the government in 1983 to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

The area's natural beauty stems from its abundant interconnected ancient woods and hedges; scattered farmsteads and hamlets; narrow, often sunken lanes and paths; rolling hills dissected by steep-sided gill streams; and small, irregular-shaped fields and open heaths. The character of many of these features was established by the 14th century and has survived to the present day. The High Weald is therefore considered to be one of the best surviving medieval landscapes in Northern Europe.



The High Weald (shaded in green) spans parts of West Sussex, East Sussex and Kent
© High Weald AONB Partnership

Directions 1

Continue down the right edge of the field towards a line of trees. At a path junction halfway down the field go right across a plank bridge and through a gate. Carry on along the top edge of two fields and stop at a wooden stile into the third field.

2. Unchanged landscape

Stile into the third field (TQ674244)

In the Domesday survey of 1086 this was the most densely wooded area in England, and a time-traveller from medieval East Sussex would find this a very familiar scene.

The settlement pattern was pretty much then as it is now, with isolated farmsteads and scattered villages, although the larger trading centres came later. By the end of the fourteenth century the landscape would have been much as it is now.

Our medieval time-traveller might notice that there are fewer hedgerows today, some woodland has been felled and that conifers have been planted in places, in contrast to the native broad-leaved species. But compared with much of the rest of fertile southeast England, the High Weald is still relatively uncultivated.

The area's highly distinctive appearance could easily change irreversibly if great care is not exercised to maintain its special character.

Preserving this landscape involves maintaining a working landscape, in particular through farming and the timber industry: managing woodlands and meadows so that wildlife habitats and archaeological features are not lost forever, keeping checks on new buildings in rural sites, and promoting understanding of the area's special qualities with landowners.



Location and density
of ancient woodland in England
© High Weald AONB Partnership



Left: medieval landscape Right: modern landscape
© Alan Marshall - High Weald AONB Partnership

Notice that on the distant skyline you can just see a tall obelisk standing on a ridge. This is The Needle built by John 'Mad Jack' Fuller (1757–1834), the squire of Brightling who erected several eye-catching follies over his estate. Its purpose is unknown but may commemorate Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805.

Jack Fuller commissioned landscape painter J.M.W. Turner to capture the landscape around his estate at Rose Hill (now Brightling Park), creating a (Romantic) record of East Sussex. Fuller is buried in an extraordinary stone pyramid in nearby Brightling churchyard.



Clockwise from top left:
Brightling obelisk;
John 'Mad Jack' Fuller's pyramid gravestone;
'The Vale of Pevensey from Rosehill Park'
by JMW Turner
© High Weald AONB Partnership

Directions 2

Descend the next field diagonally to a signpost in the far corner.

3. Sussex cattle

Fields near Burwash (TQ673241)

Looking out over the fields and the valley, you may see here – and elsewhere on the walk – Sussex cattle. They are distinct for their hides of chocolate-brown colour (officially described as ‘red’), and are thought to be direct descendants from the cattle that inhabited the woods of the High Weald around the time of the Norman Conquest almost a thousand years ago.



Chocolate brown Sussex cattle
© Caroline Millar

These gentle and hardy creatures are ideally suited for grazing grassland on poor-quality soils and in harsh climates – not just in Sussex but also in parts of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Zambia, USA and Canada. With twice as many sweat glands as other European breeds, they are well attuned to hot conditions.

They produce a fine, marbled beef that has come back into fashion in recent years, but were originally valued as much for their milk and as draught oxen – pulling ploughs and carts.



Sussex cattle in the Dudwell Valley
© Caroline Millar

Directions 3

Keeping a hedge on your left, drop down through the next field to emerge by a stile onto a road. Turn right to walk along the road. When the hedge on the right ends and Bateman’s manor house comes into view, stop by a wooden gate on the right which contains a small quarry.

4. The rocks beneath the surface

Sandstone quarry near Bateman's (TQ672238)

Look across at the wall of exposed yellow stone, this is, the chief instance on this walk where you'll see a prominent exposure of sandstone bedrock.

Since geology is the key to so much in the High Weald – including landscape, soils, land use, settlement patterns and vernacular buildings – this makes a good spot early on in the walk to consider how the High Weald came into being.



A sandstone quarry near Bateman's
© Tim Locke

The whole of the South East is made up of sediments like sand and silt deposited by water over time and compressed into sedimentary rocks. Sandstones and clays were laid down in the cretaceous period 140 million years ago. Around 30 million years after that, the entire area gradually sank beneath the sea; billions of sea creatures that ended their lives on the sea bed slowly became transformed into a vast layer of chalk, laid over the clay and sandstone.

Then massive movements around 75 million years ago from within the Earth pushed up a long spine of the Earth's crust to form a chain of uplands. First this created a chalk dome known as the Wealden Anticline covering what is now South East England. Then over time the centre of the dome was eroded away and the older clays and sandstones were once again revealed as the sandstone ridges and clays of the Weald.



Layers of sandstone bedrock
© Caroline Millar

What we've ended up with today is a kind of geological mirror image: chalk hills on the north side and south side – the North Downs and South Downs – and in between them areas of clay interspersed with ridges of sandstone uplands, including the High Weald and the Surrey Hills. River action has eroded those uplands into the intricate ridges, spurs and valleys of the Wealden landscape we're enjoying on our walk today.

Directions 4

Carry on a few paces along the road.

5. The Sussex weed

Oak tree opposite Bateman's (TQ671238)

We'll see a lot of oak trees on this walk, though this one just after the quarry is of exceptional size. Rudyard Kipling would have no doubt contemplated it many times from his study in Bateman's, just a few yards away.

Not many specimens in the High Weald survive to this age and height as so many were cut for timber. Those on boundaries such as field corners would sometimes be left to grow as landmarks, however.

Oaks are the major tree species in the High Weald, followed by birch, Scots pine, ash and sweet chestnut. As a result oaks have somewhat unfairly picked up the nickname 'the Sussex weed'. But to locals they have proved invaluable in many respects: as timber, as firewood, as a wildlife habitat and as a source of acorns for feeding pigs.



Acorns from oaks were a source of food for pigs
© High Weald AONB Partnership

In the pre-industrial age oak was the strongest available material for ships and buildings. Its resistance to rot and sheer strength made it the king of building materials. Oak is easier to cut when green, so it was used unseasoned. Carpenters would look around the forest to select a specific tree for a specific purpose. In parts of the forest, oaks had little crowns and grew tall and straight – ideal for building houses and barns. More crooked boughs – with 'knees' and 'elbows', as they were known – were often used for shipbuilding.

Through soil analysis of pollen preserved in sediments, researchers can build up a picture of tree and plant cover in prehistoric times. The first colonisers of landscape at a period of global warming some 13,000 years ago were birch, aspen and willow; then as the climate warmed up came pine and hazel, then alder and oak. The 'ancient woodlands' of oak, hornbeam and other species are thought to have made up the wildwood around 5,500–3,000BC.

Directions 5

At the junction in front of the ornate gates of Bateman's, turn left. The line of trees ahead indicates a river in the bottom of the valley. Cross the river at the road bridge and go through a small gap in the hedge to stand on the river bank.

6. Power to the Weald

Banks of River Dudwell (TQ671237)

Though it's rather a small stream today, a gentle burbling brook rather than a rushing river, the modest-looking River Dudwell deserves a moment's attention.

In primeval times fast-flowing streams and sinuous rivers (like the Dudwell) gouged out the High Weald into the valleys and spurs we're walking through today.

When humans began to settle here, the Wealden rivers provided a vital power and water source. Tributaries were dammed to create power to drive mills and bellows for iron furnaces, and lower catchments were deepened to speed the water flow.



The sleepy River Dudwell
© Caroline Millar



Water crowfoot in flower
© Arkive

From its source near Rotherfield in East Sussex, the Dudwell flows through the High Weald and joins the River Rother at Etchingham, from where the parent river carries on to the sea at Rye.

The river banks, marshy surrounds, riverside trees and waters themselves support a great diversity of wildlife and plant life. Some like water-crowfoot are particularly important for fly larvae and overwintering brown trout.

Directions 6

Continue ahead until you reach an interesting looking group of buildings on your right.

7. Wealden building styles

Group of buildings just after Bateman's (TQ670235)

This little cluster of buildings is worth a closer look as they exhibit distinctive traditional Wealden features.

The white building at the back is a watermill. The mill's walls are weather-boarded, this describes the characteristic overlapping cladding on timber frames, commonly now painted white.

Weatherboarding was often used for barns and other outbuildings but you also see it in domestic buildings in numerous Wealden villages and towns.



The white weatherboarded mill and the rounded oasthouse
© Tim Locke

Up to the seventeenth century, timber was the most readily available material; after then, clearance of some of the forest for naval ship building and for fuelling iron furnaces caused builders to look for other materials.



A triangular half-hipped gable
© Caroline Millar

Now look up from the weatherboarding and you'll see a distinctive triangular shape in the mill's tiled roof. The gable is half-hipped, meaning that it has a sloping, cut-off roof rather than the wall going straight down.

Hipped roofs with slopes on all four sides were the norm up to around 1750, and half-hipped roofs were common after that. Hipped gabled roofs are harder to construct than conventional roofs but have fewer sharp corners and are self-bracing, so are more resistant to high winds.

The next building is an old oasthouse. We'll be stopping to take a closer look at an oasthouse later on the walk so for now we'll move our attention to Corner Cottage.



Ornamental shapes on a tile hung house in Robertsbridge
© N Chadwick, Geograph (CCL)



Stone barn with a deep catslide roof
© Tim Locke

Notice that its roof is tile-hung meaning that the tiles are attached to a wooden frame. This method of keeping out the weather is another very common Wealden building style.

In many local towns and villages such as Cranbrook and Robertsbridge you'll see hung tiles are fashioned into ornamental shapes like scallops and overlapping diamonds.

If you look round the back of the house, you'll see that Corner Cottage also features a spectacularly deep rear roof which runs down in one plane from the top to below the height of the rest of the eaves. This is known as a catslide roof, and allows for a greater floor area of building without raising the height of the ridge.

Directions 7

Carry straight on through a wooden gate towards Park Farm (ignoring a left turn just before a converted oasthouse). At Park Farm (look out for a fine old set of old ploughs outside, relics of the horse-and-plough era of farming) continue ahead on the main track past the farm buildings, after which continue on the waymarked track slightly left, up to a woodland strip.



8. A shaw between the fields

Woodland shaw after Park Farm (TQ668232)

This wooded strip is an example of a shaw: a linear strip of woodland between 15 and 50 foot wide, bigger than a hedgerow but smaller than a wood.

Quite why shaws came into being is a bit of a mystery, but the probable reason was that they provided a useful timber resource so were just left for that reason.

They were previously thought to be belts of trees left round field edges by early farmers, but this theory does not explain how they appear to be deliberately created in order to be stock-proof.

Many have a bank and ditch around them, so it is more likely that a hedge was planted against the field boundary and the shaw within was created later on by natural seeding or by planting.

Shaws are often to be found either side of a gill, where the trees would have been hard to remove and were useful to stop the animals falling into the ravine itself. We'll see an example of a gill later on the walk.



A woodland shaw in springtime
© High Weald AONB Partnership

Directions 8

Leave the wooded area by a gate, then carry on up the field edge with woodland on your right, which you soon enter via a gate at a bridleway marker post.

9. Coppice

Second area of woodland after Park Farm (TQ668230)

As you walk through this woodland look out for clusters of tree trunks that all appear to be growing from the same stem. This woodland has been planted out with sweet chestnut, an ideal tree for coppicing.

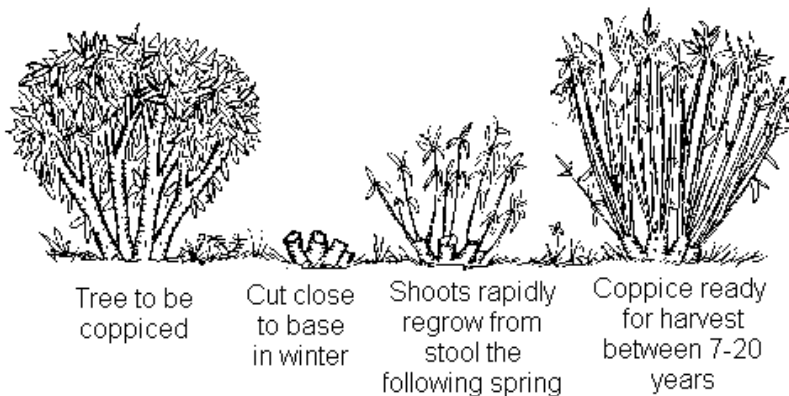
This ancient system of woodland management is a simple but extremely effective way of getting a sustainable supply of wooden poles and works on most hardwood species: by cutting the tree close to the ground, it produces fast-growing shoots from the 'stool' or stump.

The cutting is typically done on a 14-to 20-year rotation through the wood.

The straight, thin wooden poles that are harvested had many uses: as domestic fuel, for charcoal-burning, for fencing and for agricultural use including hop poles. As a result, these sorts of woodland would have been valued and carefully managed.



A coppiced sweet chestnut
© Tim Locke



Stages of coppice
© Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

When coppice is abandoned for a long time, the individual trunks become what look like a ring of separate trees although they're actually still part of one tree.

Directions 9

At a T-junction with a broad woodland track, (note the splendid mature beech tree ahead, carved with centuries-old graffiti) turn left along it then immediately right on a narrower track.

10. Sunken tracks and pannage

Sunken woodland track (TQ668227)

This sunken track is probably extremely old. It's part of a network of paths and tracks, many of which are sunken through use by hooves, cartwheels and human feet.

This one may well have originated as a route along which pig herds were driven to graze the woodlands of the High Weald in the winter months, a practice known as 'pannage'.

The pigs staple diet was acorns. It was said that a peck (around a bucketful) of acorns a day meant an increase in weight of a pound a day (over two months of fattening) – although they also fed on hazel nuts, rosehips, chestnuts, wild cherries, pears, apples and sloes, and rooted around for worms, slugs and insects.



Recreation of a drover herding pigs
© High Weald AONB Partnership

Early settlers from as early as the Neolithic period (2500-800BC) drove their pigs here to feed and exploited the trees for timber. In medieval times the Weald was the main centre in the country for pannage. In the Domesday Book of 1086, compiled at a time when the practice was declining elsewhere, it was recorded that some 150,000 pigs were driven in to feed in this area during late summer and early autumn. Those using the woods for pannage had to pay a fee to the lords of the manor; the fees were set and paid at an annual 'Aves Court' held in the forest.

The pig herds were led every year along tracks to the same places, known as 'dens' (the suffix 'den' survives in many Wealden place names including Biddenden and Tenterden). Many dens later became small settlements, linked to their parent villages by north-south tracks, many of which survive to this day in the rights of way network.

Directions 10

Keep left at the fork, as indicated. Ignore a gate into the field on your left but keep in the woodland.

11. Protecting the woodland

Raised bank inside the woodland (TQ668226)

As you walk along the edge of the forest you'll notice a distinctive raised bank running alongside you on the right.

The bank is typical of many in High Weald woodlands, laid down centuries ago as a boundary marker.

The bank is made by digging a ditch and throwing up soil onto the woodland side, then planting trees which are managed as a hedge on top of the bank.



A raised bank in the ancient wood
© Caroline Millar

Here you'll notice that some trees along the bank are trained with horizontal branches, as part of an ancient, long-gone hedgerow: these were cut and laid to protect the woodland from browsing creatures, notably cattle.

Woodland banks often have an asymmetrical profile – with a dip or shallow slope on the woodland side and a steep slope on the ditch side. Such banks are one of the oldest artificial features found in Wealden woodlands – many are medieval, and some are even older, going back 1,000 years to the time when the woods were first separated from the farmland by pioneer farmers.

Also along the track you'll see one or two small beech trees, with their smooth bark and oval leaves that are stalked and pointed at the tip, something of a rarity in this part of the High Weald.

Directions 11

Continue along the woodland track. There are wide views out of the forest into the countryside and pastures to the left. The bridleway eventually passes a lone cottage built of local sandstone (with another view of The Needle to the left), and continues as a broad track to the road. Turn left on the road. Almost immediately on the left you'll see Sarah Raven's Cutting Garden at Perch Hill Farm. Carry on along the road.

Opposite the next house, turn right over a stile by a metal gate. Soon carry on along a grassy strip between fences, then on entering a field go diagonally left up to the top, to an obvious break in the hedgerow trees, to find a gate. Carry on up to reach a concrete farm track and turn right on it. There are magnificent views all round from here, notably to the left across to Dallington Church visible on a ridge and the South Downs curving along the horizon in the distance. Carry on to reach Sugarloaf Oast at Little Worge Farm.

12. Oasthouses and hops

Sugarloaf Oast at Little Worge Farm (TQ658213)

Sugarloaf Oast is a good example of a converted oasthouse. Oasthouses mostly date from the 18th and 19th centuries and were built for drying and storing locally grown hops.

Notice the distinctive round shaped room with a cone on top which spins round with the wind. This was where the hops were put to dry. Hot air from a fire lit beneath the hop flowers rose up into the roundel. The wind vane in the hood-shaped cowl moved the air around and helped the hops to dry faster.

In Britain oasthouses are confined to two regions – Kent and East Sussex, and the West Midlands (where they are known as hop kilns). Hardly any remain in use, but there is a working one just outside Robertsbridge, a few miles east of here.



The distinctive round oasthouse
© Caroline Millar

The earliest oast kilns are converted barns as well as purpose-built structures, usually with square towers. Around 1840 hop growers started building round kilns, which were thought to give a better heat distribution, but fifty years later science proved that square kilns were more efficient after all, as well as being cheaper to build. As a result, the later oasts are almost all of square design.



Hop flowers
© William Alexander

Hops add distinctive flavours and also aromas to the beer. In medieval times, virtually everyone who could afford it (and that included children) drank ale as water was not always safe to drink.

The first hops were grown in Southeast England in 1524 and oasthouses began to appear in the 18th century.

Harveys Brewery in Lewes and the Rother Valley Brewery in Northiam still buy hops from growers based in East Sussex and Kent.

Hop gardens have been in decline locally, and you will have to travel towards the Kent border before you see them in great number: they are immediately noticeable for their wooden frames (two uprights joined at the top by a horizontal pole). You can still find quite an extensive area of hop cultivation from the road north from Burwash Weald to Stonegate station.

Before hop-picking became mechanised, large numbers of hop-pickers were employed locally, and others came down from London's East End for the traditional hop-picking summer holiday, staying in rudimentary 'hopper' huts on the farms. Otherwise the process of growing and processing hops into beer has changed very little over the last 300 years.



An East-End family of hop pickers
© Barbara Millar

Directions 12

Go downhill through the gate into Little Worge Barn. Go past the car port, out through a metal gate and along the path straight ahead to descend into woodlands. In the woods pass two sets of gates on either side of the path, then turn right at a signposted four-way path junction by a barrier and follow the woodland path, across a semi-open strip with power lines, to stop on a wooden bridge over a ravine.

13. Ancient woodland and gills

Wooden footbridge over gill (TQ653214)

This beautifully unspoilt place is an example of ancient woodland. Ancient woodland is defined as being in existence since at least 1600. Around 70% of woodland in the High Weald is classed as ancient, as compared with only 19% over the country as a whole.



Pond sedge is an indicator of damp woodlands
© Caroline Millar

Botanists can pick out specific plants that colonise slowly over the centuries, and can only exist where the woodland has been in place for a very long time.

At the same time, archaeological features such as iron workings and boundary ditches survive to a greater degree than they do elsewhere. Ancient woodland indicators present in this wood include ferns and wild garlic. Ferns are distinct from bracken (which you'll see a lot of on this walk) in that bracken has side branches while ferns do not.

The footbridge we're standing on spans a striking example of a gill – the term for a small fast-flowing stream carving a course through a ravine before feeding into larger streams and rivers like the Dudwell.

The word 'gill' is more associated with northern England, and indeed the High Weald is the only place in southeastern England where you will encounter them. To a botanist they are extremely special. The ravines often provide sheltered habitats for a great diversity of ferns, mosses, liverworts and lichens. One of the notable species found in High Weald gills is the rare Tunbridge filmy fern.

This gill is, however, often dry; further on, a smaller bridge crosses a more active stream, and you'll see an unusually large concentration of dark green, thin leaved plants called pond sedge indicating this is a damp woodland. In spring bluebells and anemones create a carpet of colour in these woods

Directions 13

Eventually the path exits the woodland. Follow the marker arrows across the top edge of two small fields then carry on keeping just to the left of power lines through the next field to continue on a track, then forward along the left field edge. Stop when you reach a red tiled house on the left.

14. Classic Wealden field patterns

Solitary red tiled house (TQ653219)

Look around the edges of these fields, and you see they conform to no particular pattern. Small, irregular fields are another hallmark of the High Weald, in contrast to the more spacious and regular tracts of enclosed cultivation you'll see in much of the rest of the country.

This is a farming landscape hacked out piecemeal-fashion from the Wealden forest, giving a crooked, ancient look to the countryside.

The clearance of woodland depended on the extent and nature of tree and vegetation cover and the type of soil.



Patchwork field patterns of the High Weald
© High Weald AONB Partnership

It was an arduous task, by no means something achieved overnight. And as time went on, some cultivation might cease, and the field left to revert to scrub and then back to woodland.

We can imagine a pioneer farmer from centuries past, arriving in this area of wooded waste with his wife and children, a sackful of provisions, some basic tools, a cooking pot and some livestock.



A pioneer farmstead
© Valerie Alford - High Weald AONB Partnership

He would scout around for a suitable site – well drained, with a water source nearby. He would set about building a primitive hut, with a central hearth and smoke rising through the roof.

Then he'd begin the back-breaking task of clearing the land, chopping down trees with his tools, grubbing out by using a mattock and perhaps by grazing his animals to help root out the rest.

Months later he would pile up the stones round the edges of his newly created field and make a scythe and rake.

He'd also need to construct a barn, hayloft and granary, and might share an oxen team with a neighbour before he could plough, sow and finally cultivate the land.

Even then, life wasn't exactly easy: imagine the invasions of rodents and birds, attacking his crops and stores. He would have to pay pannage and pasturage to the Lord of the Manor, and perform certain services; the rent would not have been high but he would have been scraping a living.

Walk round the house and you'll pass has a fine stone barn, and behind it a nice example of a granary with a semi-circular back wall. Infestation of the precious grain by unwelcome creatures was the curse of the miller so granaries were designed to keep the grain store as rodent-free as possible.

Granaries were often raised on mushroom-shaped 'straddle stones' and in some places you may find straddle stones by themselves or used as garden features where the rest of the granary has disappeared.



Typical architectural features of the Wealden landscape: hung tiles, a stone barn, catslide roof and round granary
© Tim Locke

Directions 14

Emerge on to the road. Turn left and follow the road to the sign for Willingford Farm.

15. A tale of Wealden iron

Entrance to Willingford Farm (TQ656226)

Just visible from the entrance to the drive of Willingford Farm is a prominent L-shaped raised feature in the grass: this is the remains of a pond bay, or a dam for a furnace pond, a relic from the long-vanished Wealden iron industry.

From Roman times up to the 18th century, much of the High Weald was a noisy, smelly industrial area busy with iron-making.

The local place names close to this walk are a giveaway: on the map you might spot Glazier's Forge, Forge Farm and Forge Wood.



This dip and raised bank are evidence of an ancient pond bay
© Caroline Millar



A furnace pond powered hammers and bellows
© Mike Codd - West Sussex County Council

The iron-making process also left remains of charcoal hearths, ore-roasting hearths, furnaces and production waste.

The three main raw materials were all readily available: water, wood and iron ore.

Coppiced oak, alder and hornbeam was burnt into charcoal, for smelting the ore.

Deeply-cut gills were often prospected for iron ore deposits. Digging for ore left craters in the ground, some still discernible today, particularly those that fill with water in winter to form small ponds.

Iron making would have been carried out as close as possible to the mine pits.

To see if the excavated rock had any iron content it was put in a fire: if the rock turned purple-reddish that indicated it had iron content.

It was then broken up and roasted with charcoal in a blast furnace, powered by bellows.

In early times the bellows would have been hand-operated but from the 15th century onwards, water power was used by damming ponds and constructing leats, overflow channels, mill races and wheel pits.



A blast furnace powered by waterwheel
© Mike Codd - West Sussex County Council

After hours in the furnace, the contents were allowed to cool down and the non-ferrous material was chipped off to leave the (ingot) of iron.



On the other side of the road, a small gap in the hedge allows you access to the river-bank.

Treasures and offerings to the river have been placed here indicating a sacred spot.

Notice too the red colour in the banks of the river, which indicates iron-rich soil and bedrock.

The water built up by the dam (or pond bay) drove a waterwheel to power the furnace
© James Cope

Directions 15

Retrace your steps back along the road until you reach a stile on the left. Cross it into a meadow, bearing half right.

16. Wildflower meadow

First meadow from the road (TQ658226)

Depending on what time of year you experience this walk, this meadow can look very different.

It may look like an ordinary field but it's a prime example of an unimproved meadow, untouched by modern farming methods such as inorganic fertilisers, slurry, herbicide, re-seeding and pesticides. Traditional low-intensity grazing or haymaking by farmers over many centuries has kept it that way.

The best time to see unimproved meadows like this is during late spring and early summer before the field is mown.



A wildflower meadow blooming with daisies and orchids
© High Weald AONB Partnership



A yellow rattle
© High Weald AONB Partnership

As a result it is rich in species of wildflowers and grasses, which themselves attract bees, grasshoppers and other insects, as well as birdlife.

Such is the pace of intensive agriculture that grasslands like these are something of a rarity: across the country only 3 per cent of meadows are unimproved.

Yet in the neutral and acid soils of the High Weald, where very little intensive farming has taken place, rather more survive. With careful management techniques, more such meadows could flourish.

In this particular field, the white-flowered pignut plants are an indicator that this is an unimproved meadow, as are green-winged orchids, birdsfoot trefoil ('bacon and eggs'), ox-eye daisy and yellow rattle.

This type of grassland can only feed a small number of animals per hectare, but can support fifty or more plant species, including several rarities.

Semi-improved grasslands that have been fertilised at some stage and have been ploughed once or twice may still retain ten to twenty-five grass and flower species.

Managing meadows requires cutting a hay crop in mid to late July, and using no fertilisers other than well-rotted organic manure every three years or so.

Pasture management on the other hand requires ensuring that the right level of grazing takes place each year; again fertilisers are not to be used.



A green winged orchid
© High Weald AONB Partnership

Directions 16

Over the next stile enter the left-hand field ahead as waymarked, and follow the top edge, soon into woodland by a stile, and leave by a kissing gate. Go forward over grassland (with Burwash church now in view ahead), dropping down the slope to continue along the valley floor. Keep the stream on your left, ignoring a path through a gateway to the left, then go through a gateway to a signpost avoiding a path to the right. Barns appear ahead.

Take a bridge on the left as indicated by arrows (no route ahead), and proceed across a field between strips of trees to enter a woodland, avoiding a wooden footbridge to the left. Cross a sluice by a brick bridge and follow the path curving right round the millpond. If you have a National Trust card, you can visit Bateman's and its watermill from this side, through the first gate on the left; otherwise (to continue the route or to purchase an entrance ticket), carry on along the pond past the watermill then left. Either turn left and left again to take the entrance into Bateman's car park, or to continue the walk turn right on the lane.

17. Kipling's manor

Bateman's, Bateman's Lane (TQ671238)

"Out of the Weald, the secret Weald,
Men sent in ancient years,
The horse-shoes red at Flodden Field
The arrows at Poitiers!"

(From 'Puck's Song' by Rudyard Kipling)

The High Weald is not an area with sumptuous stately homes and grand estates of the likes of Petworth or Knole.

Bateman's, best known as the home of writer Rudyard Kipling from 1902 until his death in 1936 (and where he wrote his celebrated poem 'If'), is about as large a country house as you'll find in this area.



Rudyard Kipling's last home
© High Weald AONB Partnership

It dates from 1634, and is rumoured to have been built for an ironmaster called John Brittan, but no one knows for certain what occupation the first owner had. The house's sandstone walls, imposing chimney stacks, gables and mullions all tell of an owner who has made his way in the world.

The landscape, too, appealed hugely to Kipling: many of his stories from Puck of Pook's Hill feature local places, and the hill the book takes its name from is visible from the house. Born in India, it was here at Bateman's that he felt he truly discovered England. And as royalties from his books poured in, he used some of the money to purchase land around the house, so his estate grew and grew.

One curious iron-related relic is the ironstone slab on the front doorstep (only visible if you pay to go into the property). In centuries past iron or ironstone doorsteps were sometimes placed outside Wealden houses as a superstitious measure to ward off witches.

Directions 17

Retrace your steps along the road past the oak tree and the quarry then left over the signposted stile up to Burwash village car park (up the right edge of the first field, then along the left edge of three more fields).

18. A Sussex street

Burwash High Street (TQ675247)

The A265 leading into the village of Burwash is one of the classic ridge roads of the High Weald and is why Burwash settled here. Its name is thought to derive from Beorg aesc (ashes hill), and evolved in the twelfth century to Burhersce then in the fourteenth century to Burgasshe, then Burgherssh and finally Burwash.

The village's oldest building is its twelfth-century church, and the rest of the settlement was a scatter of houses across a rural area. Only later did it grow out along the trading route (now the A265).



Sussex signpost and Burwash church
© Caroline Millar

After the decline in the iron industry, the village descended into murkier pursuits, as a centre for sheep stealing and smuggling. In the early 19th century it was not considered a safe place through which to wander.

Today the high street is one of Sussex's best preserved village streets, and has a great variety of mostly 17th and 18th-century buildings, though some are medieval. Many are tile hung, timber framed, brick and weather-boarded, and display typical hipped gables. Look out for Rampyndene on the same side of the road as the church. This striking red brick and tile house was built for a wealthy wool merchant in 1699: he commissioned a front porch carved variously with cherubs, birds and flowers.

St Bartholomew's Church is also worth a visit. If it's open, go inside and see if you can find remarkable relic of the Wealden iron industry in the form of a 14th-century cast-iron tomb slab in memory of John Collins, one of a family of ironmasters who owned a forge nearby at Socknersh. Placed on the wall by the Lady Chapel altar, it is said to be the oldest such iron memorial in existence.

Directions 18

Take time to explore Burwash's high street before returning to the car park.

Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

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Further information

High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership

www.highweald.org

Landscapes for Life

www.landscapesforlife.org.uk/high-weald-aonb.html

Natural England

www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designations/aonb/highweald.aspx

Visit Sussex

www.visitsussex.org

Bateman's

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/batemans

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