



Lewes and the South Downs

Distance: 20 km=12½ miles moderate walking with long easy stretches

Region: East Sussex

Date written: 8-apr-2013

Author: Hautboy

Last update: 20-aug-2024

Refreshments: Lewes

Map: Explorer 122 (Steyning) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

Public rights are restricted to printing, copying or distributing this document exactly as seen here, complete and without any cutting or editing. See *Principles* on main webpage.

High hills, views, forest, historic country town

In Brief

This is a wonderfully exhilarating circular walk over the high hills near Lewes. You start and finish in this historic town and, in between, you are walking on high, surrounded by hills with great views.



There are no nettles, so shorts are fine. Boots are recommended because of the length and the impact of the hard chalk, but good walking shoes would be adequate. Your dog can also come on this adventure.



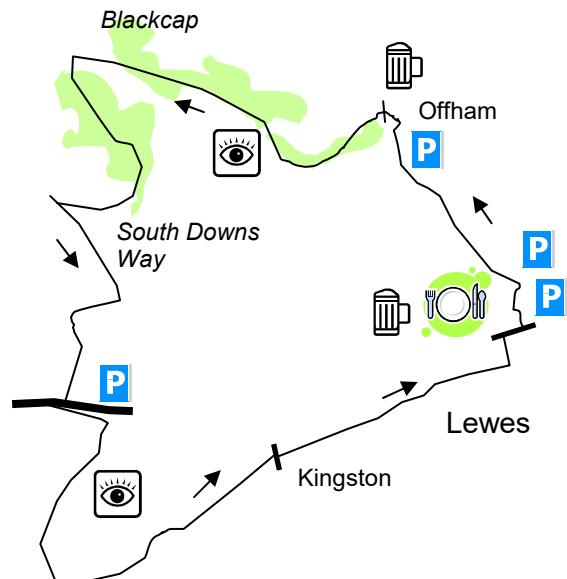
The walk begins at in **Lewes, East Sussex**, by **train** or by car. On **Sundays** (NB) there were no parking charges at the time of writing, and the best place to start is the **Westgate Street** car park (**post-code BN7 1XT**). On Saturdays, the best place to park is **County Hall**, postcode **BN7 1UE** (£1 all day as 2019). On other days, you can park by Offham Church (postcode **BN7 3PX**) or, on the route, 10 minutes outside central Lewes in **Landport Road**, either on the roadside or in the Recreation Ground car park opposite the Pells School (postcode **BN7 2SU**), www.w3w.co/fame.perplexed.nuns.

Kingston is another good starting-off point. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

This walk is also the start
of the **Lewes Monster**.



Bird's Eye View



The Walk

Leg 1: Lewes to Offham 3 km=2 miles

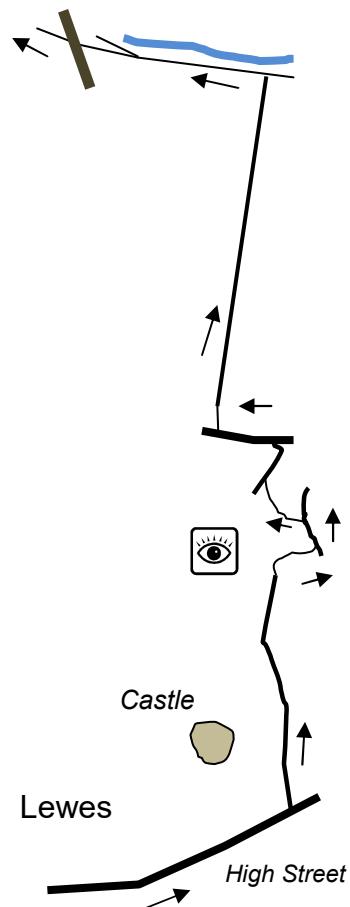
Lewes was once a sea port (like Steyning) before the coast retreated and, being in a strategic valley and near the site where the Normans landed in 1066, it has always been hugely important in history. Even before then, it saw visits from the Romans for a century from 55 BCE and was settled by the Saxons from around 450. In 853 it saw a Danish invasion and in 1006 King Ethelred the Unred granted Lewes powers to mint the "Danegeld" to buy them off. The Battle of Lewes in 1264 ended in (temporary) defeat for King Henry III and a kind of second Magna Carta. (See under the Priory near the end of this text.)

- 1 Starting in the High Street, facing the Fifteenth Century Bookshop, turn **left** along the High Street towards the Castle, passing many interesting shops. In 150m, just before the Castle Museum, turn **left** on a cobblestone path that leads past the Castle on your left.* The Castle can be visited through a gateway.

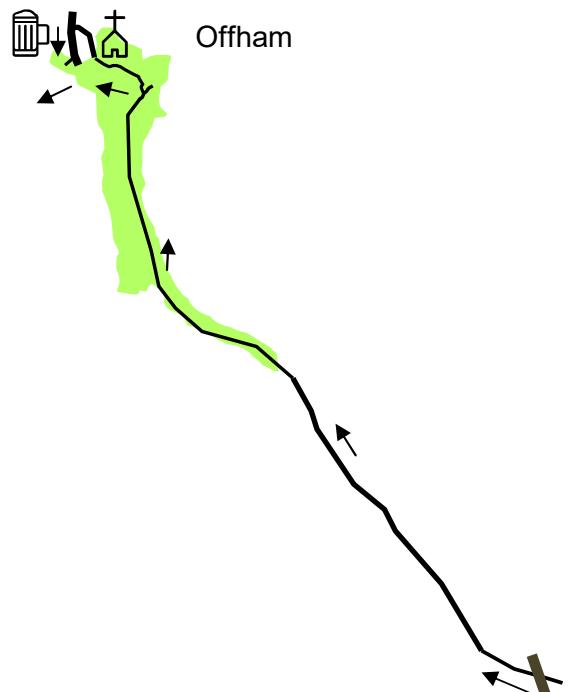
The building of Lewes Castle began soon after 1066. It was the stronghold of William de Warenne and was added to over the next 300 years, culminating in the magnificent Barbican.

Continue past the old Bowling Green to a terrace where there are seats giving a view of the town. Take the winding descending lane Castle Banks just to the right of the terrace. In 30m, turn **left** on a tarmac path Castle Rise downhill. At the bottom, turn **right** briefly on a lane and sharp **left** on a main road. The *Elephant and Castle* (Harveys), a traditional pub, is behind you. Cross the road and, immediately **before** a bridge over the railway, turn **right** down a steep flight of steps. At the bottom, proceed along a residential road Talbot Terrace and continue to the end. Cross the grass to reach the Pells Pond and turn **left** along the waterside. Before the end of the water, fork **left** up a slope and take a footbridge over the railway to re-join the walk at Offham.

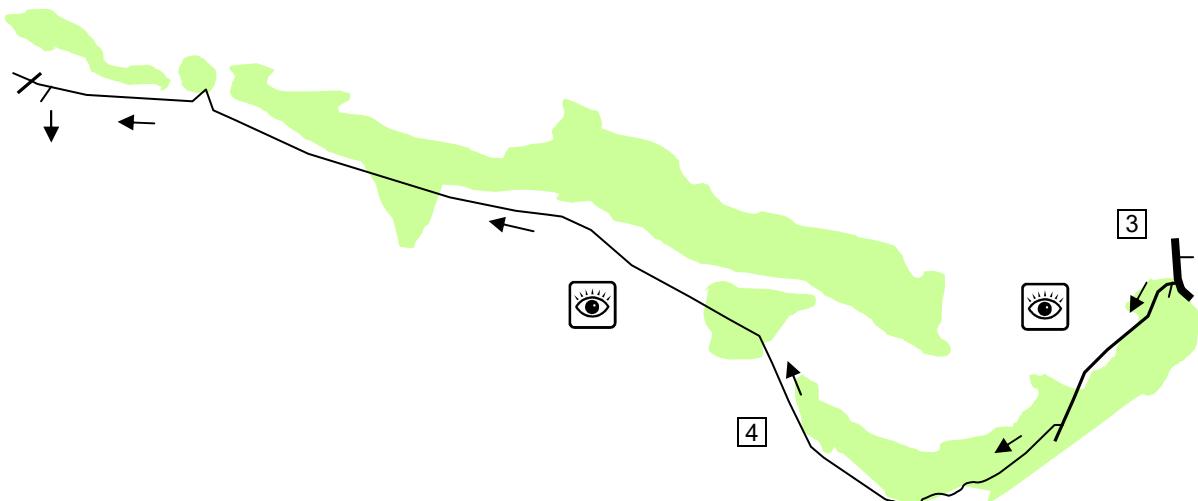
(* An alternative, suggested by a walker, is to go to Offham via the **Ouse Valley walk**: continue straight on past the church of St John sub Castro, cross the South Malling footbridge and turn **left** following the river on your right, finally turning **left** again under the railway to re-join the walk at Offham.)



- 2** The footpath runs beside a wall, briefly joins a tarmac lane and becomes a tarmac path again. Soon it passes playing fields and the Pells School, opposite which is a Recreation Ground car park (an alternative start). Continue along Landport Road, past a green and on a concrete road which becomes a track by some allotments. Stay on this stony track, now in open country. At *The Granary*, your track veers right downhill. 700m further, the track runs under power lines and you reach a junction by a marker post. Take the **left** fork, the byway. This track curves right to reach Offham Church. *This is the “New Church of St Peter”, built in the 1850s.* Pass the church on your right to meet the main A275 road opposite the *Blacksmiths Arms*, a freehouse inn offering accommodation and “superb food with fine wines”, but closed afternoons and Sunday evening.



Leg 2: Offham to Blackcap 4 km=2½ miles



- 3** Cross the main road, turn **left** for 50m and go **right** onto a bridleway marked with a blue arrow, immediately avoiding a left fork leading to a stile. Your track gradually climbs Offham Hill and soon affords good views over the countryside to the north. Roughly 500m from the road, about 50m before the crest of the hill, go **right** through a small gate [2023: almost off its hinges] into a wildlife area with a notice about Natural England who look after the site. Continue straight ahead, now under a dense canopy of trees. In 100m or so, your path becomes more twisty and you can see a large ploughed field ahead. Veer gradually left until you are walking beside the field on your left alongside a wire fence. On your right is the woodland of the Coombe Plantation soon giving way to an open space. Your path takes you through a wooden gate and continues ahead on the open hillside with the field still on your left.

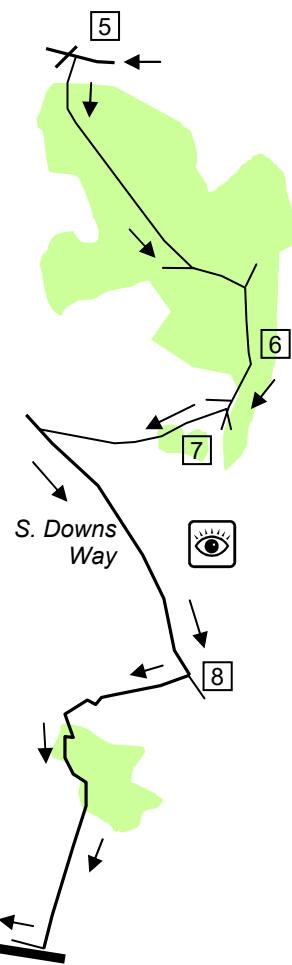
4 Keep ahead at all times on the main path, avoiding all side paths. As you approach overhead power lines, your path goes straight ahead across grass to join a track on the other side as it passes under the wires. Your course is now grassy with views south. After a small wooden gate, your path is still gently uphill. Avoid a narrow path forking left, soon to pass, on your left, a beacon brazier on Mount Harry. Blackcap is now visible ahead, with the thick wooded crown that gives it its name. One of the loveliest stretches of the walk now takes you gradually up to the top, with a bridleway joining from the left along the way. From the triangulation pillar you can see the taller buildings of Brighton. Continue from Blackcap another 400m to approach a junction with a small gate beside a large one.

Leg 3: Blackcap to Housedean Farm 5 km=3 miles

5 Do *not* go through this gate but, just before the gate, turn sharp **left** in a sloping meadow. Avoid a gate slightly to the right that leads into an adjoining meadow but instead aim for another small wooden gate directly opposite you, 50m from the corner of the woodland ahead. Go through the gate on a narrow path into a large wood. *Ashcombe Bottom is part of the National Trust's Blackcap reserve and a section of the Clayton to Offham Escarpment, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).* Your wide grassy path winds downhill through the brambly wood. After more than 800m on this easy path, you meet a path coming down from the right, just before you pass under power lines. Your path enters an open area, with a path coming down from the left, and curves slightly right.

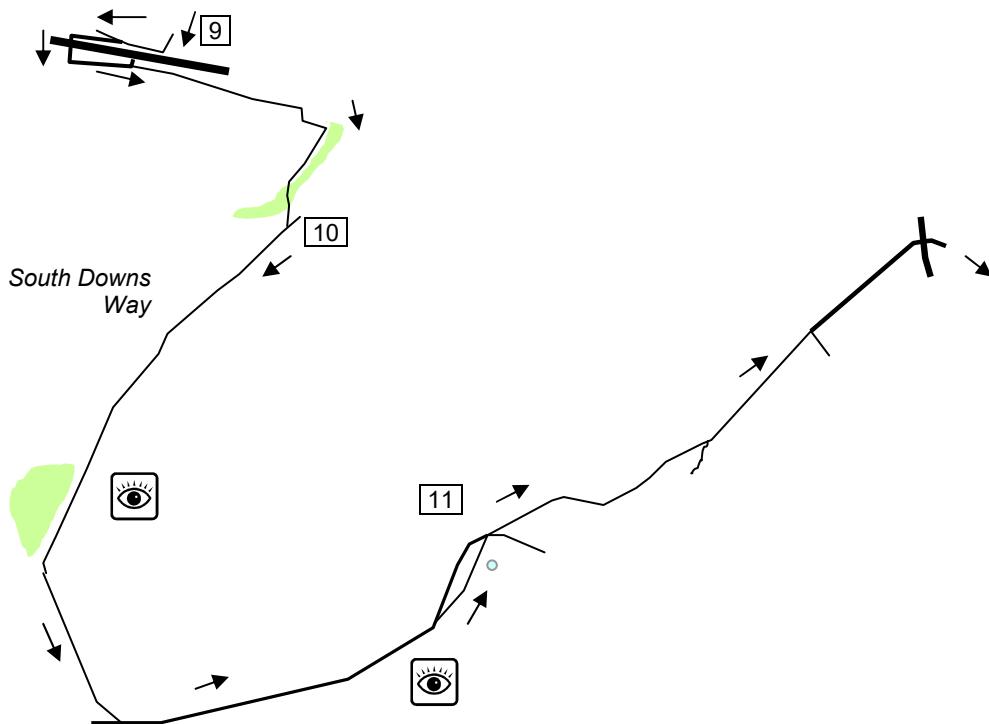
6 About 100m before a gate visible ahead, at a blue arrow on a post, keep **left**. Your path shortly takes you through a smaller wooden gate and beside a sloping meadow on your right. It comes out of the trees and reaches a junction of paths in a valley. Ignore a right turn at the first post with blue arrows and proceed only 20m further to another junction. As a check, you have a path straight ahead and another forking left uphill. Avoid both and instead go **half right** by going through a small wooden gate on your right into a large sloping pasture and thence on a path going diagonally up the slope towards some trees on the top of a hill. The faint path should be marked by many boots and hooves.

7 At the top of the slope go past a disused wooden gate into trees. Once out of the trees, keep ahead up the right-hand side of another sloping meadow. At the top, keep ahead beside a wire fence on your left. At the next junction, by a collection of wooden gates, turn sharp **left** with another wire fence on your right. *You have joined the South Downs Way (SDW), a 160 km=100 mile long-distance path running from Winchester to Eastbourne.* You now have an easy open stretch on this grassy route with views ahead, including, slightly to your left, *Ashcombe Mill*, which is on the route back to Lewes. After just over 1km, you finally reach a junction with a stile and footpath ahead and a small gate on your right.



- 8 Turn **right** through the gate, staying on the bridleway and the SDW. Your path runs between fences and twists downhill by a sheepfield. After 500m, it bends sharp left and hairpins a few times uphill through the wood, finally turning left at the top. Your path emerges from the wood via a small wooden gate. It now runs along the right-hand side of a high field. Ahead are the range of high hills south of Lewes, a section of which you will soon be crossing. In about 500m, the path goes through a small wooden gate and down steps to the A27 main road.

Leg 4: Housedean Farm to Kingston 5 km=3 miles



- 9 Turn **right** on a footpath parallel to the main road and, in 100m, keep ahead on a service road by the entrance to Housedean Farm. *Housedean Farm Campsite now sells coffee, ice creams and snacks; it also has a toilet.* Fork **left** uphill and go **left** over a bridge across the main road. The tarmac lane takes you sharp **left** and, in 150m, turns left to the main road. Leave the lane here by continuing through a gate ahead, parallel to the main road. *The SDW has been re-routed and is still in a state of flux. For now (2013) this suits you quite well. In case it should change again in the future, please simply follow the SDW signs.* Continue on the surfaced path, gradually rising, going past a railway arch and taking you through a small wooden gate after 500m. Go **right** under the railway and turn **left** with the path beside a field. The path turns **right** at the corner. In under 200m, the path veers **left** steeply uphill. It comes out between two small fields and through a wooden gate to a 3-way fingerpost.
- 10 Keep straight ahead up the right-hand edge of this large field, still on the SDW. *You will be climbing up to the high point above Kingston Ridge but the gradient is always gentle. As you near the top, you will meet families out for a stroll as well as dedicated walkers.* Your path goes through a wooden gate next to a large metal gate. Keep straight ahead, ignoring a stile on your left. After a long easy climb, go through a small wooden gate ahead, avoiding a wooden gate on your right. After another easy climb, go through a wooden gate and continue with a wire fence on your left. You



approach a steep drop and here the path and fence curve **left** taking you through a new metal gate by a 3-way fingerpost, still on the SDW and still going gently uphill. Pass through a wooden gate and stay near a wire fence on your right, the path now high and level with wonderful views around. As the path begins to descend, it forks through gorse and you can take either fork, the right one passing a round dew pond. Finally your path takes you through a small wooden gate near a large metal gate.



For the **Lewes Monster** walk, return to the **Lewes Monster** guide and do the Bridging Section.

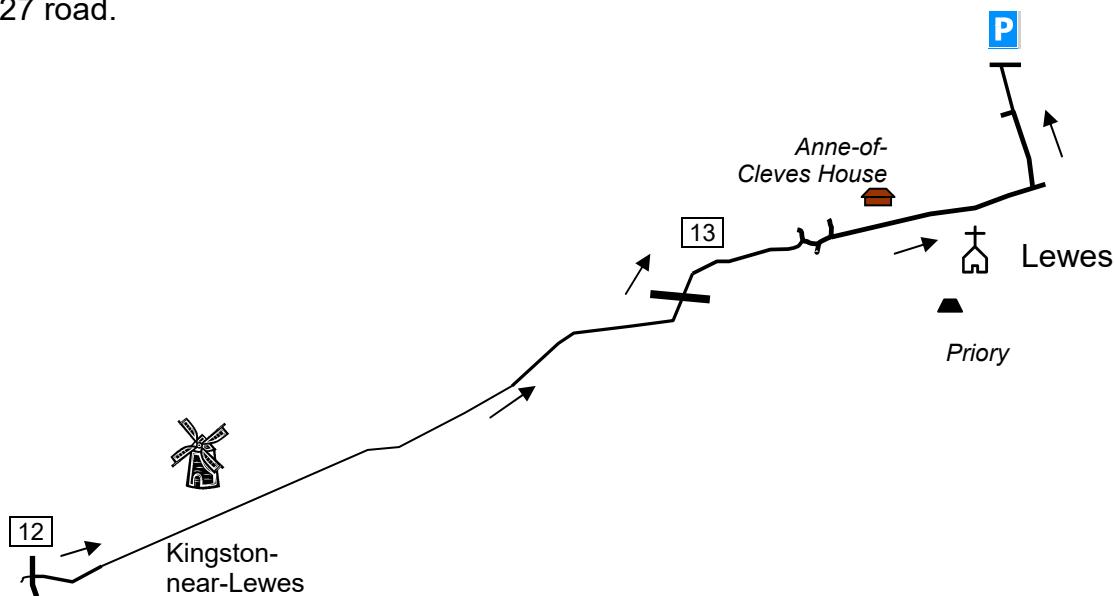
- 11 Leave the SDW by keeping **left** beside a fence. Follow the chalky path downhill (**care! the chalk can be slippery and uncomfortable**). A track joins you from the right and your path goes through a small metal gate. Soon you are walking along a rough residential lane. Ignore a bridleway here on the right. You reach a road on the outskirts of Kingston-near-Lewes.

Leg 5: Kingston to Lewes 3 km=2 miles

- 12 Cross the road and continue straight ahead on a tarmac lane marked as a bridleway, soon passing to the side of a large metal gate. On your left is the Ashcombe Windmill.

Ashcombe Windmill is a rare six-sweep mill but it was destroyed a gale in 1916. In 2007, the local Council passed a proposal to reconstruct the mill and work has progressed s-l-o-w-l-y using contemporary photos. Some 90-year old pieces, such as shutter cranks, were found lying in the fields. The cladding is now complete and the first pair of sweeps are up (2013).

Keep straight ahead across the grass, now with Lewes visible ahead, the grim outline of the prison being the first thing you see. *The hills above Glynde are on the other side of the town and, partly to the right, with the masts, is Beddingham Hill.* At the far side of the meadow, go through a gap where once stood two gates and continue on a path between hedges. The path becomes a tarmac lane and bends left over a bridge high above the A27 road.



- 13 Follow the lane between flint walls and turn **left** on a major road by the *Swan Inn* (Harveys) and continue straight over the mini-roundabout on Southover Highstreet. Along this ancient way you pass many interesting buildings, including *Anne of Cleves House*.

This 15th-century timbered house was part of the settlement made by Henry VIII to his spurned fourth wife, but the “flanders mare” never lived in it. Despite this, the house is a fascinating nearly perfect living museum of Tudor life. The house is open daily, except December and January.

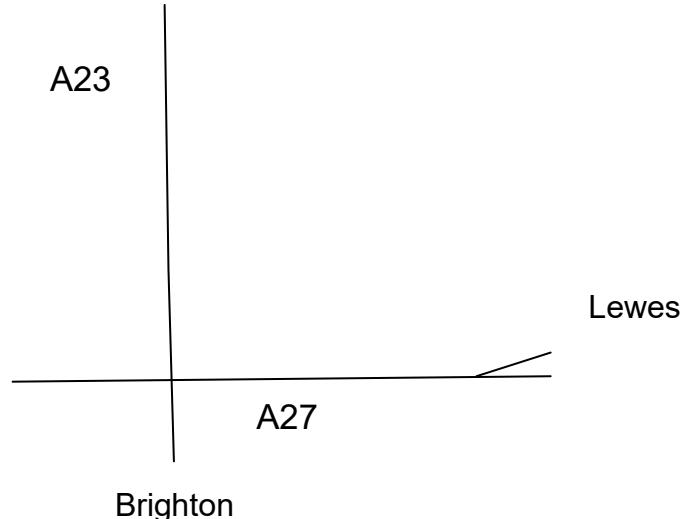
On the right, down a side lane and under a small railway arch, are the extensive ruins of *Lewes Priory*.

Lewes Priory was a vast richly endowed Clunian monastery founded in 1077 by William de Warren and his wife Gundrada, built of Caen stone. Its mighty church dwarfed all the other town churches and the position of Prior was one of the highest in the land. Its lasting importance in history comes from the signing of the “Mise of Lewes” by Henry III and what could be called the “second Magna Carta” (see the “Windsor-Runnymede” walk in this series) after his defeat by Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Lewes in 1264. The Priory was eventually demolished on the orders of Henry VIII.

On the right also is Southover Parish Church. (This part of Lewes is the old village of Southover.) Just before the *Kings Head*, an intimate pub with a good menu, turn **left** passing the public gardens of Southover Grange. At a junction keep straight ahead up the cobbled Keere Street to reach the High Street where the walk began.

Getting there

By car: the easiest way to Lewes is via the A27 and, if from coming from the north, the M23 / A23 (Brighton road). Simply follow the signs all the way to the town.



By train: regular trains to Lewes station.

fancy more free walks? www.fancyfreewalks.org