Fancy Free Walks

point your feet on a new path

Bewl Water and Bedgebury Forest

Distance: 25 km=15½ miles or 15½ km=9½ miles easy walking

Region: Kent, East Sussex Date written: 30-jul-2011

Author: Malinovka Date revised: 8-jan-2012

Refreshments: Kilndown, Hawkhurst Last update: 29-oct-2022

Map: Explorer 136 (The Weald) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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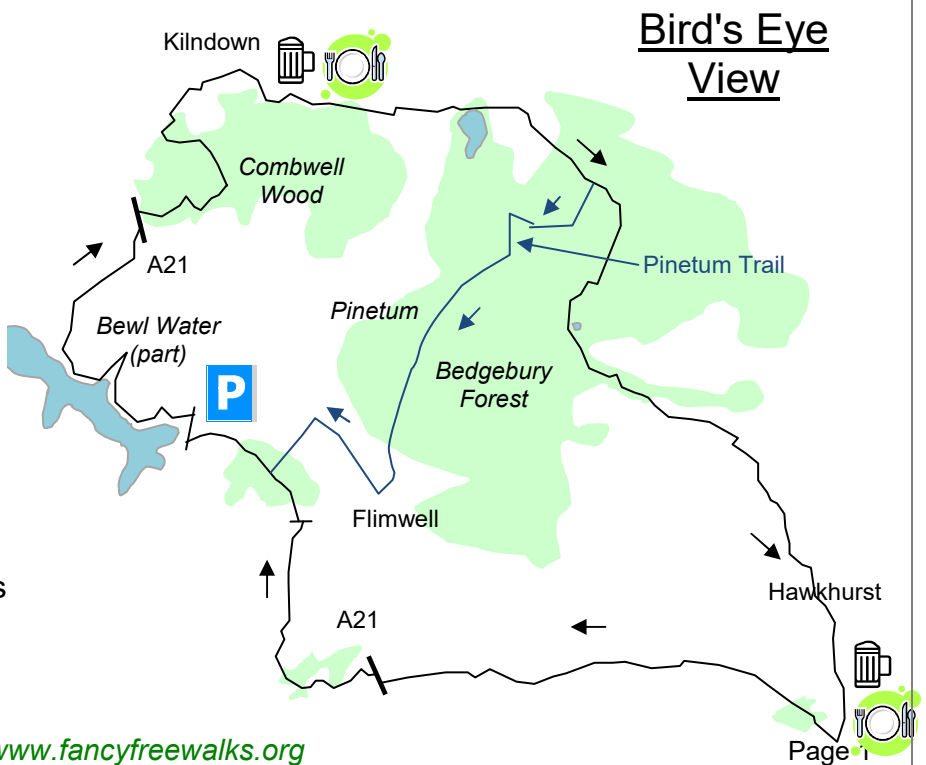
Lakes, villages, woodland, heath

In Brief

This is an awe-inspiring circular walk through the Kent-E.Sussex border country, full of variety and surprises. It visits the largest body of water in the South East and one of the very great forests of the region. A shorter option also allows you to visit the world-famous pinetum.

There are only a few small patches of nettles, not enough to worry an alert walker. The paths and tracks are all comfortable, with no steep gradients, so any sensible clothing and footwear will be fine. However, after a damp spell, you will find a few patches of mud, making boots preferable. The lakeside and the forest are perfect for a dog too but the stiles on the full walk would present problems for a large dog.

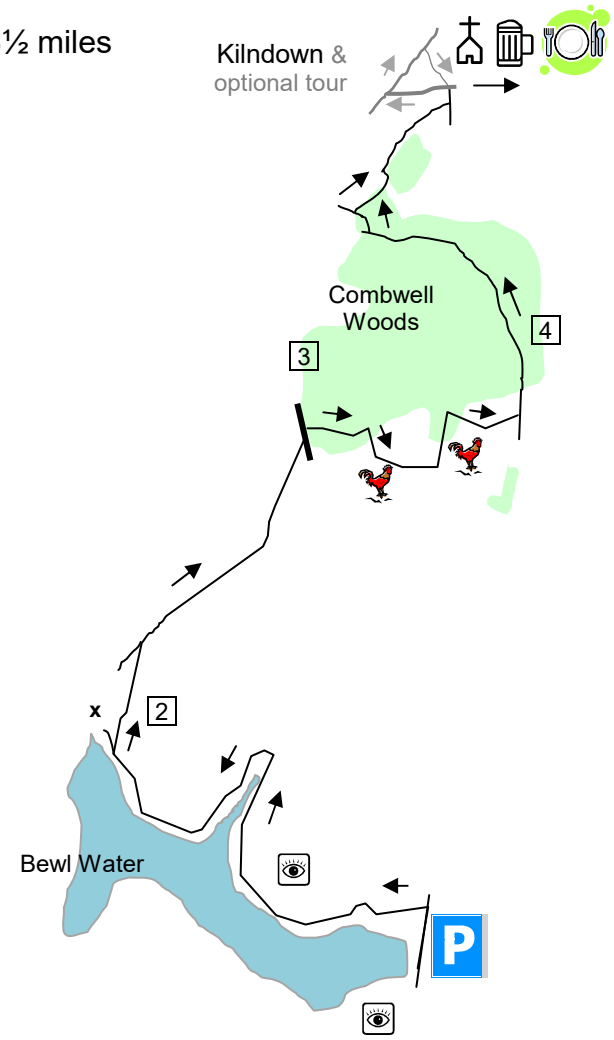


The walk begins at the head of Bewl Water in **Rosemary Lane** [Mar 2022: if you see a *Road Closed* sign it does not apply!], off the A21 near Flimwell in East Sussex, w3w:journey.stove.hubcaps, postcode **TN5 7PY**, grid ref TQ700320. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Bewl Water is the largest body of water in Southeast England. It was formed in 1973 by damming the valley of the Bewl and Teise rivers. It also draws water from the Medway. It serves as a reservoir for much of Kent and East Sussex. It is connected by a pipe to the Darwell reservoir and can transfer 35 million litres of water a day.

Leg 1: Bewl Water to Kilndown 6 km=3½ miles



1 After pausing to enjoy the view across the lake with the twin oasts of Overy's showing on one side, turn **right** along the road, back the way you came and, at a footpath sign, turn **left** on a tarmac track. The track runs past cottages and through a wooden gate, becoming a normal path, winding amidst willows and soon giving you another view of the lake. Follow the path into trees and ignore a footpath **right**. The path takes you nearer the lake and you may see rowers and sailing boats ply the waters. The path takes you through coppiced woodland, over a concrete bridge across a creek overgrown with wild flowers, known as the *Yalding Inlet*. The path turns left on the other side of the creek and you may wish for fewer trees, until suddenly you are by a grassy bank with more views and the occasional seat. Soon after you re-enter the woods, turn **right** at a sign that reads *Footpath to Post Boy*.

2 The path is sunken at first, then goes over a farm track, by an unneeded stile and into trees. When you come out of the trees, go straight on slightly uphill through two crop fields and ignore a footpath on the left. At a junction, go through a kissing gate and along an enclosed path by a fence. The path zigzags left-right and goes through another kissing gate, arriving next to a converted oast. Follow the drive passing the aptly named *Thatched Cottage*. You emerge by the busy A21. Turn **left** on the road for just 30m and then cross over to a footpath opposite. This is a difficult road crossing and you need to be careful of fast traffic coming from both directions but, with a little patience, you will always find a gap. You are entering a nature reserve. *Combwell Woods are a Site of Special Scientific Interest, containing many rare things such as mosses, liverworts and beetles, run by volunteers within the High Kent Weald Partnership; they are now almost impenetrable because of fallen trees.*

3 As you enter, go over a stile or through an adjoining tall gate in a metal fence. After 100m, ignoring the wider track on the left deeply rutted by forestry vehicles, take a track to the **right** by a yellow marker. (In 2021 the

"marker" was a thick yellow plastic tape around a tree.) In 100m, continue straight ahead as indicated by a post on the left with a yellow arrow. In nearly 200m, on your right is another post with a yellow arrow. Turn **right** here. In 50m, go over a bridge with handrails, up steps and straight ahead through a tall metal gate into a chicken range. *Combwell Chicken Farm expanded in 2014 to three multi-storey "houses" for chickens to keep their "free-range" credentials but they were criticised for overcrowding.* Go straight over to a similar gate on the other side. Keep straight on along a grassy path between fences. The path bends left at the corner of a wood by more chickens, still with a wire fence on your right. At the next corner, go **right**. In 250m, you reach the far corner and a T-junction. Go **left** here, over a stile, into another part of Combwell Woods.

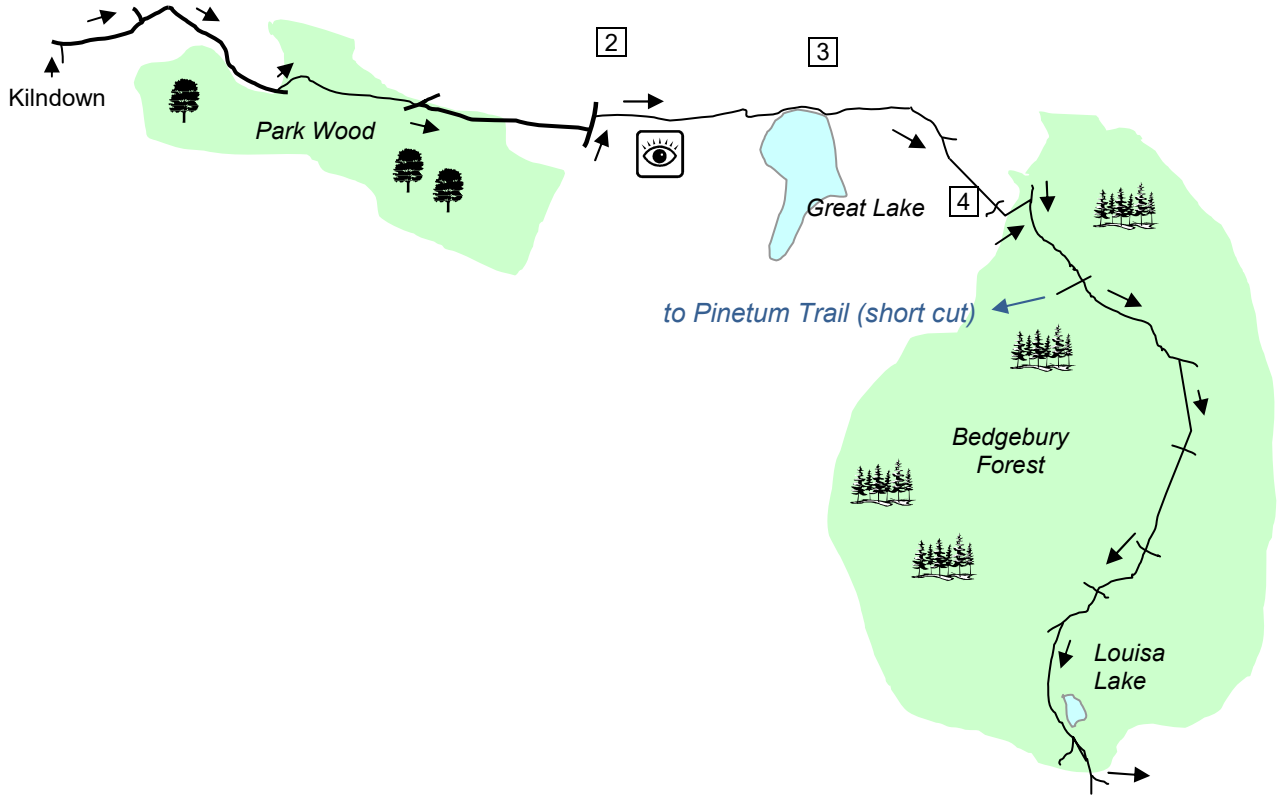
4 In nearly 200m, keep straight on at a marker post. Soon your path curves left, goes downhill, over a 2-plank bridge and up a steep bank. Go over a crossing path by a wooden barrier on your right. The path veers right in an open area and runs by a wire fence on your left. After around 250m you reach a T-junction. Turn **right** here as directed by the yellow arrow. Ahead of you is a large wooden gate. 20m before the gate, turn **right** on a path as directed by a yellow arrow on a post [Jun 2021: propped up against a tree]. (Don't confuse this path with another one very sharp right which has barrier across it.) In 150m turn **left** up a narrow path through trees as directed by a yellow arrow on a post. This path leads up to a stile. Cross the stile and turn **right** along the right-hand side of a large meadow. Across on your left is the village of Kilndown with *Farm Oast* visible. Go over a stile and continue ahead with fine views right since this is high ground. You reach a stile beside a large wooden gate. Go **left** on a drive for a few metres to a lane in Kilndown. The route continues to your **right**, but first you may want to have a look at this village, with the chance of refreshment. You could make a little village detour by turning **left** up Chicks Lane, **right** on the main road, visiting the church and the pub, retracing you steps and turning **left** 30m after the Village Hall on a narrow hidden footpath which comes out directly opposite where you are standing now.

Kilndown is a modern village by the usual standards. It was established by Viscount Beresford in 1840 as an extension to the Bedgebury Estate. The huge church is extraordinary, having an elaborate beamed and strutted roof, a marquetry screen at the west end, wonderful standing candlesticks, a carving of St George and the Dragon in one corner and a charming box-shaped church organ. It was designed by an Italian, although he seems to be paying tribute to Victorian Gothic. A little further along the road, the newly-run (2018) "Small Holding" pub/restaurant can also provide a pleasant drink with craft bottled ales, as well as a menu which is partly foraged in the Nordic style, with some inventive "small plates", a "½ Acre Menu" and a "Full Acre Menu". The "Small Holding" is ***closed all day Mon & Tue*** *and Sunday after 4, open* ***all day Fri & Sat****.*

Leg 2: Kilndown to Bedgebury Forest 4½ km=2¾ miles

1 **See map overleaf.** From the point where you arrived in the village, turn **right** (east) (that is, **left** if you took the little detour) on this very quiet lane, soon passing a turning on the left. The lane bends right. When the large meadow on your left ends and the lane goes over a stream, turn **left** at a footpath sign into woods. This little spur of Park Wood is a delight with wispy birches and ferns. Eventually the path veers right passing a field and leads down to a gate. Turn **left** here on the lane, immediately ignoring a minor road, Priors Heath, branching left. You pass a gate on the right as a

reminder of Combwell Woods. The lane passes houses on the left and ends at a major road by a group of interesting cottages. Turn **left** on the road and, in 50m, turn **right** at a footpath sign onto a track. Going through a swing-gate on the left of a large wooden gate, you find yourself in a wonderful wide grassy ride.



2 As you stride along this wide grassy strip, you can admire the pines and distant oasts that frame the perfect picture. The building over to your right with the pointed tower is Bedgebury Park School. Soon after seeing the school, you come to a pair of large wooden gates in the fence on your left, just as the fence curves slightly left. Turn **right** opposite the gates on a track into the trees. Immediately you come to a T-junction where a private track right leads to the school. Turn **left** on the track and shortly ignore a path forking left. Suddenly spread out to your right is the Great Lake. Even if you know this path, the lake is always a delightful surprise. The name may be a little exaggerated but the impression is grand indeed.

3 Continue beside the lake, walking along what is in fact a well landscaped retaining wall. Go over a stile, straight uphill in a meadow to another stile and uphill in the direction of two windswept pines. Keep straight ahead as you approach the distant houses to a large weeping willow and go over a stile beneath it. Turn **right** on a concrete drive approaching a group of oasts known as the *Three Chimneys* (although there are six oasts). Veer **right** and take the rightmost track between low wooden fences. Opposite a wooden gate, veer **left** on a cinder path which becomes a straight path between meadows. Finally, the path enters woodland. You are now well and truly in the great Bedgebury Forest.

Bedgebury Forest owes its existence to the poor acidic soil which discourages agriculture. It includes the National Pinetum, on the west side, the world's finest collection of conifers, listed among the 'Seven Wonders of the Weald'. Nevetheless it was always a working forest, a centre of the Wealden iron industry where sandstones and clays were dug and quarries and brickworks worked, powered by water and steam from the various hammer ponds. Apart from forestry, the main use now is recreation, include walking, cycling, mountain biking, horse riding and orienteering based around a Visitor Centre. Archaeologists have revealed evidence of Roman presence and an entire history of occupancy from the Jutish tribes (pre-Norman) till recent times.

Among the archives appears the names of Kenwulf, King of Mercia, in 815 and John de Bedgebury from the early 1300s. Members of his family are buried in Goudhurst Church and are linked by marriage to the Culpeppers, who lived here until the Restoration. (See other walks in Kent in this series: "A Way Through the Rocks" and "Offham, Old Soar Manor".) Henry VIII and Elizabeth I visited Bedgebury (of course).

4 Immediately turn **left** at a little fingerpost. In 70m, at a T-junction with a fingerpost, turn **right**. You now follow a long track through this stunning landscape but you need to be alert as the next turning is unmarked. You pass a magnificent stand of scots pines on your left and a mountain bikers' "red route" on the right. 140m further, at a markerpost, you reach a junction with a track on the right.

Decision point. If you wish to visit the Pinetum and return to Bewl Water by a shorter route, skip to near the end of this text and do the **Pinetum Trail**. Otherwise, continue with the next leg.

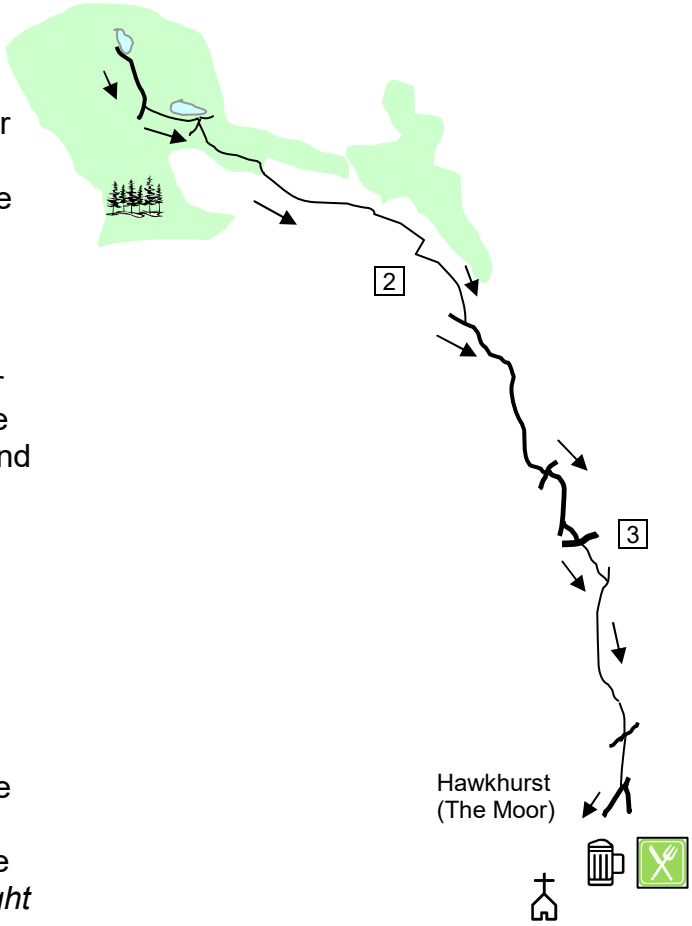
5 300m further, after a double bend, you come to another 2-way fingerpost. Turn **right** here, thus leaving the official bridleway. This wide grassy path passes close to Sugarloaf Hill on your left and soon reaches a fork. Take the **right** fork, soon crossing over another path. You reach a very wide crossing path via a metal barrier. Go straight over, passing another metal barrier. At another junction with a markerpost, keep straight on. In 100m, you reach paths on the left with a blue arrow. Ignore these and stay on the main wide path. In 50m, at a markerpost, veer left, still on the main track, ignoring a grassy path uphill. Soon you pass the picturesque Louisa Lake on your left, a favourite destination for families and their bikes. Never designed to add such beauty to the landscape, this was in fact once a hammer pond. At the next junction, keep ahead, passing a 3-way markerpost. As the track begins to rise at another 3-way fingerpost, you come to a turning on the left by a metal barrier.

Leg 3: Bedgebury Forest to Hawkhurst 4½ km=3 miles

1 **See map overleaf.** Turn **left** at the metal barrier onto a narrower path. Soon you reach another pond on your left, swirling with ducks. Ignore an uphill track here sharp right but take the second track to the right, initially downhill. The track rises to a high point above the valley on your left. In a while, pass a wheatfield on your right and ignore a left fork which is only a farm track. Your path runs between banks. Where it ends, veer **right** on a farm track and immediately join a path coming from the left. In 10m, turn **left** by a broken stile along the right-hand side of a field. In the corner, veer **right** through a line of trees and turn **left** along the side of the next field. Turn **right** round the corner of the field. In 50m, just before a metal gate, go **left** over a stile into a pasture.

2 Cross the pasture under wires to a stile by a metal gate on the other side. Go straight across through a gap in the hedge and veer a fraction **right** in the meadow, heading for a broken oast visible ahead. Go over a stile next to a wooden gate and veer **left** on a drive by the garden of a house. You now follow this long drive for over 800m. It winds and undulates and is mainly sunken, the main advantage being that you can make easy progress. Finally, the drive meets a crossroads. Cross the major road to join a lane on the other side. You pass some pleasant houses on the outskirts of Hawkhurst. As you approach the main road, fork **left**, cross the road and go straight ahead through gates into the grounds of Marlborough House co-educational prep school. *Notable alumni of this school are "Thomas the Tank Engine" author the Rev. W.V. Awdry (who knew Hawkhurst when the trains still ran), cricketer David Gower, playwright Stephen Poliakoff and novelist Peter Vansittart.*

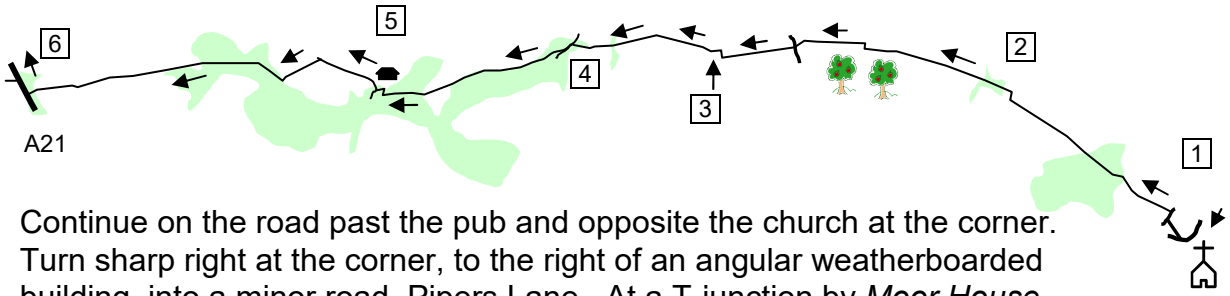
3 Keep ahead on an initially tarmac track. Where the track bends right, keep straight ahead over the grass. As you approach a line of trees, veer **left** to go through a swing gate and veer **right** on a path coming from the left. This fenced path soon leads between meadows. It zigzags left-right round a laurel hedge. Ignore a footpath leading off to the left here. There are hedges and fields on your left and woodland on your right. The path now takes you over a stream and up through woodland. Go through a metal swing gate to a road of white weatherboard houses. Cross this road diagonally to a tarmac footpath opposite. Cross a lane next to a Victorian school building. Cross straight over the cricket green (or round it if a match is in progress) to join the main road on the left. Ignore Hastings Road forking off left (signposted *Bodiam*) and stay on the main road, quickly arriving at the *Eight Bells Inn*.



Hawkhurst is practically divided in two and this is the older "half", known as "The Moor". The name of the town means simply "Hawk Wood". It was a favourite place of settlement in the middle ages of Flemish weavers who brought with them a taste for beer. This was one cause of the many hop fields that sprang up in this part of Kent. In the 1800s, so many Cockney hop pickers would arrive in the late summer that this alone paid for the railway branch line (now closed). Hawkhurst gave its name to the notorious gang of smugglers known as the "Hawkhurst Gang" active in the 1700s. They made use of the extensive forest of Kent and Sussex to store their caches and relied on sheer terror and the complicity of the local people. (See "Harting Down", another walk in this series".) Their power extended as far as Dorset where they raided a government Custom House in Poole. Interestingly, their chief contraband was ***tea****. The large church of St Laurence is worth visiting: its great east window is a marvel.*

The "Eight Bells Inn" is a no-nonsense local with some good brews (including Rother Valley's "Level Best") a medium-sized garden and a separate dining area.

Leg 4: Hawkhurst to Bewl Water 8 km=5 miles



1 Continue on the road past the pub and opposite the church at the corner. Turn sharp right at the corner, to the right of an angular weatherboarded building, into a minor road, Pipers Lane. At a T-junction by *Moor House*, turn **right** and immediately **left** on the tarmac of Hensill Lane, marked as a footpath. At the metal gates and pillars of *Hensill House*, take a **left** fork. Your track goes down through woodland. As it emerges back into the light towards farm buildings, fork **right** at a stone footpath sign, up a bank and along the left-hand side of a field. On the other side, go through a gap in the hedge and into the next pasture. Keep straight along the full length of this field to the far right corner.

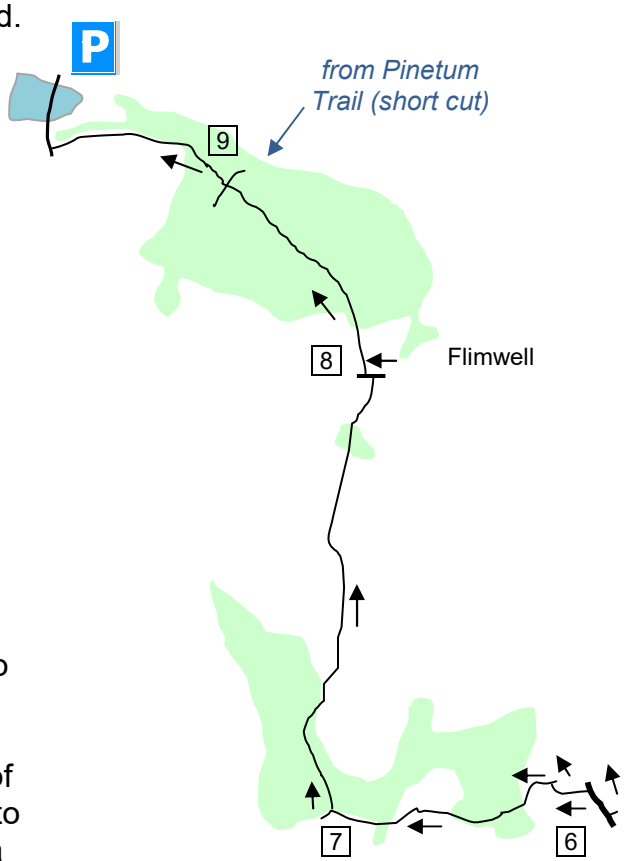
2 In the corner, turn **right** over a stile, across the short end of a meadow, over a stile and a 3-plank bridge and **left** on a narrow path. The path runs along the edge of woodland, past two redundant stiles and along the left-hand side of an orchard. Continue through the middle of the next apple and cherry orchard, then along the right-hand side of the next. At the end, where you meet a crossing path, zigzag right-left to continue along the left-hand side of the next two orchards. In the corner, go down to a road. Turn **left** for 15m on the road and then **right** up a bank into a wheatfield.

3 When you meet a hedge on the other side, do **not** go over the stile ahead into a field of horse jumps, but turn **right** along the edge of the wheatfield. At the next corner, go through a small wooden gate and across a meadow of tall grass. On the other side, go over a stony track and along the left-hand side of the next meadow. This pleasant grassy path runs next by a house and garden on your right. Follow it through a patch of woodland and over bridges until you meet a wire fence.

4 Turn **left** by the wire fence and, where the path quickly divides, keep to the right-hand upper path. Continue ahead into a long open meadow and keep to the left-hand side, staying near the woods on your left. Your path goes over a bridge and an overgrown stile. Keep along the left-hand side of the next meadow. As the meadow widens, keep straight ahead across the centre, aiming for the far right corner. Go over a stile [Jun 2021: collapsed] and a long wooden bridge, then up a grassy path towards a house. Go straight ahead across a small private orchard and turn right-left in front of the house (which is also a cattery) to meet a track.

5 Turn **right** on the track which quickly bends left. Go through a small wooden gate beside a larger one onto a track beside a sheep pasture. Half way along, turn **left** on a track through a band of trees into another meadow. Cross straight over the meadow, a fraction right, and go through a gap in the fence on the other side, guided by some yellow arrows. Turn **right**. You are now on a comfortable wide grassy path. On the other side go through a metal gate and up the left-

hand side of a meadow. Continue across the centre of the next meadow [2013: a walker reports electric wire and cattle obstructing the route; if necessary, divert **left** through farm]. At the other side, go out on a track to the A21 road opposite *Mountpumps Oast*. Turn **right** on the main road.



6 In only 50m, turn **left** carefully across the main road and between two brick pillars on a tarmac drive. Immediately go up over the grass on the right to continue alongside a wall and through a small wooden gate. Follow the path along a narrow hedged path to another small wooden gate and over a stile into a meadow. Do not go down the meadow ahead but, after admiring the views south, turn **right** to a go through a large wooden gate and turn **left** on a tarmac dive. The drive goes down into woodland and approaches a large, rather forbidding, wooden gate. Veer **right** in front of the gate only to meet another wooden gate. Veer **right** in front of this, over a stile. The fenced path comes out into a meadow. Keep to the right and, in a corner by a fingerpost, turn **left**. Go over a stile in the corner on a path downhill. Keep ahead, crossing the short end of a long meadow and go over a stile tightly set into the bottom corner. Your path now goes down a steep bank and over a bridge across a stream, then over a stile and up the right-hand side of a large meadow. As the edge bends left, you reach a 3-way fingerpost. (At the time of writing, this post has been twisted round and is incorrect.) Turn **right** here over a stile into the woods and immediately turn **right** again downhill.

7 Follow this winding path through woodland beside a stream on your left. The path now rises for some distance through an old coppice. Finally you come out onto golf links which may come as a culture shock after so much wild rambling. Keep **left** as far as the next fingerpost, then veer right across the green towards the next fingerpost, visible on the other side. Here, turn **left** on the first of two tarmac paths. As the path shortly bends left downhill, leave it by keeping straight on, on the level, along the right-hand side of the green. Go over a stile on a narrow path between a fence and trees. Where the path emerges, veer **right** by farm sheds, passing a small oast. Keep to the track, gently uphill, going past the drives of various houses, finally arriving at the road in Flimwell. *The "Royal Oak" in Flimwell, which has a good unpretentious menu, is about 800m away to the right, possibly worth returning to by car.*

8 Cross the road and take a track opposite, a few metres to the left. Follow the track and go over a stile beside a large wooden gate, into a fine forest of tall birches and pines. At a signed crosspaths, go straight over.

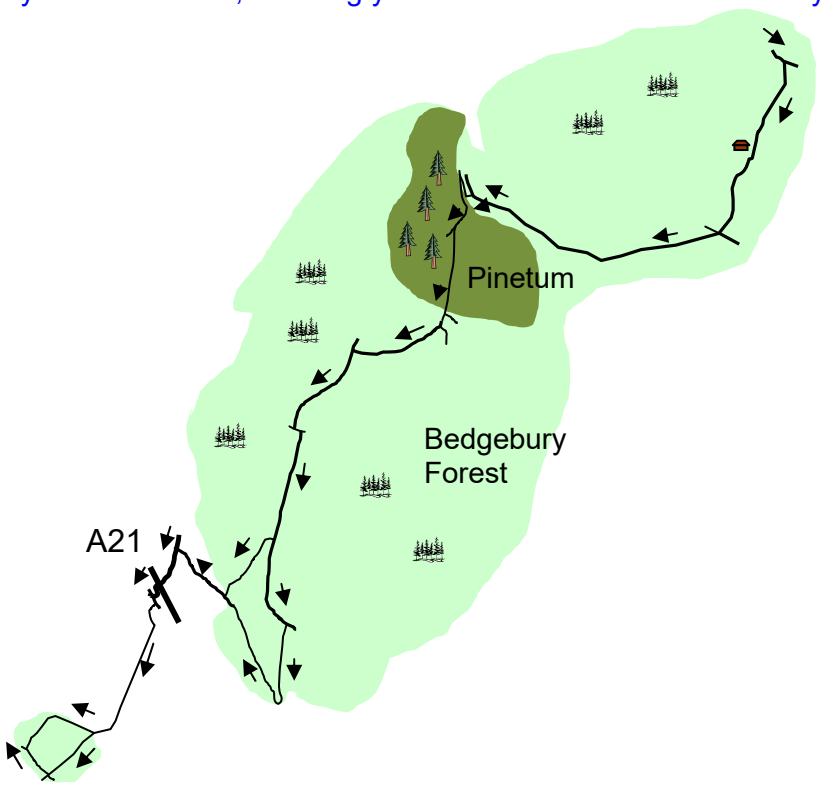
Here the Pinetum Trail rejoins the main walk.

9 Avoiding all turnings off, stay by the wire fence on your left. Go over a stile and a bridge over a usually dry stream. Cross an open area of grass and small oaks, then another footbridge, with a meadow on your left, with the

top of Ketley's Oast visible. This pleasant grassy path widens as it passes a group of weatherboard houses up on your left. Finally, go through a metal gate at Bewl Water and turn **right** on Rosemary Lane to the place where the walk began.

Pinetum Trail 5½ km=3½ miles

Take this route as a short cut from Bedgebury Forest back to the start at Bewl Water by a shorter route, enabling you to visit the Pinetum on the way.



1 Turn **right** at the junction on an unsigned wide track. The track curves gently right downhill, then gradually rises. It crosses a muddy track, goes through a one-bar gate and passes *Brick Kiln Cottages*. You reach a junction between some posts. Veer **right** onto the main track, ignoring a path on the right at a one-bar metal gate. In 300m, ignore a left fork at a one-bar metal gate and continue ahead. Soon you reach some buildings that serve as offices of the forest management. There is a visitor's centre down sharp left. Keep straight ahead past the buildings, leaving them to your left, staying on the main track. As you pass a track on your left, the track becomes tarmac. Just 15m after this, turn **left** through a small wooden gate that bears the message *Welcome to the National Pinetum*. There are toilets here in the wooden hut. (To see more of the lake, you can also stay on the tarmac lane downhill and go sharp left through a larger wooden gate at the bottom.)

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2 Turn **right** downhill on any of the paths that descend towards the lake. Near the bottom, turn **left** down a bank and **left** again, doubling back, on the main path running beside the lake. This is a delightful spot with wood carvings beside the path. Very soon there are some wooden railings, after which the path forks. Take the **left** fork, the more level option, staying on the main path.

Bedgebury's National Pinetum was created in 1925 using trees moved from Kew that was thought to be too near the pollution of London. It is the most complete collection of conifers anywhere in the world, with over 7,000 trees of 2,300 different types over 127 hectares, including rare, endangered and historically important specimens, such as yew, juniper, thuja and various other cypresses, some no longer found anywhere in the world. The Pinetum is a masterpiece of design, using science to combine different trees and art to produce a visually stunning result. The Pinetum contained the "Old Man of Kent", a grand fir planted in 1840, now (2016) felled but being replaced. A string of lakes and, in the wider forest, adventure grounds and challenging bike trails make Bedgebury a huge attraction.

3 After an exhilarating walk, you reach the exit by a wooden gate by a welcome sign. Keep straight ahead, ignoring a track immediately left. In 40m, ignore another path branching off left and keep straight ahead on the main wide path. Eventually you come to a T-junction with another entrance to the Pinetum on your right. Turn **left** here, soon going through a popular area with a snack bar (not always open), sand, picnic tables and a large family adventure site. Continue straight on until soon you reach a junction. Turn **left** and immediately **right**, thus keeping to your original direction, still on a wide sandy path, probably in the company of many families out to enjoy the forest. About 400m from the last junction, you pass a cyclist s post on your left with the number 61 on the back and then soon after you pass a wooden bench on your right just as the path curves left by the green metal fence of the reservoir. Reaching the A21 crossing has been a challenge since the reservoir was built.

4 Immediately behind the wooden bench, turn **right** down a narrow path with the green metal fence of the reservoir to your left. Continue until, after about 200m, you see and head for a concrete water tower. In front of the water tower turn **right** on a concrete track. (There is a radio/mobile signal mast that you can see off to your right but this is not on your path.)

5 The track soon becomes tarmac. After 200m, go over a cattle grid and, soon after that, reach a minor road. Turn **left** on the road, Lady Oak Lane, soon reaching the main A21 road. Cross both carriage ways of the main road carefully. Very close to a road sign indicating *London Sevenoaks A21 Lamberhurst*, take a narrow overgrown path down a bank beside a railing. *(Don't miss this hidden path!)* It leads to a quiet lane running parallel to the main road. Turn **left** on the lane for 20m, then **right** beside some metal farm gates.

6 You pass some steel barns on your right and reach a field. Turn **left** at the field, alongside a garden fence. As the field opens up, keep ahead along the edge for another 20m and go **right** at the corner [2022: some walkers simply walked straight down to the far end]. At the next corner, where the edge of the field bends left, keep straight ahead down the centre of the field heading for an isolated tree, with a further line of trees visible beyond. Follow the line of trees down to a makeshift stile leading, via a bridge and redundant stile, into woodland. Keep to the official footpath, straight ahead uphill, as indicated by a yellow arrow on a tree, turning **right** at a 4-way fingerpost.

Now re-join the main walk for the final short stretch back to Bewl Water at Leg 4 section 9.

Getting there

By car: Rosemary Lane if off the A21. Coming from the north, it is in a narrow stretch, just after a curve to the left. The lane is unmarked except for a junction road sign. It is exactly 3 km=1.9 miles south of the Scotney Castle Roundabout (the southern end of the Lamberhurst bypass, the one with the "bridge of trees"). You pass a terrace of three red tile-hung houses, then comes a "Farm Traffic" sign below a "side turning right" sign. Rosemary Lane is on the **right**, just before a yellowish timber-framed house adjoining a large red-tiled house, *Stonecrouch Farmhouse*. Coming from the south on the A21, it is on the **left**, 2.7 km=1.7 miles from the traffic lights at Flimwell. Go 1.2 km=¾ mile and park on the right-hand side of the dam above Bewl Water. This is a popular parking spot, no problem for the early bird.

Another possible parking place is near the pub in The Moor, Hawkhurst (TN18 4NX).

By bus/train: bus 254 or 256 from Tunbridge Wells to Hawkhurst . Check the timetables. Buses from Etchingham station to Flimwell: check the websites.

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