Fancy Free Walks *point your feet on a new path*

Bedgebury Forest from *The Great House*

Distance: 8 km=5 miles — easy walking with a short tricky section

Region: Kent — Date written: 18-aug-2025

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Refreshments: *The Great House*

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

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

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Forest, lakes, views, historic country pub, woodland trails, easy tracks

In Brief

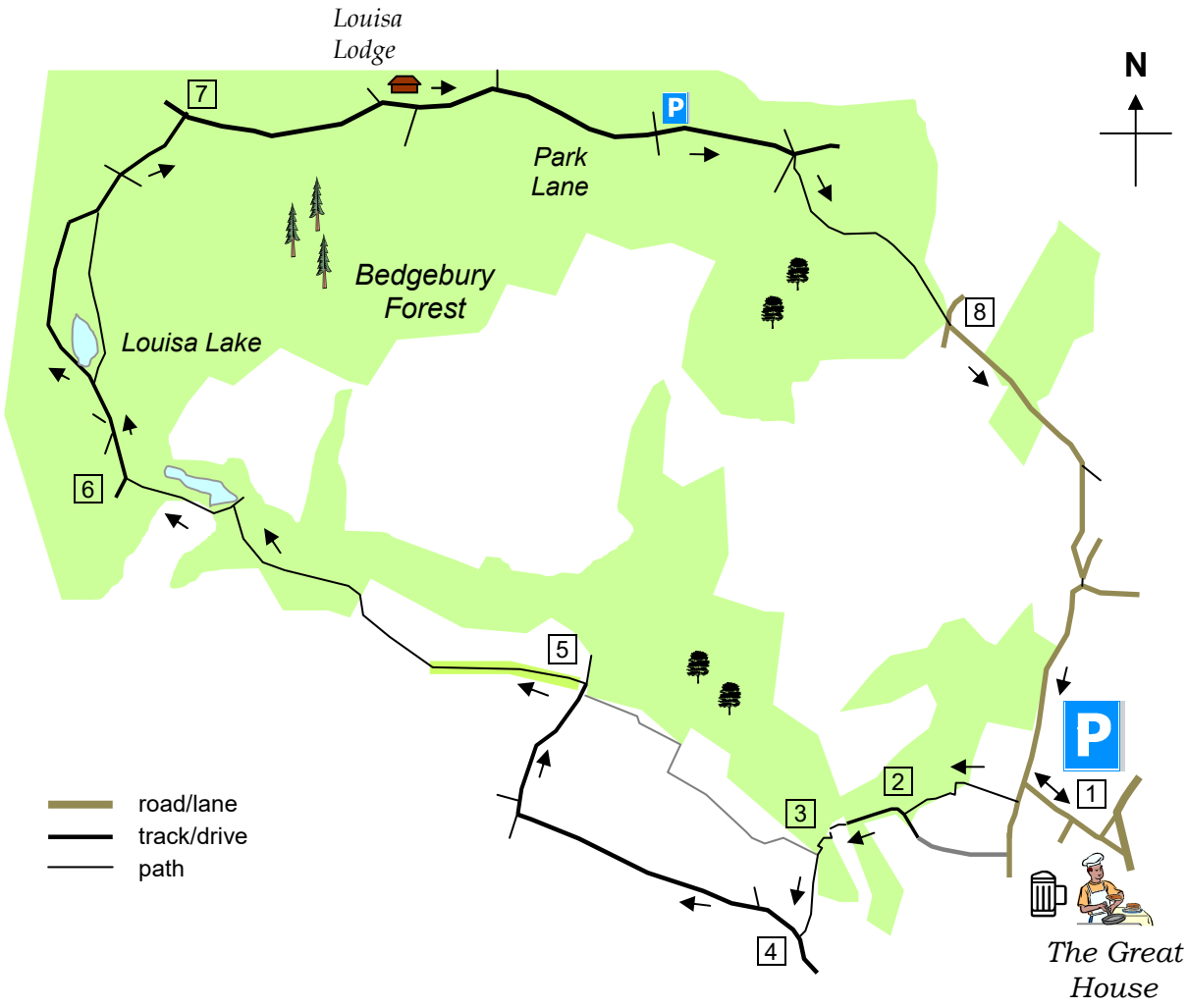
This walk explores part of the eastern fringes of this great forest. Away from the Pinetum and the more popular tourist spots, you may have most of the woods and paths entirely to yourself alone, until you reach the main cycle paths around Louisa Lake. After a tricky, rather mysterious, venture to find the high meadow, you will have easy tracks through some quite dramatic woodland.

The reward on completing the walk is one of the best gastropubs in the area, a large whitewall cottage dating from 1615 with a charming garden setting - see note at end. To book or enquire at *The Great House*, ring 01580-753119, or use their website.

There are no nettles on this walk but at the start there are some hollies that you need to swipe aside. So shorts should be fine if you are careful, because the rest of the walk is all easy wide woodland tracks. Good walking shoes are adequate, preferably with thick soles because of the stony paths towards the end. There are a number of high stiles, especially two near the start. Your dog is welcome, including in the inn, provided that he is not too large - be prepared to carry him over the high stiles; a short lead is needed because of the sheep fields.

The walk begins in a side road off the A229 road just north of Hawkhurst, Kent, near *The Great House* inn, w3w:releasing.shipyards.pest, postcode **TN18 5EJ**. The inn has a good car park, but because the inn is so popular, it may be kinder to park on the roadside or in the side road just ahead, unless it is a quiet day and you definitely intend to be a consumer of the excellent food and drink when you return. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



The Hawkhurst Gang have terrorised so many pages of this website, and it is good to track them down finally to one of their haunts. They met mainly in the Hawkhurst pubs and in the Mermaid in Rye where they would keep loaded weapons on the table. Their ruthless smuggling operations ran from 1735 to 1748, spanning the south coast from Kent to Dorset. Their main booty was tea and liquor. The local populace often benefited and tacitly encouraged them. The gang worked through terror, and with impunity, even raiding the Poole custom house to retrieve their goods. It was finally in Goudhurst that a militia was formed to fight back. The gang were finally hunted down and sentenced to be hung in chains or transported.

1 Walk along the road with *The Great House* on your left and ignore a footpath immediately after the pub. You pass a residential road (Wellington Cottages) on your left. At a T-junction, turn **left** and, in 50m, at a fingerpost, turn **right** up steps on a footpath between fences. The path goes left over a high but bypassable stile. It winds a bit over a bushy area and turns **right** by the corner of a wire fence. After an oak plantation, the path leads you **left** over a stile [Aug 2025: care! very rickety] and shortly over a very solid stile. Another stile places you at a T-junction with a wide stony path.

2 Turn **right** on the wide path. It soon leads you out, through a metal gate, into a long narrow grassy meadow. The path through the meadow is tempting but it is not on your route. Continue straight ahead aiming for the green *Footpath* sign opposite - where you will find a long wooden bridge across the Tanyard Gill (a stream that you will meet again). Cross the bridge, stepping over a wooden bar. Now follow the narrow woodland path uphill for only 20m to a faint fork. Take the **left**-hand option, going up three natural steps. Follow the clear path that leads you gently upwards, finally ending at a stile with two yellow arrows. Go over the stile into a green sheep meadow.

3 (There is a short cut at this point, not fully researched, suitable for those fitter walkers who are able to climb over (or squeeze under) at least one rather high stile: see "Sopers Lane Bypass" at the end of this text.) Continue straight ahead up the **left**-hand side of the meadow. In 100m turn **left** through a large, usually open, metal gate (the stile to its left is overgrown). Follow the **right**-hand edge of this second meadow and, in 50m or so, at a blunt corner, look to your **right** for a stile. Go over the stile (care! shaky) and down a slope to a tarmac lane, Sopers Lane.

4 Turn right on the lane uphill. You pass historic listed buildings: the *Farmhouse*, *Barn* and *Oast*. After an easy 700m total the lane reaches a definite left-hand bend. Turn **right** here, staying on the main tarmac. You pass the entrance to Grade-II listed Sisley Farmhouse, after which the lane becomes a dusty track. In 200m you pass a wooden house, *Sisley Farm Cottage* and, 100m or so further, you reach a junction of paths. Ignore a footpath on your right and, in 20m, just before a crop field, turn **left** on a path through a band of woodland into 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". Nevertheless 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 which you will soon see. 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.*

5 Keep straight ahead at all times on this woodland path. The mixed wood gets denser, with brief evidence of a field on your left. Deep down to your right is a valley floor. Finally, after 1km on this path, you arrive at the head of a large pond, usually teeming with ducks, which is a welcome surprise. *This pond (which is unnamed, so let's call it Frith Farm Pond) was formed by damming the Tanyard Gill; the reason was not to enhance the landscape, but to power a water mill and an iron furnace.* Keep **left** round the side of the pond. In 250m you come past a metal barrier to a T-junction with a wide track.

6 Turn **right** on the track. You may meet a number of cyclists now (indeed the first people today). They come down from a cycle track on the left. Keep to the main surfaced track, in the direction of red and green arrows. After 200m on this track , ignore a wide track on your left by a marker post with green and red arrows and continue ahead for a further 50m until you come to a fork with two blue arrows. Here the track branches in two to go either side of the next pond, and re-joins. This walk takes the **left** fork.

Soon there are benches and a favourite resting spot looking over Louisa Lake, another old hammer pond. (It is possible to go round the lake, via a well-hidden path past a fence of your right.) Continue, always on the main track. In 400m you re-join the other "branch". In a further 300m you arrive via a metal barrier at a very wide crossing.

7 Turn **right** at the crossing on a broad surfaced track known as Park Lane. After 500m, at a junction, turn **right** with the main track, passing on your left an eccentric cottage called *Louisa Lodge*, built around 1840, which used to be a toll house. About 650m further on, you come to a junction with a car park. In another 300m you arrive at a junction with a house called *Forester's Cottage*. **Leave** the main drive, Park Lane, here which becomes tarmac and curves away left. Ignore a wide forester's track on your right and take the **second** from the **right**, a fairly wide woodland path that has a partially hidden *Byway* sign on your left. Continue ahead through this quiet and attractive forest. The path becomes sunken and could be muddy in the wetter months. After a total of 500m, you come out to a junction by Trenley Farm where a tarmac lane comes in from the left.

8 Keep straight ahead on the lane, following the **left** curve. This very quiet country lane runs over a (dry) stream and passes a small quarry. After 700m you reach a 4-way junction. Keep **right** on Slip Mill Lane. In 500m turn **left** on Wellington Road, familiar from your outward journey, leading back to *The Great House* where the walk began.

The Great House was originally two cottages dating from around 1615. Because of its isolation, it was one of the haunts of the notorious Hawkhurst gang (see note at start). It was first called "Staymakers" after a former inn-keeper. In 2003 when the Elite pub chain took it over and renamed it from "Wellington Arms" which it had held since 1815 after the Battle of Waterloo. It's not certain the Iron Duke would approve of the decidedly French accent of the food and the menus. "To share" is "A partager" and fruits de mer, sole meuniere, snails and frogs legs almost jump off the menu. There are also steaks and pizzas; try the steak baguette at £15. Always ask about the chef's special. You can drink wine from the local Wildshark vineyards. All to be enjoyed on one of the very colourful split-level patios. Author forgot to make a list of real ales: feedback please! The inn is open daily from 11.30 till late.

Sopers Lane Bypass

This alternative route can be used by people who are able to climb (or squeeze under) one or two fairly high stiles (more like horizontal bars). This route is used (in reverse) by the great sister walk "Bewl Water and Bedgebury Forest". It was not fully researched at the time of writing, because this walk is aimed at the average, or more elderly, walker.

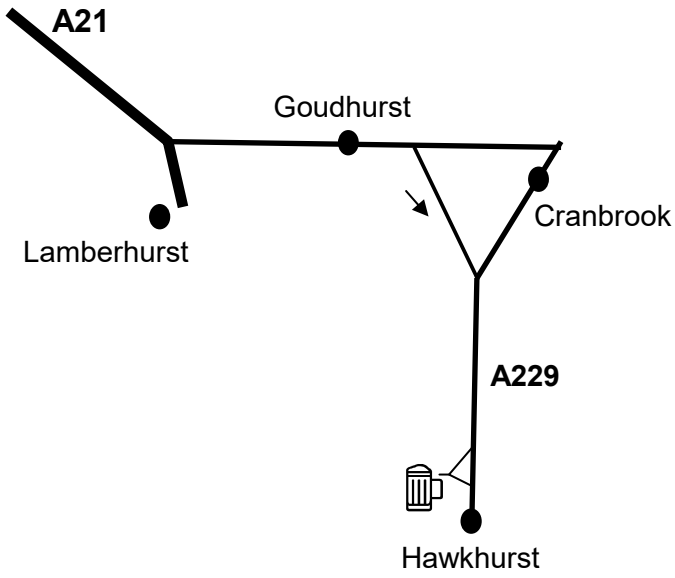
Turn **right** along the edge of the sheep pasture with woodland on your right. Before you reach the corner, veer **left** to go through a wide gap (or a metal gate if closed). Head for a large metal gate and stile in the hedgerow ahead. In the next sheep meadow continue dead straight across to another large metal gate and stile (the gate can be opened). Immediately go **right** over a very high one-bar stile and **left** along the edge of a crop field (currently maize). (From here, the description is uncertain: feedback please!) Turn **right** and **left** around the next crop field. Keep straight ahead along the left-hand edge of the next field. Just before the end, go **left** over another stile and **right** on a path, immediately reaching a T-junction with a

wide track. Turn **right** and in 20m, just before a crop field, turn **left** on a path through a band of woodland into Bedgebury Forest.

Now re-join the main walk at Section 5.

Getting there

By car: Gills Green lies on the main A229 between Cranbrook and Hawkhurst, just under a mile north of Hawkhurst. Coming from the London or M25 area, the natural way is by the A21, and **left** at the roundabout just before Lamberhurst. 1.7 miles after going through Goudhurst, turn **right** for *Hawkhurst, Hartley*. Turn **right** when you reach the A229. There is a sign on the **right** for *The Great House* but the turning is easy to miss.



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