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

Sissinghurst and Frittenden

Distance: 16 km=10 miles — easy-to-moderate walking

Region: Kent — Date written: 11-jun-2014

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Refreshments: Sissinghurst, Knoxbridge, Frittenden

Maps: Explorer 136 (The Weald) and 137 (Ashford)
but the maps in this guide should be sufficient

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

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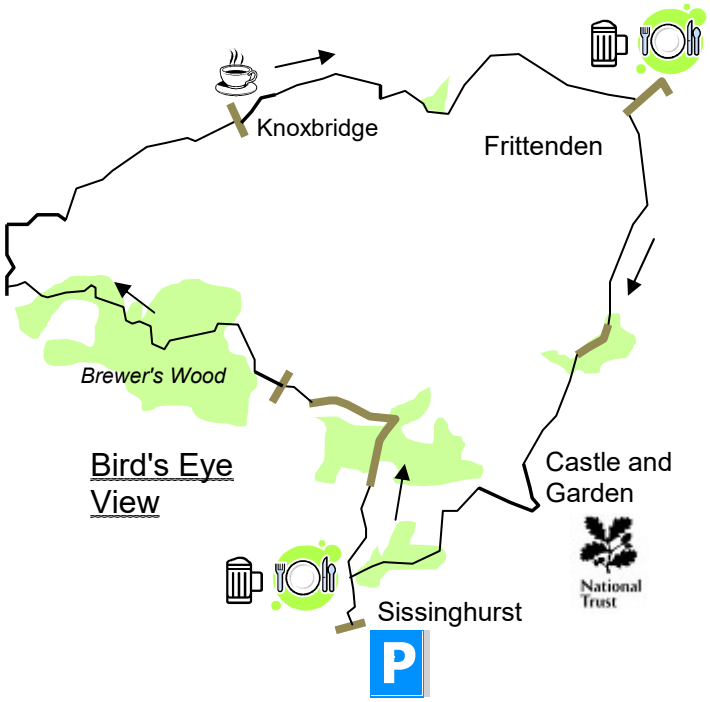
Villages, historic house and garden, woodland

In Brief

This is an extraordinary walk through a famous corner of Kent but where the footpaths are almost unknown. Apart from in the world-renowned garden and the villages, it is quite likely that you will not meet another person. The route navigates you carefully through Brewer's Wood, as though on a secret quest into a neglected and awe-inspiring forest. A highlight of the walk is Sissinghurst Castle and an optional visit to the famous garden created by Vita Sackville-West. Two excellent pubs and a café will be found *en route*.

There are nettles and brambles on this walk and long trousers are *definitely* essential. In high summer the tall grass can be a little taxing before the hay harvest and because the paths are so under-used you may need to stamp down the undergrowth in one or two places, where a stick is a great asset. There is not too much mud and strong walking shoes or trainers will be fine in the drier months. Some of the stiles are narrow or wired up and a little tricky, so this walk is not ideal for your dog, unless he is small enough to be carried.



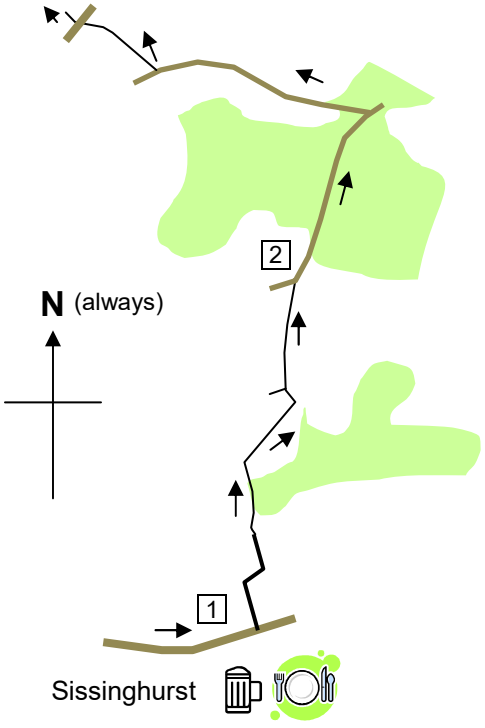
The walk begins in the village (*not* the Castle) of **Sissinghurst**, Kent, w3w:famous.valued.landowner, postcode **TN17 2JG**. There is always some room to park on the roadside. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Leg 1: Sissinghurst to Brewer's Wood 2½ km=1½ miles

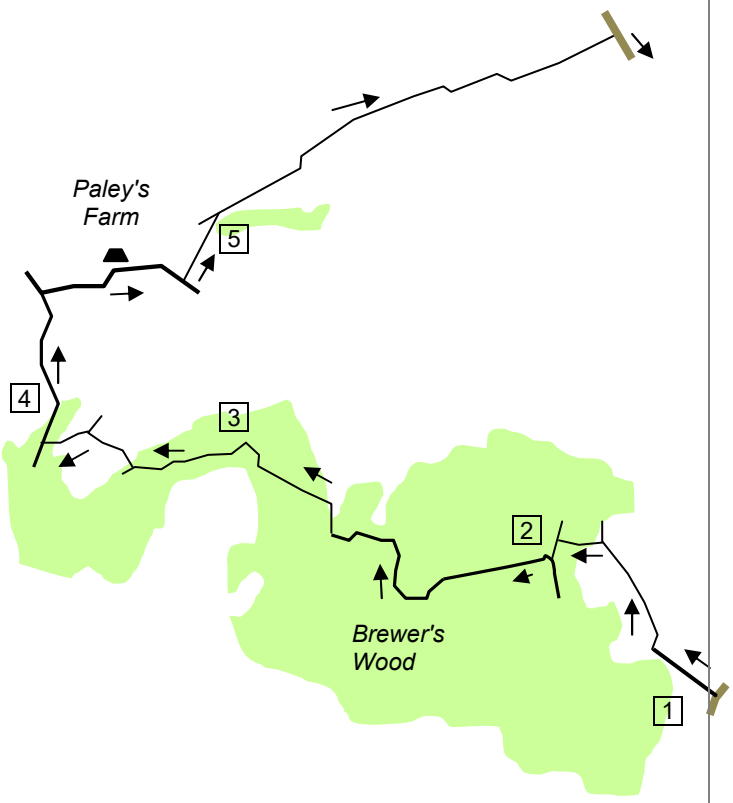
The name "Sissinghurst" (or "Saxenburst") belonged to the old Manor House and then the Castle (see later). The village where you are standing was called "Milkhouse (or Mylkehouse) Street". It had absorbed an offshoot of the Cranbrook textile industry and had gained a sordid reputation for black marketeering and riotous behaviour, stoked up by the Hawkhurst Gang. Duly shamed, local wealthy families financed the new church in 1838 and renamed the village in the 1850s. Recently the village has been transformed by tourism. The oldest house, the Post Office, became the antique shop, George Wag-horne's grocer's shop became the Tandoori and a group of three cottages became Rankins restaurant. In a retrophile gesture, the "Bull" pub renamed itself the "Milk House". Of the thirteen pubs originally in the parish, this and the "Three Chimneys" are the only ones that remain.

1 From the village of Sissinghurst, walk east along the main street with the *Old Post Office* and the *Milk House* on your left and the Village Chippy on your right. You pass the church and a small layby. Immediately after the layby, turn **left** on a tarmac drive signed as a footpath. The drive bends right and left. Just before the gate of a water treatment works, turn left-right along the right-hand edge of an apple orchard. The path takes you across a long bridge to a junction. Ignore the swing-gate on your right (your return route) and keep ahead through woods into a large orchard. Go straight ahead along the left-hand side of the orchard for **only 25m**, then fork **right** on a diagonal path that cuts across the orchard. When you reach the other side by the corner of woodland, turn **left** on a wide path that runs between orchards. In 50m this path meets another path coming from the left and veers **right** towards a road visible ahead. At the top, go over a stile to meet Frittenden Road.



2 Turn **right** on the road and follow it for 500m where it bends right and comes to a road junction. Turn sharp **left** here on a tarmac lane, London Lane. This quiet lane runs through pleasant countryside with *Comenden Manor* peeping through the trees on your right. After 500m you will notice a line of poplars on your right as you see an oast and blackboarded farm-house about 80m ahead. Turn **right** here between two posts, as directed by a yellow arrow. In only 5m, turn **left** beside wide pastures on your right. You come through a small metal gate into a small courtyard. The path ends at a large wooden gate beside a house and a main road.

Leg 2: Brewer's Wood to Knoxbridge 5 km=3 miles



1 The following sections are a remarkable route through Saunders and Brewer's Woods and you will need to concentrate; walkers have reported getting irretrievably lost in this section! Cross the road, the A229, a fraction left. **Care! especially in a group. This is a busy road on a bend with no safety verge.** Follow a tarmac drive for Saunders Farm, signed as a byway, past cottages. Just before a gate into the farm, veer **right** on a grass verge, through a large wooden gate, passing a beautiful timbered farmhouse. Continue on this lovely grassy path as far as the end of the sheep pasture on your left where the path forks. Take the **left** fork, staying beside the sheep pasture. The path veers off through the middle of the wood and reaches a T-junction in 30m. Turn **left**, going past a wooden barrier. In 40m your path meets a wide track. Turn **right** on this track which quickly passes a sign for Pitch Wood on your right.

!!

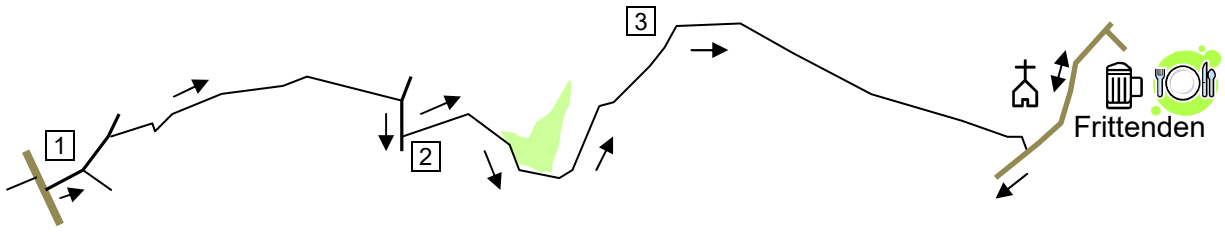
2 You will be following this winding woodland track for nearly 1km instead of the official footpaths which are all unmarked and lost in the undergrowth. The byword is: *at all times keep to the main track*. The track runs straight for 300m, then curves left and bends right. In nearly 100m it bends right again. In 100m it bends left again with a fenced meadow visible on your right. It shortly curves right, left and right again opposite a sign for Dray Wood. In 50m, at a fork, it curves right again, within sight of another meadow. Keep **right** here, with the meadow close by on your right. After 50m beside the meadow, the path curves left away from the meadowside. In late spring the bluebells here are so plentiful that it is impossible to avoid trampling them. After 250m straight through the bluebell wood, always staying on the narrow path, you see a wooden swing-gate on your left, a welcome confirmation that you are on the right path.

3 Go through the [2021: broken & propped up] swing-gate, over a 2-plank bridge, keeping left over a marshy area. Your path immediately curves right through lighter woodland [2014 over a fallen tree]. You need to concentrate here to keep to the main path through trees and shrubs. In a lighter patch you pass two timely posts both with yellow arrows. Your path soon veers right (avoid a narrow path here on your left into the woods) and passes to the side of a large rusty gate. Keep ahead along the left-hand side of the pasture heading towards an oasthouse. At the first boundary continue over a bridge with a yellow arrow and go diagonally **left** across the next small meadow, heading for a large metal gate to the right of a house (the first sign of habitation after an hour's walking). Go through the gate and turn **right** on a hardcore track, going immediately over a concrete bridge.

4 Your track passes an abandoned cottage and an oast, followed by Hartridge Manor and Farm. This pleasant newly-tarmacked track rises to meet a tarmac lane at the top. Turn sharp **right** on the lane, soon passing the superb *Paley Farm House* and the neglected oasts and farm, in sad contrast to the house. In 100m you reach *Mill Cottage* looking immaculate with its white weatherboard. Turn **left** opposite the cottage through a large metal gate by a yellow arrow. Go straight along the left-hand side of the field heading for a group of large trees. At the other side, a large metal gate takes you into a charming green triangular plot with sloping grass, various trees and a stream on your left.

5 Keep ahead and turn **right** on a wide farmer's path coming from a metal gate on your left, following some electrical poles. At the second pole veer **left**, as indicated by a yellow arrow, passing to the left of the third pole and veering towards the left-hand edge of the grass. In the extreme left-hand corner next to the stream go through a small metal gate by a yellow arrow. In high summer, before the hay harvest, this path can tax the legs but you should find a path of flattened grass about 15m from the edge to make your progress easier. A narrow path near the stream on your left leads you into another meadow and then over a stile into yet another. Finally, at the end of the last meadow, go through a metal gate and straight over, aiming just to the left of a long grey-roofed house. Here, go over two stiles to a main road, the A229 again. Turn **right** on the road and cross with care!

Leg 3: Knoxbridge to Frittenden 3½ km=2 miles



1 In 30m turn **left** next to the Knoxbridge Café *(good value and recommended by FF Walkers!)* and onto a tarmac drive. Ignore a track on the right and continue on the drive which leads to *Friday's*, an industrial-megascale egg farm of which the less said the better. (2021-26: A new path has been created which this guide now follows.) Turn **right** just before a barrier into the farm and follow a path through the bluebell wood, waymarked with yellow arrows. (If the terrain is challenging underfoot at first, it should soon improve.) The path immediately curves left within a narrow strip of woodland. After 300m the path runs close to a wooden fence and a large metal fence on your left, after which the path becomes very pleasant to walk, with tall oaks. At the end, after a brambly patch, the path suddenly comes out onto a tarmac drive by Little Wadd Farm. Turn **right** on the drive.

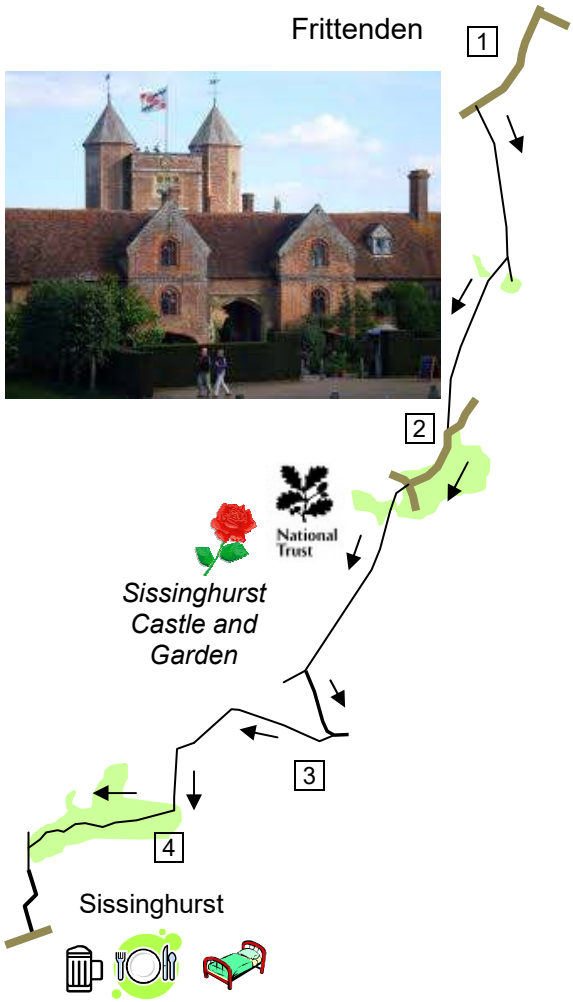
2 After 60m you pass a converted barn. Only 20m after it, go **left** at a yellow arrow over a long bridge with rails into a meadow. Go straight across the centre, under wires, aiming to pass the corner of a garden fence on your left. In the far corner go over a stile and along the left-hand side of another meadow. At the other side, facing a small wood, ignore a wooden gate marked *Janes Wood* on your left and continue round a little to the right to go through a metal gate into a sheep

pasture. Turn immediately **left** along the left-hand side, walking beside a new wooden fence and going through a metal swing-gate in the corner into another large meadow. *The steeple of Frittenden Church is now in view.* Go diagonally sharp **left** in the meadow, aiming for a solitary oak on the far left opposite side. On reaching it, go over a concrete bridge, passing the oak on your left. Maintain the same direction across the centre of the next meadow, passing a line of trees on your left, to reach the far corner. (As a guide, the church steeple should be at "2 o'clock".) Here, go through a metal gate and over a three-plank bridge.

3 Avoid a large wooden gate ahead and bear **right** on a path through a strip of woodland. Where the path ends, go **right** through a kissing-gate and **left** along the left-hand side of a pasture. As you proceed, ignore a kissing-gate on your left. Go through a kissing-gate and continue as before. At the end of the pasture, go through a gap by a pond and continue further to go through a wooden swing-gate into the churchyard of St Mary's Frittenden. Exit the churchyard via the lichgate. Your route is **right** along the road, but first you will wish to visit the village. So turn **left** to reach the centre of the village and, at the junction, the *Bell and Jorrocks* pub.

Welcome to the smallest parish in the borough of Tunbridge Wells! Like the other 'dens', Frittenden was a clearing in the vast forest of Andred. The church was built in 1848 to replace one that burned down. The "Bell and Jorrocks" pub was named after a merger between the "Bell" and the "John Jorrocks" across the road. Here you can have a good fixed-price lunch, accompanied by a live chicken or two, and quaff one of four ales (Harveys, Woodfords Wherry + 2 guests such as Exeter Lighterman).

Leg 4: Frittenden to Sissinghurst 5½ km=3½ miles



1 After a break for refreshment, retrace your steps, passing the school and church on your right and the village stores (closed Sat from 12 and Sun). Just after the adjoining Memorial Hall, turn **left** on a signed footpath, through a large wooden gate and along the right-hand side of a pasture. *On your left you have a view of the Frittenden Chimney and the Street Farm Oasts.* At the corner, continue across the centre to a small swing-gate under an oak. Continue slightly right on a narrow path across a crop field. *Biddenden church can be seen on the horizon, half left.* Go through a gap in a hedge and over a 3-plank bridge, then across another crop field towards an electricity pole. Under the pole your path divides. Take the **right**-hand option, walking beneath wires. At the other side you arrive at a wire fence. Turn **left** here for 70m, where you will find a stile in the hedgerow. Go **right** over this stile and go straight across an attractive meadow, aiming for a stile visible on the left-hand side of a line of trees. Go over this stile and cross a hay field, slightly left, passing a solitary tree to a metal gate in the far corner. Go over a stile and turn **right** on Sand Lane.

2 You pass a pond on your right and, after only 300m on this quiet lane, you reach a junction with Digdog Lane. Go straight over on a bridleway, passing a stonemason on your right, all that is left of the old brickworks, and *Old Brickyard Cottage* on your left. Continue straight ahead along the right-hand side of a field and, in 50m, take a path between hedges. After 600m you reach a junction with a wide stony path (very muddy in winter unfortunately). Turn **left** here on the path, passing the vegetable plots of Sissinghurst Garden and quickly reaching the entrance gate to Sissinghurst Castle. Go **right** through the impressive gate into the grounds. The restaurant and ticket office are on your right. The entrance to the garden itself is on your left, through the tower.

In the 1200s Sissinghurst Castle was a modest moated manor belonging to a pig farmer. The castle was the creation of Sir John Baker in the mid-1500s. In the Seven Years War (1756-1763) it was rented out as a prison to house 3000 French sailors. Cruelly treated by guards in overcrowded conditions, the sailors trashed the building, burning and looting the fine architecture. The remains of the castle were acquired by Vita Sackville-West of the Bloomsbury Group in the 1930s, moving here from Knole (see the walk "Knole and Ightham" is this series). She and her husband Harold Nicolson established the gardens that you see today, organised as a series of "rooms" each with a surprise element. The garden is open daily, for an entrance fee, free to NT members.

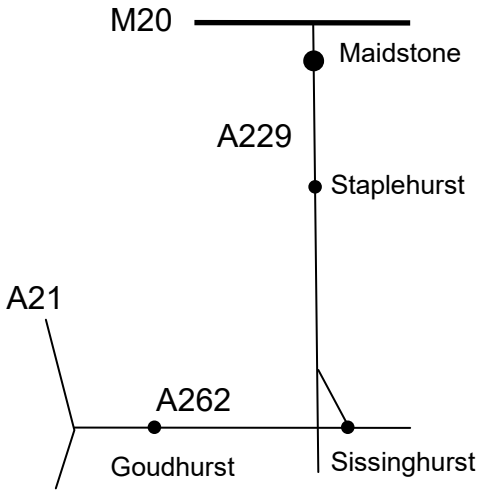
3 After possibly visiting the garden, go past the restaurant and visitor reception and continue on the track passing a coffee and garden shop. Keep ahead along the right-hand side of the car parks until you come out through a gap in the hedge into an orchard. Take a diagonal path to your **left** through the orchard to the opposite corner where there is a bench. Go through a small wooden gate next to two large ones onto a fenced track with a sheep pasture on your right. In 50m, go **left** through a small wooden gate, down the **lef**t-hand side of a meadow. At the far side, go through a swing-gate, over a bridge, through hawthorn and holly. As you come down to a wide track, turn **right** on it.

4 Your path winds through a chestnut wood and you may need to be alert to keep to the path. You go past a pond and a forest of birch on your right. Finally your path goes through a wooden swing-gate to meet a crossing path. Turn **left** over a long bridge (familiar from the outward leg) and up the left-hand side of an apple orchard. In the corner, go through a gap and continue on a drive coming from a water treatment plant. The drive bends right and left to reach the main road. Turn **right** on the footway, passing Sissinghurst church and the *Milk House* pub in the village where the walk began.

For final refreshments, the Milk House is an innovative pub / hotel in clean nordic style offering pizzas on the terazza and, since this is farming country, a grazing menu. Best of all, the Milk House is always open.

Getting there

By car: Sissinghurst is just off the A229 road from Maidstone. Alternatively, it can be reached via the A21 and Goudhurst.



By bus/train: bus 5 runs from Maidstone or Staplehurst station to Sissinghurst, hourly or two-hourly on Sunday. Check the timetables.

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