Fancy Free Walks

point your feet on a new path

Underriver

Distance: 9½ km=6 miles — easy walking

Region: Kent — Date written: 14-jul-2020

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Refreshments: Underriver, Shipbourne

Map: Explorer 147 (Sevenoaks) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Villages, easy field paths, woodland, natural water garden, great houses, parkland, extensive grasslands, oak avenues, forest tracks

In Brief

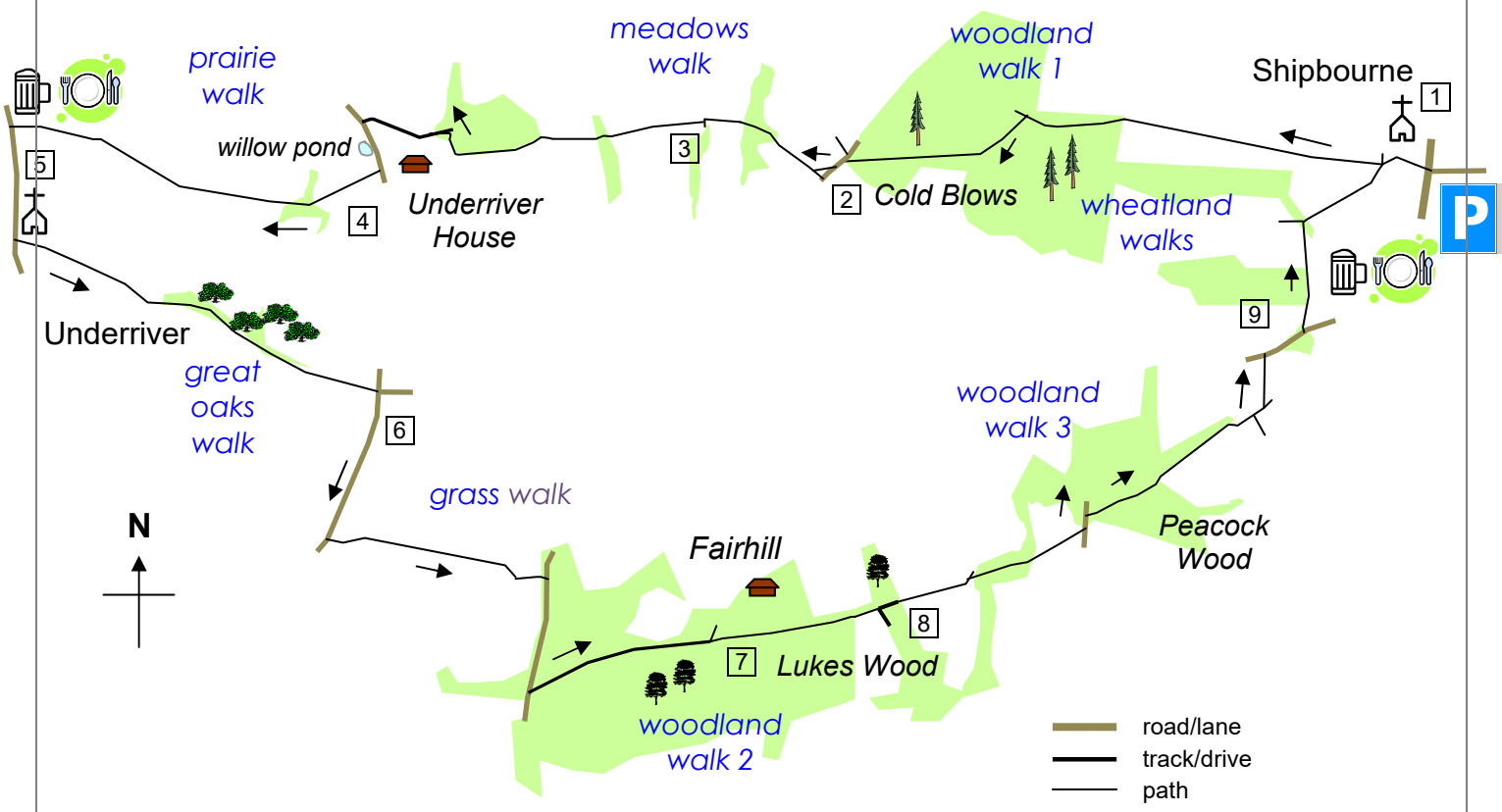
This is a walk between two villages through a remarkable Kentish landscape which for centuries was dominated by great estates. Consequently, instead of arable land, you will stride along a whole kilometer of waving grass; and instead of a farm track you will walk the length of the most perfect avenue of great oaks. Between these, there are long woodland walks and green pastures.

The splendid *White Rock* pub in Underriver *has now re-opened* as from 20 October! (See their website or ring 01732-833112 to book ahead.) There is also a "superb" pub/restaurant in Shipbourne with plenty of outdoor seating (to enquire at the *Chaser Inn*, ring 01732-810360).

This walk is almost entirely on firm paths, through woodland, across fields and on wide tracks. After a wet winter/spring, such as 2024, there is some mud near the start (in the woodland of Cold Blows), making boots advisable. The field paths are clear and well made. There are some stiles but they are all of the very robust Kentish standard and you can cross them almost without breaking stride. One or two can be a problem for a large dog. There is one pasture with a few quiet cattle but the farmer has very kindly invited you to use an adjoining field.

The walk begins at the car park in **Upper Green Road**, opposite the church in **Shipbourne**, near Tonbridge, Kent, w3w:shade.spray.issues, postcode **TN11 9PE**. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



Shipbourne, pronounced "shibbun", is named after the local sheep and from the Bourne stream. St Giles church was built by Edward Cazalet of Fairlawne and opened for worship in 1881. The gargoyled tower contains six bells.

1 Starting in Shipbourne, take the wide path next to the pub leading to the church. Pass to the right of the church and leave the churchyard through a little round gate at the other side to meet a tall 4-way fingerpost. Take the **middle** choice, a path that leads straight on beside a hedge on your right. In the next wheatfield, take an excellent path across the centre. At the other side, go over a stile into the great woodland of Cold Blows. After 200m beneath these majestic Scots pines, at the top of a rise, you pass a wooden field gate on your right. Go another 25m and fork **left** on a rising path. Soon the path starts to descend gradually and, after a total of ½ km brings you out, via a stile, onto a tarmac lane.

2 Turn **left** on the lane towards *Budds Oast* but immediately fork **right** on a narrow path across the grass (a short cut to the next footpath). Take a path to the **right** of the fence of another house, *Great Budds House*. Your path goes over a stream in a natural water garden. It leads over a stile beside a large wooden gate (or through a gap on the right), into a field. A wide shingle path leads between fields. Where the path suddenly bends sharp left, keep straight ahead on a good path (sculpted by tractor tracks) across the centre of the crop field. At the other side, after a bridge-with-rail and a stile, the path goes over a wide grass crossing path.

3 A large open gate next to a disused stile now leads you straight across a pasture to go through an identical large open gate also next to a disused stile. Continue past a barn, straight ahead through two large open gates - each with adjacent disused stiles, and along the right-hand side of a meadow. A stile now leads you onto a path which curves right beside the

brick wall of *Underriver House*. Follow this fenced off path to soon arrive at a dirt driveway. Turn **left**, following a yellow arrow, on a narrow footpath. (The footpath runs parallel to the driveway on your right but soon re-joins it.) Follow the drive past cottages to a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane. Soon, opposite the entrance to *Underhill House*, you pass a pond embellished by an ash and oak, overwept by a large willow. Shortly after, you get a good view of the house.

Underriver House was a "Plain but pleasing seven-bay house, built for Richard Goodhugh in 1697". He was High Sheriff of Kent for that year and therefore the principal law enforcement officer. The house replaced a much earlier house and farm in what was called "Little Underriver". The house changed hands many times and previous owners included a tomato baron and John Coletta who managed Deep Purple and several other groups.

4 At a fingerpost, 35m after the entrance to the house, turn **right** over a stile and bridge-with-rail. You are in a long golden prairie, on a clear path through a vast field of tall waving grass, one of the joys of this walk. More is to come – in fact a whole kilometer all the way to the village. A yellow arrow, by yet another disused stile, and a large, open, metal gate leads you into a second field. You come over a stile into a third field. An earth bank leads into a fourth field. After a metal kissing-gate, the path in a fifth field runs beside a line of poplars dividing you from a small pasture which houses a tennis court. Finally, a modern kissing-gate and a small metal gate (thank you, Sevenoaks Ramblers!) takes you out to the road in Underriver. Turn **left**, passing the *White Rock* Inn and the little church.

You may wonder about the name "Underriver" where there is no river. In fact the second part of the name comes from a Saxon word "yfer" meaning an "earth-bank" or "hill-brow" (cf German "Ufer"). The landscape artist Samuel Palmer (1805-1881) produced numerous paintings in the Sevenoaks area and called Underriver "The Golden Valley". (Griselda Barton's book "Underriver: Samuel Palmer's Golden Valley" is available in paperback.) St Margaret's Church, built in 1867 from a design by George Gilbert Scott, saw the village become a parish in its own right. Its great oak seems to be as old as the church.

The "White Rock" has long been a major pride of the village. At the time of writing, the 2020 situation had not been too kind. To add to this, Frank and his wife had run the bar and the kitchen for decades and Mick, the owner, had to decide on re-opening, possibly with some new staff. The good news finally came in October that the White Rock was to re-open! It is now flourishing. You can sign on to their website (www.thewhiterockinn.co.uk/sign-up) to view the numerous events.

5 Continue past the church and one more house. Now turn **left** on a wide track, signed as a restricted byway. You are at the start of the *Oaks Half-Mile*, another joy of this walk. The first section is Green Lane, a shaded driveway leading past occasional houses. After the last cottage, keep straight on through a modern kissing-gate and over a bridge-with-rails across a stream. You are now on the first stage of the path under great oaks. They line your path as an unbroken roof of deep green. After 150m, at the top, go over a stile and along an avenue which has ash trees before the oaks take over again. Go over a stile or through an open metal gate into a large sloping meadow and follow the left-hand edge. The oast of Underriver Farm with its horse exercise arena are in view before you come out finally, over a stile or through a large open metal gate, to a road junction.

6 Avoid Hildenborough Road straight ahead and turn **right** on the tree-shaded road. After 400m, immediately after a large wooden gate and just before the road curves right past the entrance to *Hollandhurst*, go **left** over a stile into a meadow of wild grass. Cross the meadow diagonally to a stile into another field. Follow the hedgerow and tree line on the right of the field to a metal kissing-gate. Once through the gate, follow a path between a wire fence and trees. Ignore the *first* bridge-with-rail and continue on a path to the **left** to reach, and cross, a *second* bridge-with-rail on your right. Follow a dusty drive past *Grenadier Cottages* to a road. Turn **right** on the road. In 300m, turn **left** on a tarmac drive signposted as a public footpath, to *Fairhill*.

7 After 200m in woodland, under a redwood, you meet the private left fork for *Fairhill Court*. *Fairhill was one of the homes of Edward Stanley, 17th Earl of Derby (1865-1948), last of the great landowners, who shaped much of this landscape, holding lands from Plaxtol to Hildenborough.* Ignore a stile and yellow arrow on your right and continue ahead on the drive. The tree cover and deep shade persist as you pass a Christmas tree plantation on your right. Where the main track curves left, keep straight ahead at a yellow arrow, past an unneeded stile beside a large metal gate into Lukes Wood. This wide woodland path rises steadily and eventually levels out in a lighter area. The path takes you over a stile and runs between hedges to another stile. A wide track now leads across a bridge. *This bridge only crosses a wooded ravine, having been built by the Earl of Derby, one of many pieces of civil engineering to facilitate movement of the estate traffic.*

8 Keep ahead, over a stile and along a wire-fenced path running beside a meadow on your right. You reach a junction beside a large gate on your right where the main path veers left into a field. **Leave** the main path here by keeping straight on over a stile into the brooding wood. You come out into a meadow with Tinley Lodge Farm visible on your right. The path leads out onto a tarmac lane by a 3-arm fingerpost. Turn **left** on the lane and, in only 20m, resume your woodland walk by turning **right** at a 2-arm finger-post into the deep cover of Peacock Wood. After 200m or so, you come over a crossing track just as a green meadow appears on your right. Your path runs beside the meadow for 200m and goes round the hedged garden of a house on your left. You emerge onto a junction of paths, private on the left, with a box gate on the right. Keep straight on across the grass but, in 20m, avoid a narrow fenced path ahead and instead fork **left**, on a path which shortly runs between fences and comes out to a road.

9 Cross the road and turn **right** on the generous grass verge. In 120m, at a signpost, turn **left** over a bridge-with-rails and take an excellent diagonal path across a cereal field. The path runs beside a patch of woodland on your left and continues across the centre. At the end, the path veers right into the next field. Keep straight ahead across the field heading for the church tower. The path veers left along the edge and runs through silver birches to the 4-way signpost, familiar from your outward journey if you began in Shipbourne. Go **right** through a small circular gate into the churchyard of St Giles. Follow the path round the left-hand side of the church to come out through the lichgate onto the driveway and small parking area, next to the *Chaser Inn*, where the walk began.

The "Chaser Inn" was refurbished in 2003 as an open-air family-friendly pub that provides several real ales and good food. In 2020 it was teeming with outdoor diners. Renowned chef Michel Roux Jr was born in Shipbourne and occasionally cooks here for selected friends.

Some walkers stayed overnight at the nearby Donnington Manor Hotel (TN13 2TD), described as "top notch" for service and price.

Getting there

By car: Shipbourne is on the main **A227** road. Coming from the south or west London Area, the easiest way is via the M25 and the A25 passing north of Sevenoaks, through **Seal**. Two miles after Seal, where the road wheels left, filter **right** and turn off in the direction *Ivy Hatch*. Go straight through the village and turn **right** soon to join the A227. It's best to park in Upper Green Road, opposite the church and pub, where there is a free car park. Leave the small car park (www.w3w.co/popped.visit.intro) for less sprightly visitors who only popped in for an introduction to the church or the pub.

Because of the wealth of walks around Shipbourne, this area gets crowded with cars. If you find the car park full despite arriving early you may wonder, can I park on the roadside? Returning in the evening, you will find a whole line of cars stretching from end to end along the roadside.

By bus/train: bus 222 from Tonbridge Station to Shipbourne, not weekends. Check the timetables.

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