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

Graffham Down

Distance: 9½ km=6 miles or 5 km=3¼ miles moderate walking

Region: West Sussex Date written: 31-aug-2020

Author: Hautboy Last update: 18-sep-2026

Refreshments: *The Foresters* after the walk, or picnic

Map: Explorer 121 (Arundel) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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

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Village, extensive forest, high hills, views, long woodland trails

In Brief

This is a stirring walk up into the heights of the South Downs. The downs are steep on the north side and fall away gently on the south side, with vast acres of forest. Your initial ascent uses a zigzagging route so that your legs won't tire too soon. At the top, you meet the South Downs Way (SDW) long-distance path and probably many families, walking groups and bikes. Here you have a choice between an easy walk on the SDW, including a local nature reserve, and a more challenging forest trail where you will navigate a fascinating network of dense woodland paths, all signposted. There is only *one* sturdy compulsory stile and only 200m on a cul-de-sac lane, so this walk is a perfect escape into the calming haven of nature.

There are a few patches of nettles, at least on the main walk, and quite a bit of undergrowth, so bare legs are not advisable. Boots are desirable because of the stony and chalky paths. The author met many dogs along the way who were enjoying the freedom of the outdoors.

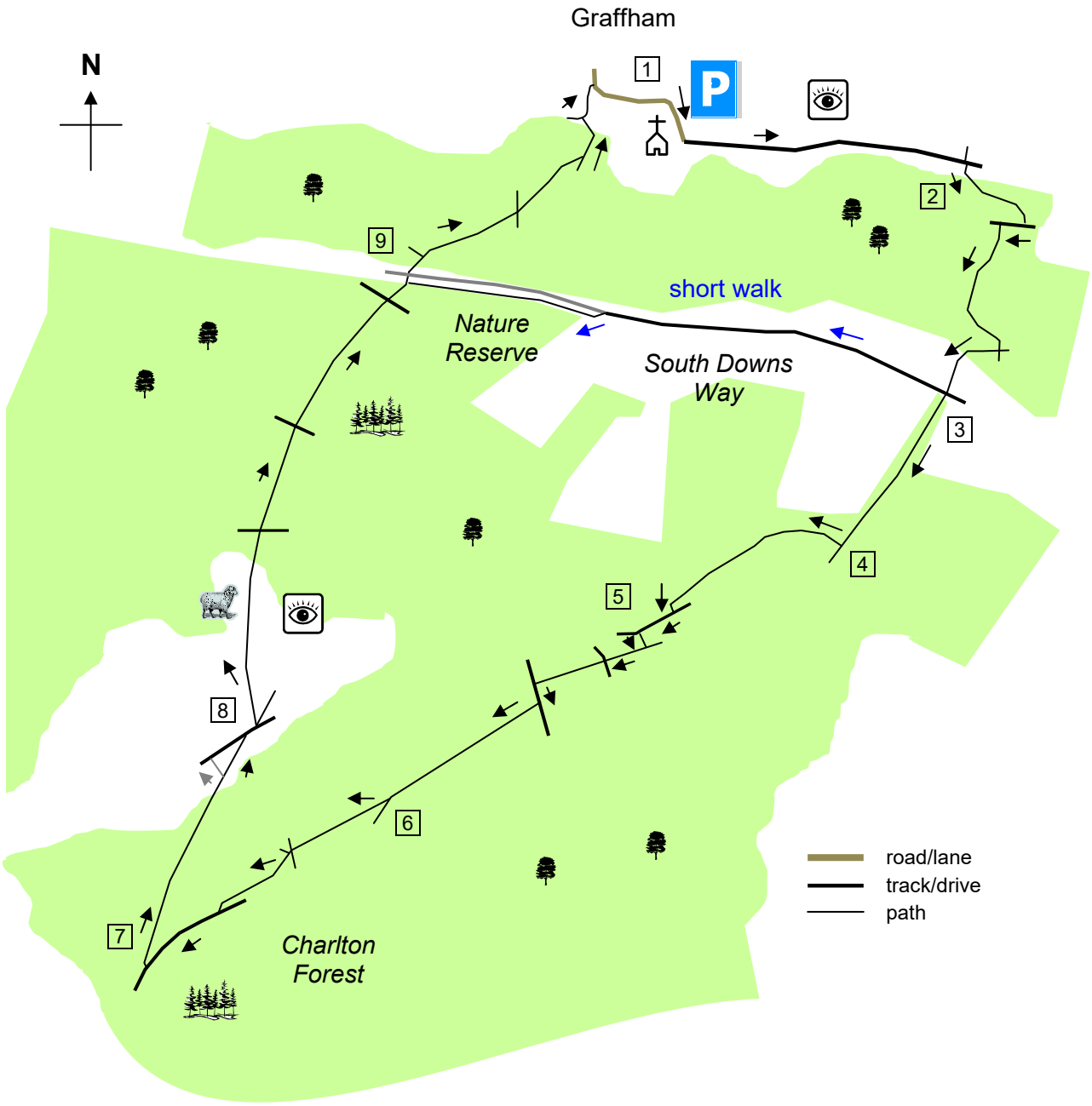
The walk begins at St Giles Church, Graffham, West Sussex, just outside the centre of the village, w3w:carrots.regrowth.automatic, postcode **GU28 0NJ**. Park on the roadside near the church. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

The name "Graffham" probably means "settlement" (ham) by the "ditch" (græf, cf German "Grab"). Before the Normans, the manor of Graffham was held by six thanes (lesser nobility) in "allod", a medieval term meaning absolute possession, as a king or sovereign. Graffham consisted of only about 8-10 hides, a "hide" being a parcel of land sufficient to support one household. Like much of Sussex, Graffham was one of the last places to take up Christianity, having worshipped Woden or Thor (like Bernard Cornwell's Uhtred) until the year 800. The Normans recorded the church in the Domesday Book at the time

when four French noblemen had taken over the parish. Later Graffham came under the overlordship of Arundel Castle. In 1778 MP John Sargent inherited the estate and his daughter Emily married Samuel "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce, later bishop, son of anti-slavery campaigner William, famous for his "hand-washing" sermons, who was killed whilst riding in the Surrey hills. (See the "Abinger" walks in this series.)

*Graffham church of St Giles was built in the 1100s but re-designed in 1875 by Victorian Architect G.E. Street as a memorial to Soapy Sam (who had been semi-resident in the parish). The tower originally had three bells, then four and after a lively debate around 1900 and the fixing of an iron frame, **six** bells, all rung by the modern "Ellacombe chiming mechanism" i.e. a lever which pivots close to the mouth of each bell, enabling each ringer to work at least two.*



1 Walk along the lane with the church on your right, shortly passing the junior school and reaching the end of the tarmac. Go **left** here between the tall pillars of the driveway signed to *Seaford College*, passing the *West Lodge*, with good views left across the Weald of Sussex. Soon the houses of East Lavington come into view, with the college just to its left. The hedge on your left bends away to reveal an area of grass, and shortly a large white gate signed to *Lavington Stud*. Turn **right** at this point beside a 4-way fingerpost, going across the grass and into the woods.

2 Your path veers left and rises fairly gently. Ignore a steep footpath to the right by a marker post. After 250m the path ends at a junction with a view of the college on your left and a wide forestry path on your right. Veer **right** up to the chalky forestry path and turn **right** on it uphill. In 100m, you reach a 3-way junction by a fingerpost. Turn sharp **left** here uphill. The path soon steepens and, after a total of nearly 500m, it reaches a 4-way junction with a fingerpost. Avoid the steep curving path ahead and instead turn **right** on a path which rises at a more comfortable gradient. Your exit onto the top of the downs comes as a sudden release from the dark forest into the light. A short path between fields leads to a wide crossing track running beside the line of forest beyond. This is the South Downs Way (SDW), a much-used scenic walk.

Decision point. If you are doing the shorter (5 km=3¼ mile) walk, skip to the end of this guide and do the High Nature Trail. Otherwise …

3 Cross straight over the SDW onto a path opposite. Avoid the green meadow to your right and instead fork **left** on a narrow grassy path under trees via a wooden gate. In 150m your path breaks clear of the trees and you have the green meadow on your right. Go through a large metal gate, passing two more metal gates, one in the adjacent field, the other across your path but always? open. In 200m your path is surrounded by thick forest again. After another 100m or so, your path suddenly starts to go uphill along a wider strip between the trees. Immediately look for a fingerpost on your right. Turn **right** here on a narrow footpath into the trees. Your woodland adventure has begun!

4 After those straight wide forest trails, from here onwards, the paths are narrow and you need to be alert so as not to stray. This path runs fairly straight through the greenery of the woodland floor. As a guide, you will see that same green meadow on your right and your path runs within 50m of it. Very soon you have passed the meadow and your path curves a little to the left. You have another 400m to go before the next clear junction. You will see some faint vehicle tracks and your path may seem to split. If in doubt, remember to *keep to the bottom of the valley*, with rising ground on both sides. Finally your path ends at a fingerpost where it meets a wider grass path coming from the left (currently beside a wood stack). Veer **right** on this path as directed.

5 In 120m, after a straight section, you see your path curving right just ahead. At this point, look for a fingerpost on your left. (Don't miss this junction! - the fingerpost is under a small tree and may be very well hidden.) Turn squarely **left** here on a narrow path through the undergrowth. In only 50m you reach a second fingerpost. Turn **right** here on a straight path going gently uphill. After a total of 150m, the path passes a 2-way fingerpost and ends at a wide gravel track. Cross straight over, as directed, on a path which runs in a strip between two dense beechwoods for over 200m. It ends at a stony

track by a 2-way fingerpost. Turn **left** uphill on this track as directed. In only 50m, look for a marker post on your left. (Don't miss this junction! - the arrows on the post are very faded.) Turn **right** here on a good wide path through more of those majestic beechwoods, soon becoming a lovely level woodland ramble.

6 Just over 500m from that last right turn, you reach an important fork in the path. It is indicated by a marker post on your right with two yellow arrows. (Don't miss this junction!) Take the **right** fork, hardly changing your general direction. Shortly after the fork, your path briefly comes out of the trees into a clearing with several crossing paths. Keep **straight ahead** here on a path through a bright corridor of tall trees. After 300m on this pleasant woodland path, you come out to meet a broad bridleway. Turn **right** on this wide gravel track.

7 The next turning is the most crucial on this walk! After 300m on the wide track, look for a marker post on your right with blue and yellow arrows, with the yellow arrow pointing sharp right. (This turning is easy to miss. If you find your path bending right downhill and you reach a major junction with a badly weathered sign with *Charlton Forest* on the back, you have come 200m too far and need to retrace your steps.) Turn **very sharp right** at this junction, almost doubling back. You pass a post with a faded yellow arrow. This good path runs through more beechwoods, leading you gradually downhill. The woods end at a robust stile which takes you into a green meadow. Head down the centre of the meadow on the well-worn path and turn **right** on a track for about 100m. You meet a 4-way fingerpost with some moveable metal gates.

8 The way ahead is to a private camping site, so your route is **left** through the gates (now superfluous since the meadow is unfenced) into a wonderful sloping green pasture. There are two signed paths ahead. One path, a byway, goes diagonally right up the slope to a gap in the trees. **Avoid** this path and instead take the **left**-hand path, a bridleway, which goes more **squarely** up the hillside. (This is an exhilarating slope for young families with bikes coming the other way, giving them a safe descent down ½ km of grass.) Keep straight ahead on the well-worn path, possibly passing numerous sheep (depending on the season). Aim for a large metal gate ahead and go through a smaller wooden gate about 30m to its left. Follow a grass path through woods, quickly going over a wide crossing track. In a further 300m or so, your path goes over another crossing path. A long straight forest walk takes you, in 500m, to a wide gravel forestry track. Cross straight over, going past gates of the nature reserve (a site well worth whiling away some time in), to arrive at the SDW.

9 Cross over the SDW, a fraction right, onto a signed byway. In 100m, ignore a footpath on the left with a faded yellow arrow, staying on the wide path. The path is chalky, so take care, especially in damp weather in case you should slip. In a further 400m, you meet a wide diagonal crossing path. Cross straight over on a narrow path downhill under tall pines (with considerable woodland debris from selective felling). After you pass under wires, the foliage changes to leaf. At the bottom, your path ends at a 4-way finger-post by a wide sunken path. Veer **left** on this path to come down to a 3-way junction. Turn **right** here on another sunken path. In 120m it leads out, through the smaller of two metal gates, to a tarmac lane. Turn **right**, arriving in 200m back at the church of St Giles where the walk began.

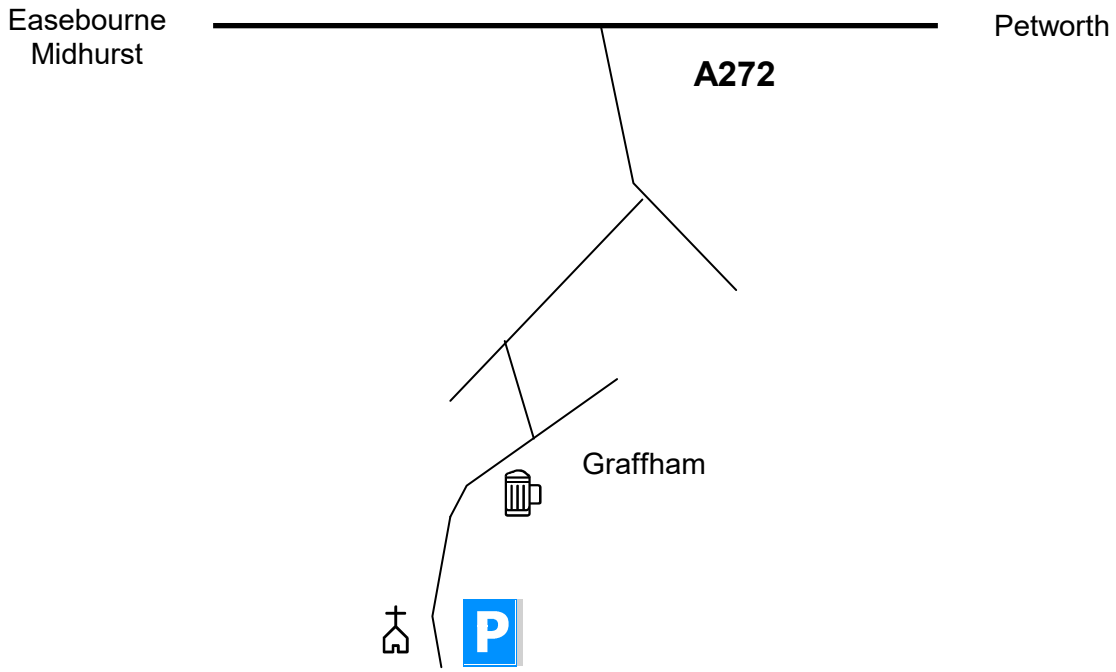
High Nature Trail

Take this route if you are doing the shorter 5 km=3¼ mile walk.

Turn **right** on the SDW. Stay on the wide path beside a cereal field, avoiding signposts pointing away. Soon there is a grass verge on your left which is easier on the feet. The crop field narrows and you come through bushes, passing an old-fashioned 5-way signpost. Keep straight ahead on the SDW as for *Cocking*, but immediately fork **left** through a small wooden swing-gate adjacent to a large wooden one, and into the Graffham Down Wildlife Reserve. The green mossy path through the Reserve runs parallel to the SDW (which you could use in case the Reserve is closed). After the first section, keep straight on towards two wooden gates, ignoring the swing-gate to the right. Go through the smaller gate into the next section, the *Paterson Reserve*. Another wide greenway through mixed woods leads to two final wooden gates. Go through the swing-gate and turn **right** onto a wide path leading back to the SDW.

Now resume the main walk from section 9.

For final refreshments, the Foresters Arms in the main village is a short drive or a one-km walk on easy tracks.

Getting there

By car: Graffham is easily accessed from the main A272 (Midhurst-Petworth) road. Graffham is signposted 3 miles east of Midhurst or 3 miles west of Petworth. Follow the little road signs. Continue through the village heading for the hills and the church. Park on the roadside near the church, leaving more leeway for church attendees on Sunday.