



West Hoathly, Balcombe & Bluebell Railway *Steam and Seed Bank*

Distance: 18 km=11 miles
or 2 walks of 9½ km=6 miles and 12½ km=8 miles

easy-to-moderate walking

Region: West Sussex

Date written: 8-jul-2010

Author: Stivaletti

Date revised: 6-jun-2015

Refreshments: Ardingly, West Hoathly

Last update: 3-jun-2021

Map: Explorer 135 (Ashdown Forest) *but the maps in this guide should be sufficient*

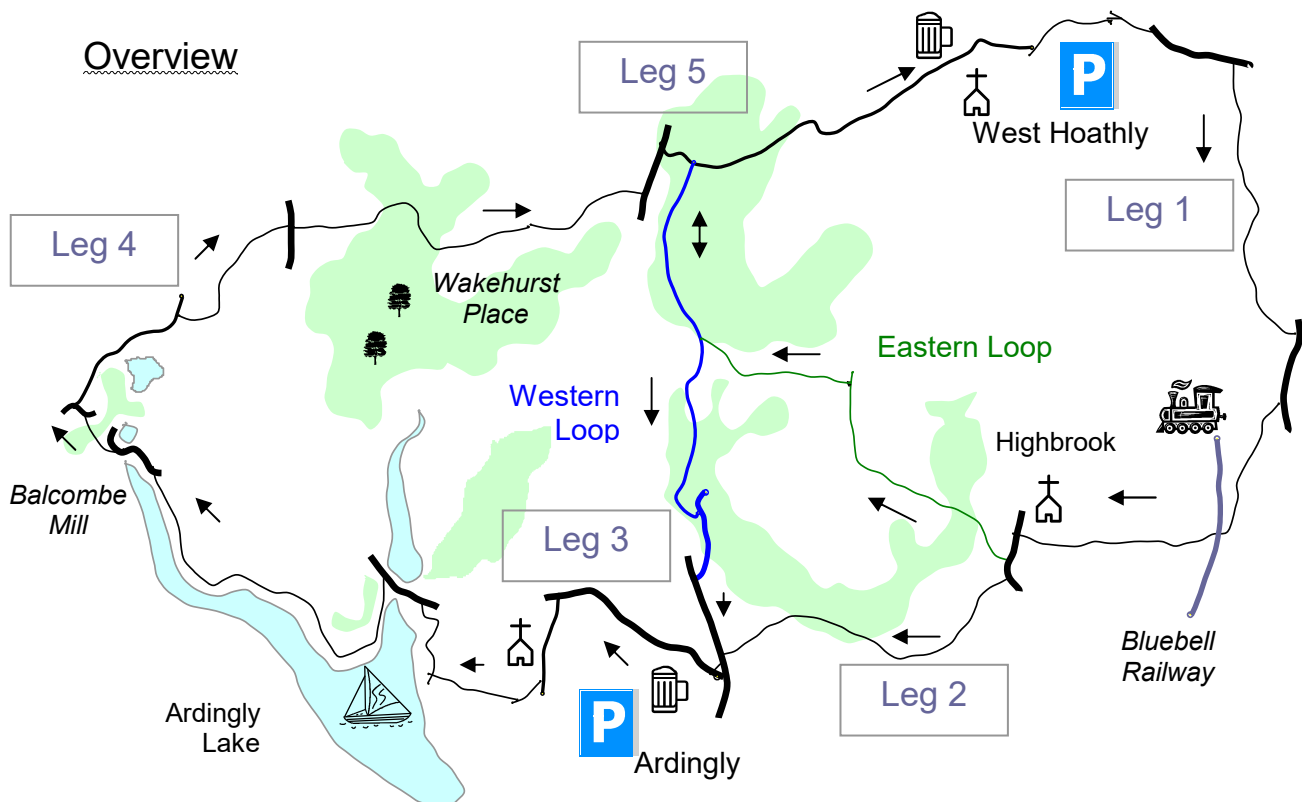
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Lakes, village, woodland, hills, botanical garden, steam railway

In Brief

This circular walk between small Sussex towns is notable by its sheer variety. It runs close to the famous Bluebell steam Railway, the spectacular lake at Ardingly and the botanic gardens of Wakehurst Place.



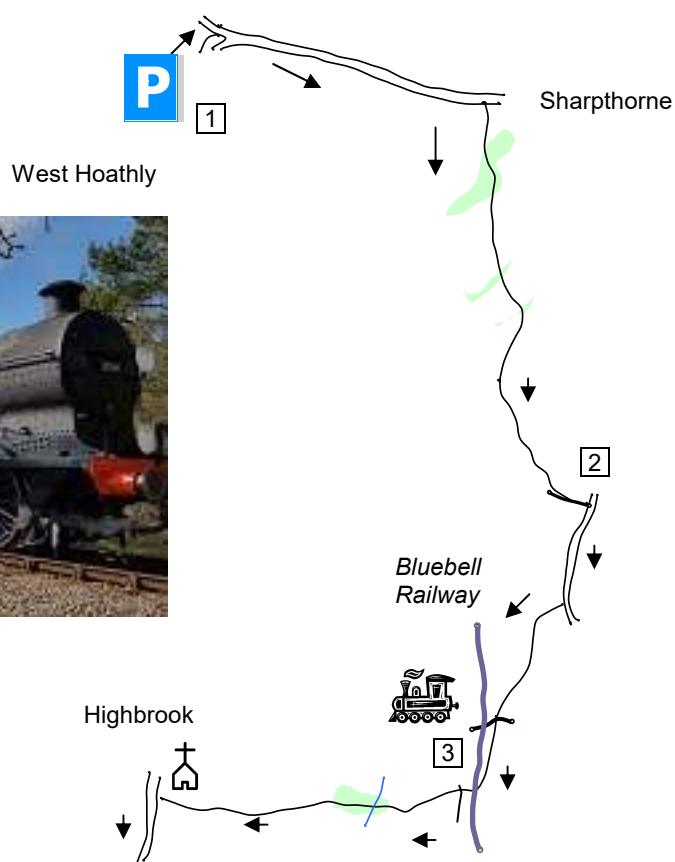
This walk can be split into two separate circular walks: the **West Hoathly-Bluebell Railway** ("Eastern Loop") walk (10 km=6½ miles) and the **Ardingly-Wakehurst** ("Western Loop") walk (9½ km=6 miles).



There are some small patches of nettles and thistles so shorts are inadvisable. The terrain is easy, so good walking shoes are adequate, except perhaps in the wetter seasons. The stile count is moderate around West Hoathly and better later. Your dog can certainly come on the Western Loop – and on the Eastern Loop too if he is not too large because some stiles have only a gap to squeeze through.

The main walk begins at the **Finches Field** car park in West Hoathly, nearest **postcode RH19 4SJ**, grid ref TQ 366 326. The Ardingly - Wakehurst walk begins in **Ardingly**, postcode **RH17 6UA** (begin Leg 3). For more details see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

Leg 1: West Hoathly to Highbrook 4 km=2½ miles



- 1 From near the entrance to the car park, take the concrete footpath beside some allotments. Turn **right** at the bottom on the main road into Sharpthorne. *As you pass a small grassy area on the left, notice the ventilator chimney of the Bluebell Railway that runs in a tunnel here.* Soon on the right is a garage and small supermarket. Turn **right** here onto a footpath just before the Sharpthorne Club and turn tight **left** at the corner of the building down a narrow fenced path that leads through a modern kissing gate out into a grassy open hillside. *Suddenly a magnificent view has sprung up like a jack-in-the-box and you have a good view of the South Downs and the gentler hills of the Weald of Sussex. You are on part of the Sussex Border Path (SBP), the part that runs down to the sea between East and West Sussex. Up on the right is the distinct*



spire of Highbrook church, your next destination. Go along the left-hand side of the meadow and, at the end, through a band of trees via a small metal gate. Go straight across the next meadow in the same direction and, on the other side, go through a small metal gate and over a stile in a line of trees. You are now in a long meadow at one corner of Moon's Wood. Go diagonally **right** uphill past a lonely hornbeam. In the far top corner, go over a stile on the left, straight across the middle of the next meadow and through a small metal gate in the hedge. Go diagonally **right** across the centre of the next meadow and, in the far corner, go past an unneeded stile and through a small wooden gate in the hedge. Keep right round the fenced-off edge of the meadow and, at the end of the next meadow, go through a small wooden gate. Turn **left** on a track by *Claverdale*.

- 2 At the end of the track, turn **right** on a road. The path on the left just before *Tanyard* is the SBP but this route leaves it here. Stay on the road and turn **right** by *Vaex End* on a concrete track and grassy path. The path turns **left** at the end and **right** over a stile. Go along the left-hand side of the meadow and through a metal gate in the corner, then along the left-hand side of the next meadow, over a stile, along a fenced path beside the next meadow and through a (usually open) metal gate. The bridge on the right crosses the Bluebell Railway but this route stays on the same side, through a metal gate (or over a stile) and along a meadow with the railway on the right. Half way down, turn **right** over a stile and carefully across the railway. If you hear a hoot, this indicates that a train will pass by soon and it may be worth waiting a while. During the summer a train should pass six times a day at 11.20, 12.20, 1.50, 2.50, 4.05, 5.05.

The Bluebell Railway is one of many heritage lines in Britain. It runs on a part of the old East Grinstead-Lewes line that was axed in the 1950s and is operated by volunteers. It runs from East Grinstead to Sheffield Park with a stop at Kingscote and Horsted Keynes. The company maintains a large number of steam locomotives as well as the stations and lines with all their original paraphernalia, decorations and advertisements. As you may imagine, the railway has made star appearances in films and TV.

[5 Nov 2020: the footpath is closed pending repair of a "damaged footbridge". For advice on alternatives, see the section "**Footbridge Closure**" near the end of this guide.]

- 3 Go over a stile ahead, ignoring a path left that runs beside the railway. [2017: one walker reports an over-friendly dog.] Pass a small pond, go through a large metal gate (or over a stile), across a sheep pasture and over a stile in the bottom left. The path goes down steps in a beautiful wide band of woodland in a stream valley and over a bridge. It then goes through a metal gate, up the right-hand side of a meadow, over a stile (or through a metal gate: untie/retie the string), beside another meadow and, at the top, through a gate and along an enclosed path that becomes a driveway. On the right is Highbrook church and on the left a well restored smokery.

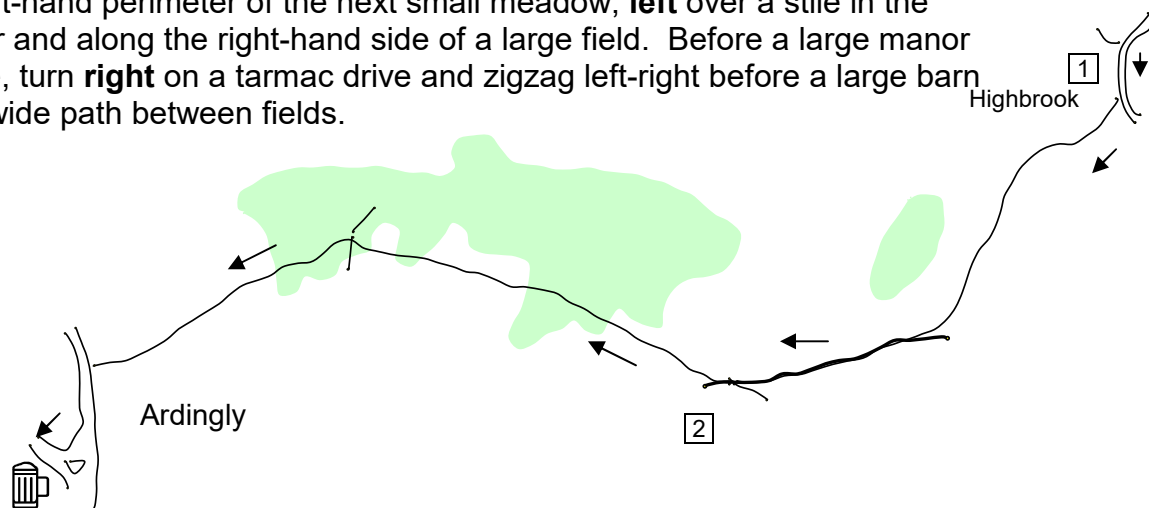
All Saints Church, Highbrook is a late-Victorian construction built from local sandstone, its spire visible from all around. Each of the windows inside contains a fine piece of Victorian stained glass and the all-round effect is deeply affecting. The church also provides a do-it-yourself hot drinks service.

Turn **left** on the road. In 100m, just before Hammenden Farm, on the right is a stile and footpath signpost.

Decision point. If you are doing only the short **Eastern Loop** and want to loop back through the woods to West Hoathly, jump to the section **Highbrook to Chiddinglye Wood** near the end of this text.

Leg 2: Highbrook to Ardingly 2 km=1¼ miles

- 1 Continue on the road, ignoring the footpath on the right. Just past the entrance to *Battens* and a village sign for Highbrook, turn **right** over a stile on a footpath. Keep right by a wall and turn **right** over a stile. Go round the left-hand perimeter of the next small meadow, **left** over a stile in the corner and along the right-hand side of a large field. Before a large manor house, turn **right** on a tarmac drive and zigzag left-right before a large barn on a wide path between fields.



It's rare to see sheep and cattle together in a field. In fact they coexist quite happily. But when a heifer wants a prime spot, she gently nudges the sheep to their feet one-by-one with her muzzle.

- 2 In 200m, at the next meadow, the path curves right beside a wire fence on your right and, in 200m, comes down to a metal gate. Here, go through a smaller wooden gate on your right down beside woodland. The path goes over a flowing stream via a brick bridge and through a kissing gate. Go straight uphill by a fence, ignoring a footpath left at the top, then through a little metal gate and steeply up into woods. Go over a stile, up the left-hand side of a meadow, over a stile in the top, across an area of grass, through a kissing gate and along a lane to the main road in Ardingly. The Post Office opposite is also a tiny general store. Turn **left** on the main road and take a **right** fork to reach the *Ardingly Inn*, a large pub with a small garden, well-regarded for its food, open all day from noon.

Ardingly is a small town and parish famous for its college, its lake and its showground. The showground hosts an amazing variety of events from agricultural shows to antiques. One of the pupils at Ardingly College, and head boy, was Ian Hislop of Private Eye and TV fame.

Leg 3: Ardingly to Balcombe Mill 5 km=3 miles

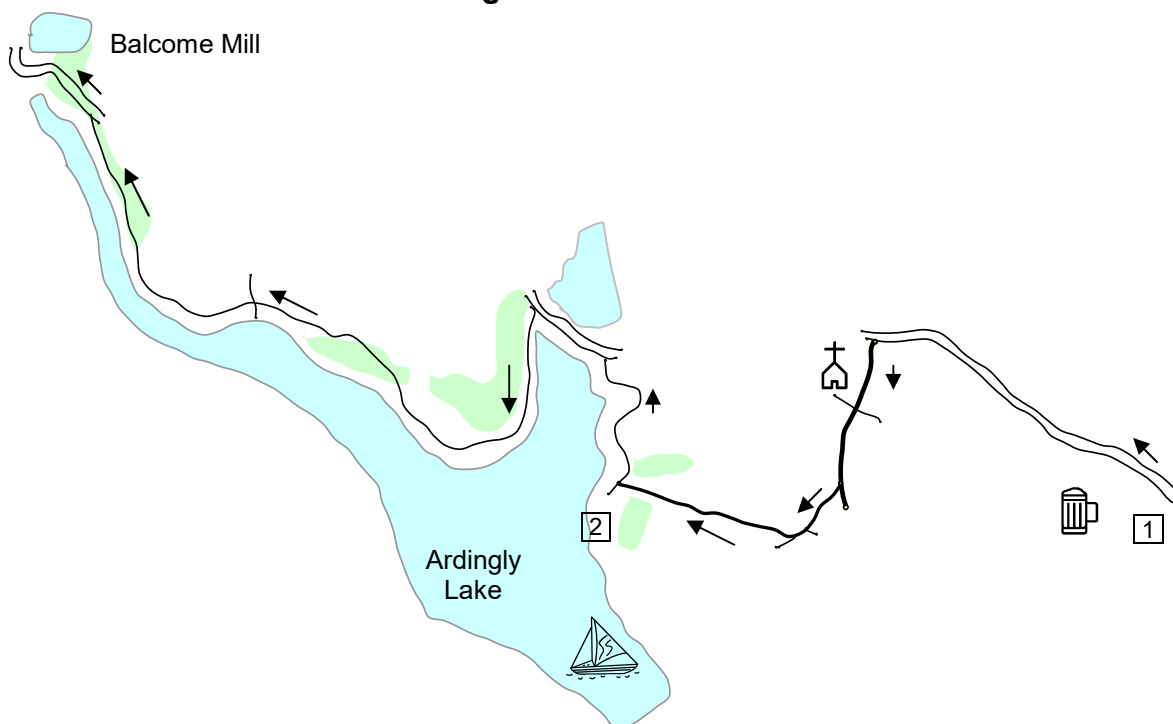
- 1 **See map overleaf.** Turn **right** on the road in front of the *Ardingly Inn* using the separate footway, passing the bakery and the (defunct) *Oak Inn*, and continue along the road, past the showground and a school, ignoring footpaths leading off, and, after 700m, turn **left** by the church.

The fine old Norman Church of St. Peter, which is usually open, contains some of the most splendid medieval brass memorials anywhere in England, the most important being the Culpeper brasses. If you would like to see more, there is a



'phone number posted on the door and the vicar will be happy to let you in and uncover the brasses.

Keep along the lane with the church on the right, ignoring footpaths right and left. After 350m, fork **right** on the lane by *Old Knowle Cottage* and follow the lane round to a junction of tracks by a barn. From this high vantage point, through a gap on the left, you have a magnificent view of the lake. There are usually a whole flotilla of colourful sailing dinghies on the water. Fork **right** on a farm track, passing the barn on your right. Where the lake comes into view, fork **left**. Go down the right-hand side of a pasture, later over a stile [2019: broken leaving a few pieces and a gap], down to the waterside and turn **right** there.



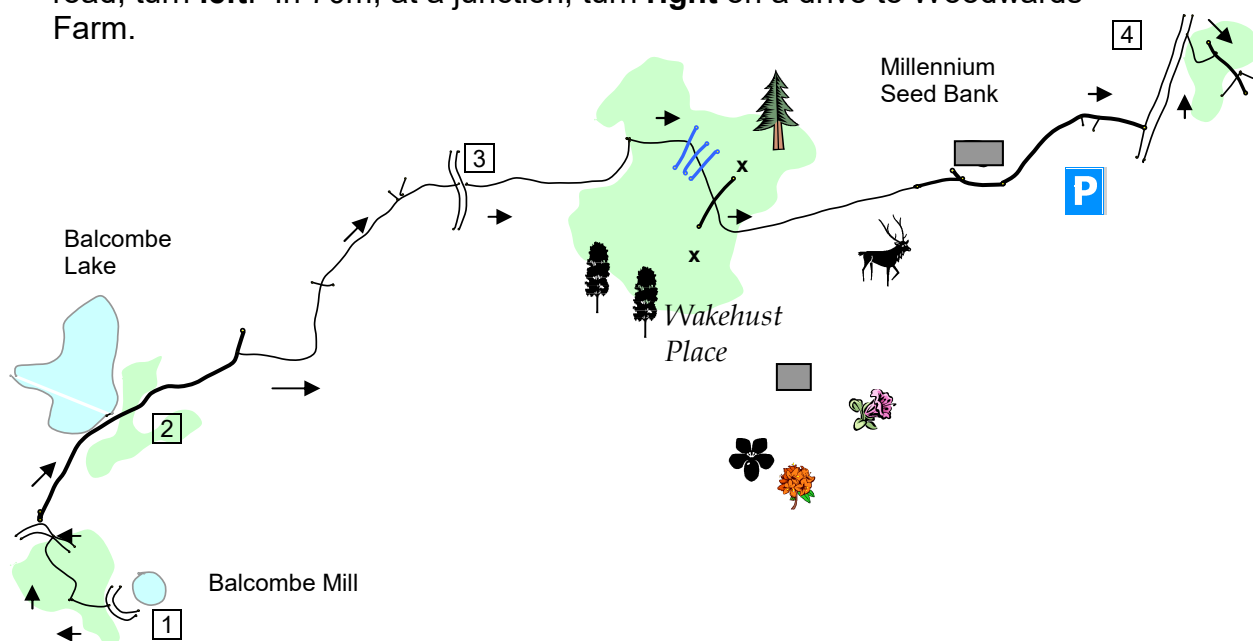
Ardingly Reservoir (it's called a 'lake' in this text because that's more poetic) is a massive centre for outdoor activities, not to mention its vital use as a source of fresh water. It covers over 80 hectares and was created during 1976-79 by damming the River Ouse.

- [2] After a stroll along the waterside you find yourself on a fenced path that snakes round to the road. Turn **left** on the road. Where the road approaches the dry land, take the first path sharp **left**, through a wooden gate, along the waterside again. You are now going south and have the lake and dam and sailing club in view. The path gradually turns north-west sometimes close to the bank, at other times hidden from it in woodland. A short muddy section can be skipped using the field on your right. At a junction, ignore a bridleway right, later going continue through some fine woods. After 2 km total, the path comes up through a small wooden gate out to a road. Turn **left** on the road, Mill Lane. In 250m, the road leads to Balcombe Mill an unexpected delight.

Balcombe Mill, situated on what is now the top of the lake, was for centuries one of the most efficient water mills in the South East, producing four sacks of flour a day Today the original mill house looks much as it did in the working days with a few other equally appealing properties along the waterside. This site is one of the joys of this region.

Leg 4: Balcombe Mill to Chiddinglye Wood 4½ km=3 miles

- 1 After passing a white boarded house and just before reaching the mill house, turn **left** on a signposted footpath steeply up steps. Half way up there is a seat by a floor made from a millstone. *On the left there is a rock formation of a type so common in these regions.* At the top, go through a swing-gate into a large meadow and immediately **right** through a small metal gate into woodland of tall ash, beech and poplar. On reaching a road, turn **left**. In 70m, at a junction, turn **right** on a drive to Woodward's Farm.



- 2 As you go over a weir, on your left is the wide expanse of Balcombe Lake. Keep straight ahead on the drive, avoiding several paths off. About 400m after the lake, just after the drive curves left, at a fingerpost, go through a large open metal gate or over a stile on the **right**. *Don't miss this turning!* Go along the left-hand side of a field and, at the end, through a large open metal gate or over a stile on the **left** and straight ahead across the length of the pasture. In the far right corner, turn **right** on a long chalk farm track and along the right-hand side of a crop field. On leaving the field, continue straight ahead for 100m along the track to reach a tarmac lane. Go **right** on the lane for 10m, **left** over a stile.
- 3 Go down the right-hand side of a large grassy meadow. At the bottom, wheel **left** along the far side and, in the corner, go through a wooden gate and experience at once a vast change in atmosphere. You are now in the dark woods of the Ardingly Brook valley, thick with bluebells in late spring. Continue on the path, eventually going over a plank bridge, then another over the fast-flowing brook. Another plank bridge follows, then a boardwalk made out of more planks to keep you dry. Next, go through a kissing gate into the verdant territory of Wakehurst Place next to a tall redwood.



Wakehurst Place belongs to the National Trust and is an extension of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, providing more space for the vast collection. Like its town cousin, it is not only a place of great natural beauty and a banquet for the senses but also a place of plant conservation and research. It boasts being the Trust's most visited property. The hilly landscape makes the gardens highly varied, comprising every kind of terrain and micro-climate, including grouped species from every part of the world, natural woodland, a large water garden, a

lake, formal gardens and at the north side trees famously growing from the rocks. There is also the original Elizabethan house.

You need to keep strictly to the footpath through the garden as it is unfenced. *If you wish to visit the gardens you must wait until you reach the entrance.* Go directly ahead, a fraction right, over the main crossing path onto a narrow path uphill. Now go through a small wooden gate onto a well-worn path, with a slight ditch on your left, through the centre of the field to Havelock Farm. As the path widens you may see pasture for farmed deer. Keep ahead on a track, later a drive. Soon on your left is a large modern building, the Millennium Seed Bank.

Kew's Millennium Seed Bank is the largest ex-situ (i.e. away from natural habitats) plant conservation project in the world. Plant life from every part of the world is saved from the threat of extinction and the seeds of plants of most value to the future are conserved. The Seed Bank passed a milestone recently by successfully banking 10% of the world's wild plant species. It is open to visitors.



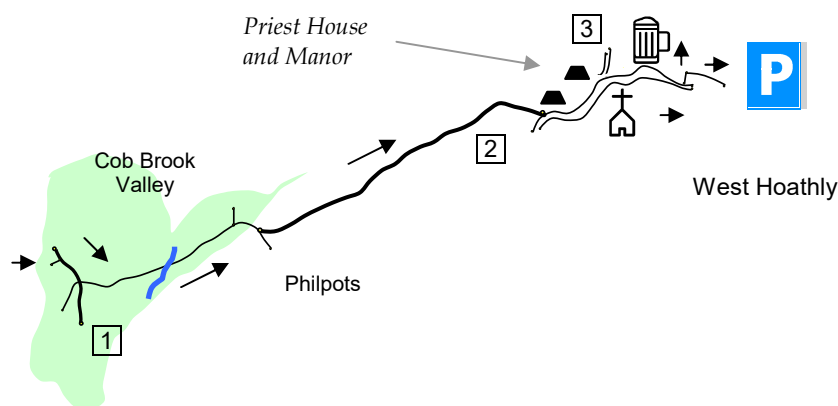
The drive veers left and soon passes the car park on the right. **The teashop / restaurant, through the car park, should be open without the need to buy a ticket.** Continue to the main road [2016: watching out for a wasp nest after the exit gate] and turn **left** on it using the high grassy path.

- 4 In about 250m, just after *Beech Cottage*, cross the road and turn **right** on a bridleway. *Note the sandrock crags on your right.* The bridleway bends **left**, then **right** at a T-junction with a track. Soon you reach a 4-way junction with a private garden of *Stonehurst* ahead.

Decision point. If you are doing only the short **Western Loop** and want to loop back through the woods to Ardingly, jump to the section called **Chiddinglye Wood to Ardingly** near the end of this text.

To continue the full walk, turn **left** and continue with Leg 5 below.

Leg 5: Chiddinglye Wood to West Hoathly 2½ km=1½ miles



- 1 The uphill path runs between woodland and a reedy area on the right and into the deep valley of the Cob Brook. *The reeds conceal the waterfalls in the pleasure grounds of Stonehurst. There are also a millpond and two mills. The Cob Brook valley has a microclimate that is mild in winter and moist even in the driest summer. Consequently a wealth of interesting moisture-loving ferns and unusual flowering plants can be found here.* The path rises gently, crosses the stream, then steepens. At the top, by a fingerpost, fork **right**. **If you divert left, you reach some notable sandrock crags in about 300m.** The path comes up to Philpots Farm. Go straight ahead and then fork **left** at a grey

residential block, by a fingerpost, onto a drive. The drive goes past Philpots Manor, now a Rudolf Steiner special education school.

- 2 After nearly 1 km, the drive bends right and enters West Hoathly at a bend in the road. Go straight ahead through the village past some remarkable buildings. On your left are the Priest House and the Manor House.

The Manor House was built in 1627 as a Dower House for nearby Gravetye Manor. The much older Priest House is an early 15th-century timber-framed hall-house in a traditional cottage garden. West Hoathly was administered from the Priory in Lewes and the Priest House was built as a kind of local estate office but in 1524 it became a family home. When Henry VIII seized Lewes Priory's property, the estate was given to Thomas Cromwell and, after his fall, to Anne of Cleves (ironically, as she was the reason for his fall). The Priest House was originally an open hall, with a few small rooms off, an open hearth and a thatched roof. In 1560 the Priest House and the estate were sold to new owners who virtually rebuilt the house in the 1600s. After centuries of neglect, it was bought in 1905 by John Godwin King of nearby Stonelands who restored the building and opened it to the public. In 1935 he presented the house to the Sussex Archaeological Society. The House still contains a wonderfully varied collection of 17th- and 18th-century rustic furniture, together with ironwork, embroidery and ornaments displayed in furnished rooms. The garden has a small formal herb garden containing over 170 types of herb. The house is open to the public most days outside the winter months.

On your right, you pass the church with its fine tall pointed spire.

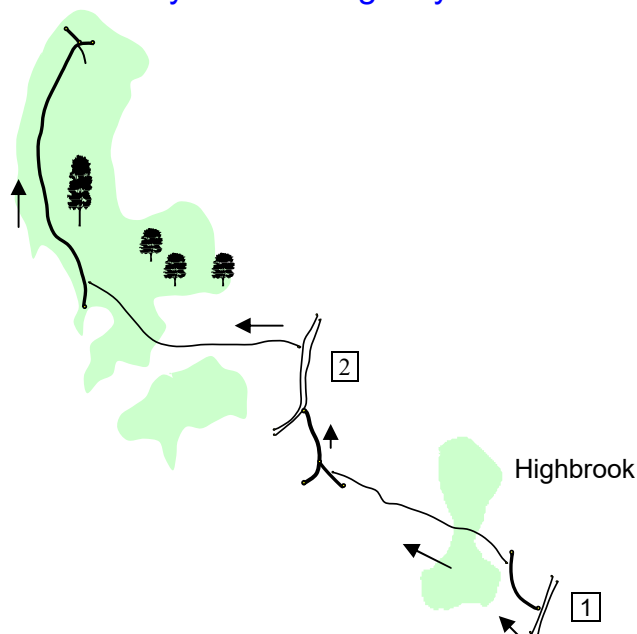
The church of St Margaret of Antioch was founded around 1100, the tower appearing in the 1400s. Inside are an ancient font, a possibly 12th-century wooden chest, and a 17th-century pendulum clock.

Ahead is *The Cat Inn* a free house and restaurant dating from the 1500s and offering a notable choice of real ales.

- 3 Turn **right** in front of *The Cat Inn* and follow the road as it curves left and right. As you come to some railings on the left, go **left** up some steps and **right** at the top on a tarmac path, back to the car park where the walk began.

Highbrook to Chiddinglye Wood 3 km=2 miles

Take his short cut if you are doing only the **Eastern Loop**.

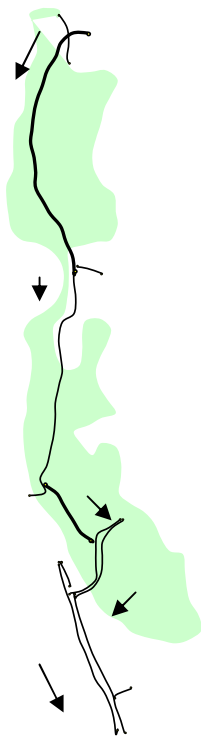


- 1 Turn **right** at the footpath sign, through a large metal gate, on a concrete track through an untidy part of Hammenden Farm and, at a fingerpost, proceed down a track, through a metal gate and immediately **left** down the pasture and under wires. Go through a small wooden gate into woodland, over a bridge and up steps. The path then leads you over a stile beside a small wooden gate, along the left-hand side of a large meadow and through a gap next to an unneeded stile and metal gate. You then traverse the left-hand side of a pasture and, at the far end, go over a stile and veer **right** on a drive opposite Holly Farmhouse, past two fine old cottages. Next, veer **right** at a junction onto a wide drive and, at the end, veer **right** again, this time on a country lane.
- 2 Just after the entrance to Ludwell House, turn **left** through a metal gate, go along the right-hand side of a meadow, through an open gate and down the next meadow. In 20m, at the corner of the meadow, keep ahead in a faint line across the centre. Continue down the long meadow, veering slightly left, and at the other side go round the corner of the wood to find a wooden gate [2018: broken and on the ground] beside a larger metal gate. Through the gate, go down into woodland, over a sturdy bridge crossing the full-flowing stream and then uphill. On meeting a track at a T-junction by a fingerpost, turn **right**. In 30m, avoid a right fork which is private and keep to the lovely wide level path. The path passes several tall redwoods. It then goes downhill to a 4-way junction with a private garden on the right.

The walk now resumes from [Leg 5](#).

Chiddinglye Wood to Ardingly 3 km=2 miles

Take this short cut if you are doing only the **Western Loop**.



Turn **right** at the 4-way junction uphill. This lovely wide path passes several redwoods. When the path finally comes out into the open, ignore a path left at a fingerpost. Keep ahead on a narrow enclosed path that skirts the pastures of *Fulling Mill Farm*. The vegetation changes abruptly as the path re-enters a woodland of tall conifers. Just as a house comes into view on the right, turn **left** by a new fingerpost on another path [don't miss this unobvious turn!]. (If you are a bit tired and want to avoid another down and up, you can keep **right** to the road, cross it and turn **left** on the wide grass verge into the village.) The bridleway follows a route steeply down with a descending slope on your left. At the end, turn **right** on Cob Lane uphill. The lane bends right to a road. Turn **left** on the road. Soon you reach the houses of Ardingly and continue to the point where the walk began.

Footbridge Closure

Here are some notes on the “closure” of the footbridge between the Bluebell Railway and Highbrook, gleaned from other walkers.

A new notice dated 19 November 2020 by the stile advises that an Order, effective from 25 November, closes the footpath for 6 months or until the footbridge is repaired. The notice adds that “unfortunately no alternative route is available via the public rights-of-way network.”

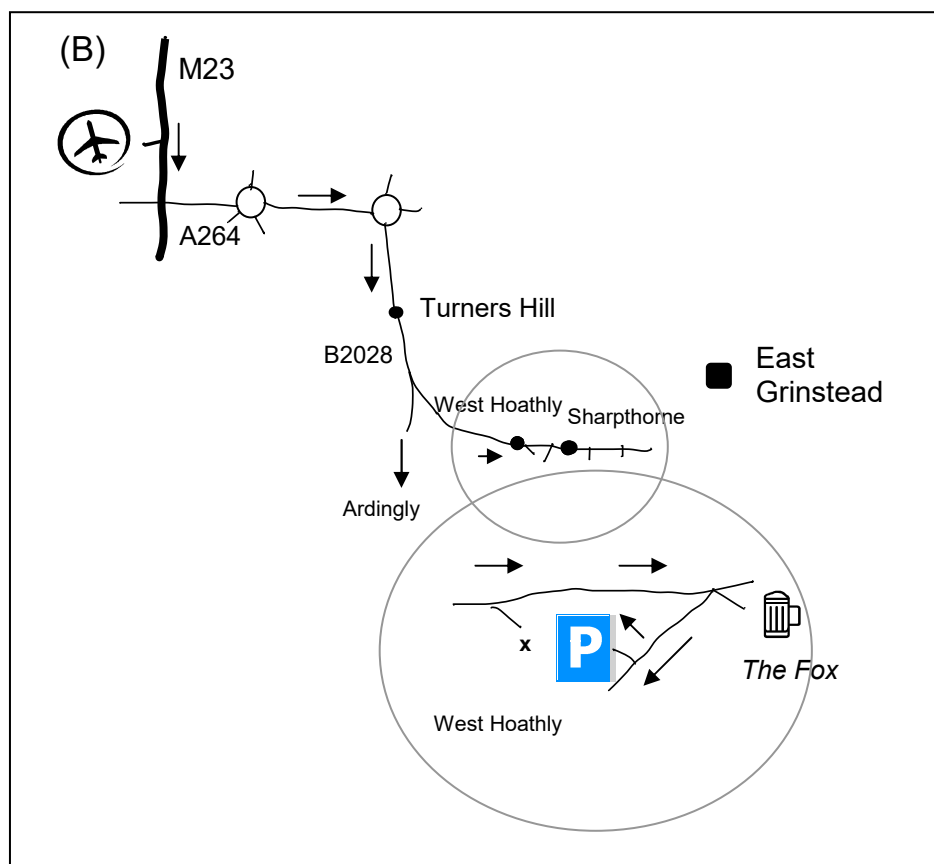
A local dog walker explained that a *single plank* on the footbridge had been broken. Judging by the numerous footprints, it seems that many people have, with care, continued to use the bridge regardless. The same walker suggested that you can simply avoid the footbridge by crossing the stream just to the **left** of the bridge. The stream is narrower here and there are no steep banks to worry about.

It is also apparent from the footprints that many other walkers have heeded the footpath closure notice and taken an informal alternative route. They continued to walk along the field edge to **left** of the railway line. (Although this is not a designated footpath, it seems an excusable liberty in these circumstances.) Although not researched, the Explorer Map suggests that you may continue alongside the railway for about 400m. Just beyond the edge of a wooded area near Cinder Hill on your left, there is a footpath on your left which leads to the Sharpthorne to Horsted Keynes road. Turn **right** here. After about 100m, turn **right** into another lane and after another 200m turn **left** on another minor road which takes you under the Bluebell railway and then over a dismantled railway. Continue past Lower Sheriff Farm and then turn **right** into Hammingdean Lane which leads uphill into Highbrook, where, just before the church, there is the track on the right that would have been taken were it not for the footpath closure. The estimated extra distance is 1.5 miles. (Thanks to Alan B.)

Getting there

By car: The full walk starts at the **Finche Field** car park in West Hoathly. If you are coming from the **west** side of the M25, with easy access to the M23, the following route is recommended (see the Map). Take the M23 past Gatwick Airport and turn **left** at the next junction, the A264 (*East Grinstead*). At the third roundabout, turn **right**, signposted *Turner's Hill*. A mile after Turner's Hill the road forks. Take the **left** fork signposted *West Hoathly and Sharpthorne*. Ignore the first right turn in West Hoathly (signed for the Priest's House). On reaching the *Fox Inn*, turn sharp right. The car park is a little further on the right. If you are approaching from Sharpthorne, fork left at the *Fox Inn*.

For Ardingly and the Western Loop, ignore the left turn after Turner's Hill.



By bus: No. 84 from East Grinstead or Crawley to West Hoathly, except Sun. No. 272 from Crawley, Burgess Hill or Haywards Heath to Ardingly. Check the timetables.

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