

WALKING IN KENT

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WALKING IN KENT

by Kev Reynolds

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Dedication

*This book is for Billy Moon, in the hope that he too will be inspired,
uplifted and enriched by the natural world that is his inheritance.*

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Front cover: Orchard country on the greensand hills above Hunton and Yalding (Walk 18)

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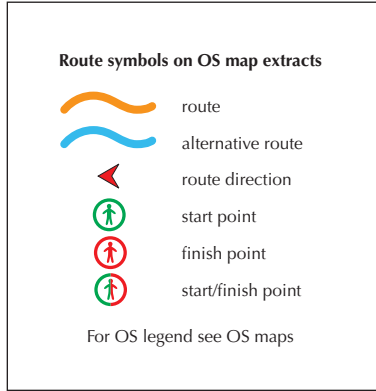
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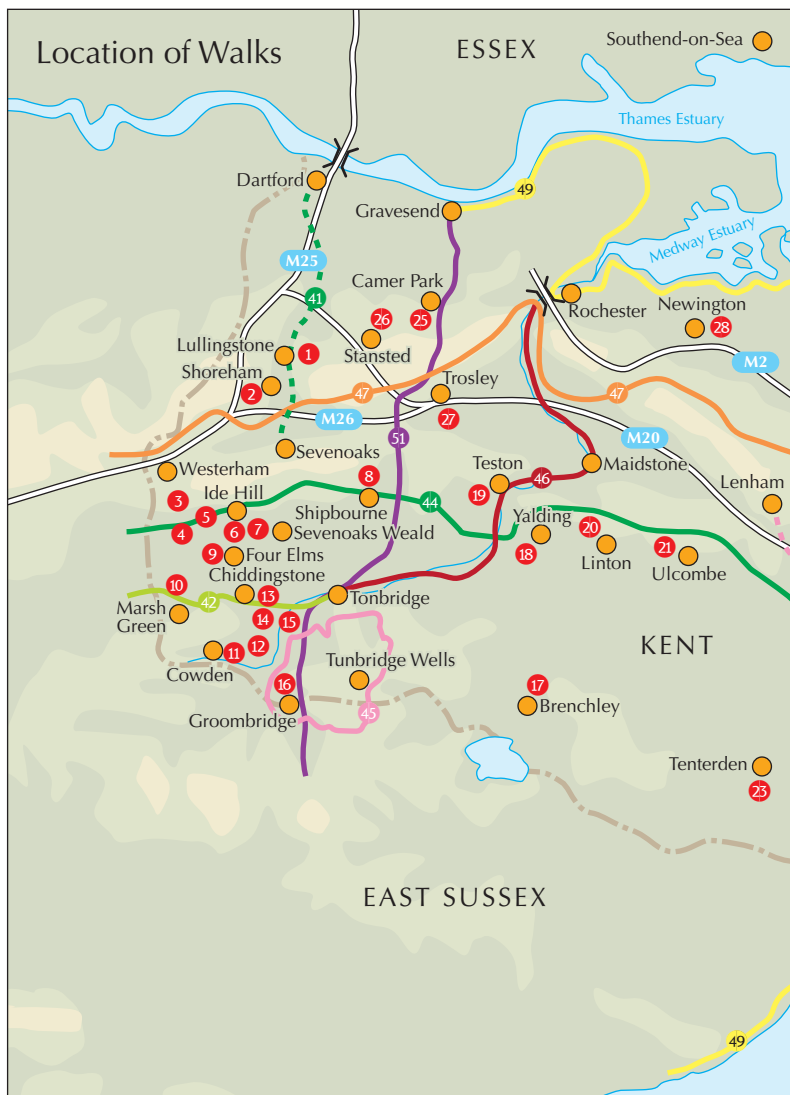
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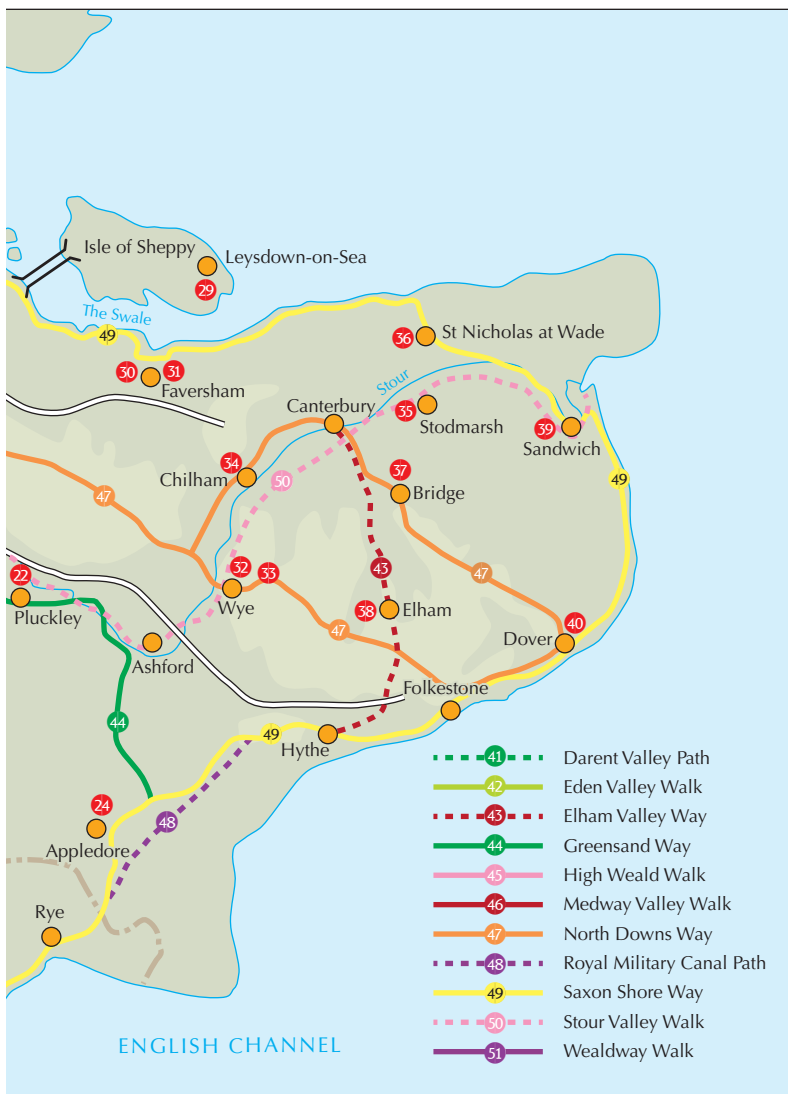
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Acknowledgements

Wandering through this countryside of ours, I am acutely aware of the debt we owe to so many farmers, landowners, private individuals and members of local rambling clubs, who undertake work to improve the quality of our footpaths, help maintain the numerous stiles and gates, and are vigilant in regard to problems of access. I am thankful, too, to the county's Rights of Way officers and their staff for ensuring that our footpaths are, on the whole, in pretty good condition and reasonably well waymarked, and to readers Steve Edwards and Ian Yarham, who alerted me to route changes to the previous edition of Kent walks. I am grateful as ever to Jonathan Williams at Cicerone for agreeing to this latest edition, and to his talented staff who put the guide together – it's always a pleasure to work with such a great team. Once again my wife shared the joy of plotting the walks in advance on our well-used maps, and then checked every route with me in all seasons and in all weathers, making this book as much hers as it is mine.







The 13th century church of St Mary's was destroyed by a doodlebug in 1944 (Walk 22)

PREFACE

The first collection of Kent walks appeared in 1988, a few months after the landscape was drastically changed by the hurricane of October 1987. A second collection, with a broader reach across the county, was published in two volumes in 1994 and 1995. Later, in 2007, it was decided to select the best walks from previous collections and present them in a new edition. Having gone through three updated reprints, it's now time for a complete revision. This is it.

We've spent a year checking and re-checking the routes for this edition, travelling to every corner of Kent and being reminded, yet again, what a wonderfully diverse county this is. One day we might be wandering across the North Downs, plunging into what appeared to be a secretive little valley in which we'd discover a hamlet lost to the world. Another day might find us following a path beside saltings, whose exposed mudflats bore the prints of scores of gulls and waders that rose as one, wheeled across the water and returned to land as though they'd forgotten something important.

Some days we'd take a clifftop path with a view across the Channel to France; on another we'd be tracing the Greensand Ridge, the Weald spreading into remote distances below and beyond. There were

woodland walks, walks that took us through orchards, vineyards and (rarely nowadays) the once-ubiquitous hop gardens. Our paths have drawn us through fields of barley, wheat and oats. We've wandered beside streams and rivers, watched kingfisher, heron and more ducks and geese than we could count, and listened on so many outings to the mewling cry of a buzzard. A fallow deer has sometimes crossed our path; we've stood for ages, barely breathing, to study an adder curled asleep on a half-cut log in the sunshine. One morning I watched a mother ewe licking clean her moments-old lamb as she expelled the after-birth into the grass behind her.

We've been walking in all weathers: in winter, muffled against the cold, frost on the ground, elm and oak producing stark outlines, naked without their leaves. In spring we've almost tiptoed among cowslips as a fresh breeze huffed along the Downs. In summer heat we've waded through waist-high grass, elbowed aside the nettles and gathered blackberries. In autumn we've scuffed dried leaves and picked sweet chestnuts. The changing seasons have been marked by what we've seen in the hedgerows; welcoming spring's celandine in meadow and bluebell in woodland shaw; summer's dog rose and elder in

flower; autumn's old man's beard and softening sloe.

And every day out has been a joy.

One summer Saturday our walk took us through a churchyard where guests were gathered for a wedding, all after-shave, shiny shoes and Ascot hats. Out of the churchyard the path led across a series of sheep-grazed meadows where we were followed by the quintessential country parish sound of a peal of bells. Two miles later the bells could still be heard as we strolled through an avenue of stately lime trees in whose shade heavy-fleeced ewes lay panting.

Kent is a beautiful county, and walking the footpaths reveals it at its best. Not only the countryside, but its buildings too. According to Kent County Council there are more than 20,000 historic buildings that bless this county of ours. Twenty thousand! There are two cathedrals, many castles, numerous stately homes. There are Wealden hall houses, the weight of the centuries etched in every beam, and tile-hung cottages adorned with rose and old-fashioned clematis. There are splendid half-timbered pubs revived from coaching inns, and farms dating from the fifteen- or sixteen-hundreds that have passed from one generation to another.

A few days ago we checked the final walk for this collection. It just happened to be my favourite – as well as one of the closest to home. I don't know how many times we've walked it – or variations of it – over

the years we've lived here, but it never ceases to surprise with its beauty and sheer variety.

Midway through the morning we emerged below a woodland to a panoramic view as vast and exciting as any in all of Southern England, and there we rested on a seat erected in memory of a local farmer; a charming, generous man with a passion for nature and an environmentalist's attitude towards the husbandry of his land. (I found it hard to believe it's 20 years since I attended his funeral.) Several miles and a couple of hours later, we came by chance upon his son who took over the farm from him. We've known each other since he was a teenager (he's a grandfather now), and we were soon chewing the cud, discussing his crops and sharing his father's passion for the countryside as we talked of the heavy-leaved trees, the long feathery grasses, and the meadows patched with 'common' flowers. And we both agreed that it's too easy to take the beauty of such everyday plants as daisy, stitchwort, the yellow ragwort and even the massed ranks of cow parsley for granted; for each one is a miracle of nature, as exquisite and worthy of attention as the rarest orchid.

Shortly after parting with a handshake, we found a log in an elm tree's shade, and perched ourselves on it to eat our picnic of home-made bread with cheese and salad from the allotment, drank a flask of tea and basked in the gentle warmth of late July. The

head of a green woodpecker appeared from the meadow grass. Then it disappeared to attack something unseen by us, before rising with a yaffling cry and flying away towards a line of willows with that familiar riding-the-waves swooping flight we've seen so often on our walks.

There was not much in the way of birdsong; summer is too far advanced for that. But the air was thick with other sounds – the soft buzz and hum of insects that are all too easily dismissed as 'silence'. There was the summery smell of the countryside too; warm grass and honeysuckle, almost – but not quite – overpowered by sheep dung. (This is a sheep-grazing county, after all.) And there were no distant views to be had from our log seat; just a half mile of meadow, then a block of trees to deny us the hills we'd walked along in the morning. But we were happy, and we knew it. We needed nothing more.

During the year that we've walked and re-walked the routes in this book we've recorded a number of changes. Some have led to the re-routing of a short section of footpath; one or two have led to the creation of a major variation. In a few cases, orchards described in the previous edition have been grubbed out, while others have appeared where before there might have been a meadow, or they've been

replaced by a vineyard, say, or a field of soft fruit. One walk crossed a golf course the last time we checked it a couple of years ago – not any more, the golf course is now farmland.

The demand for housing has enlarged some villages, and one or two towns are encroaching into Kent's countryside. We found a few country pubs that have closed, but we've also discovered a small café resurrected in a village high street, and in one notable case a Community Shop has opened, serving tea or coffee with a view to linger over. But most of the changes have been where stiles have been replaced by kissing gates – and I've welcomed each one. (In an earlier collection of Kent walks I said that if I ever made a fortune I'd replace every stile in the county with a kissing gate. Now it looks as though KCC is doing it for me!)

So here we have a collection of 40 of our favourite walks, revisited and largely rewritten since the previous edition was put together a decade ago. As you walk them, you'll come to understand what a richly varied county this is. But wherever your footpaths lead, I hope you'll gain as much pleasure as my wife and I continue to do every time we go walking in Kent. Enjoy every step, and treasure each new day as the gift it is.

*Kev Reynolds
Summer, 2017*



Orchards above Hunton and Yalding on the fertile greensand hills (Walk 18)

INTRODUCTION



Sunburst on a misty walk adds a touch of magic

The diverse nature of its landforms makes Kent a wonderland to explore on foot, and with more than 4200 miles/6876km of footpaths, bridleways and byways criss-crossing the county, the walker is spoilt for choice. Every natural feature has its own particular charm, and every season its own brand of beauty.

THE NORTH DOWNS

The chalk ridge of the North Downs stretches right across the county in an extensive arc reaching from Westerham to Dover. Covering

almost a quarter of the county, the Kent Downs region was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1968. Though one side of the ridge slopes gently to the Thames and Medway estuaries, or off to the Swale or low-lying Thanet, its 'front' makes an abrupt, steeply pitched wall that acts as a natural boundary to the Weald. Far-reaching vistas from the scarp edge provide a bonus to explorations, while secluded hamlets nestle in folds of the back-country to underline their apparent isolation. The chalk being overlaid in places with clay and flint makes this a fertile land, and in



both the back-country and on the broad downland crest, large arable fields and sheep-grazed meadows act as springboards from which larks rise singing. Step lightly as you explore, for deer may be seen straying from cover; there are fox-runs and badger trails, and wildflowers that adorn meadow and woodland alike – especially the orchids and cowslips that are so characteristic of the Downs.

For the long-distance walker, the North Downs Way keeps mostly to the scarp edge on its 130-mile/208km journey from Farnham in Surrey to Dover, with an alternative section that breaks away near Wye to visit Canterbury before curving round to the coast. The Pilgrims Way, however, traces a route along the base of the

Downs, but as this is tarmac road for most of the way, it's lost much of its appeal for walkers. Not so the broad crest, the scarp edge and the inner valleys where abundant opportunities exist for walks of varying lengths; delightful half-day rambles or full-day walks, some of which can be found in this book – from Lullingstone, Shoreham, Camer Country Park, Stansted and Trosley and Wye.

THE GREENSAND HILLS

The greensand hills act as an inner lining to the North Downs. But the ridge which shadows that downland wall is much narrower and more clearly defined than its better-known neighbour, and the views arguably even

better from its crest. Overlooking the Weald, this ridge also stretches right across the county, entering Kent from Surrey a little south of Westerham, and making a long curve towards Hythe and the edge of Romney Marsh. Unlike the chalk downs, the greensand hills are, as their name suggests, sandy in places – although this is not evident everywhere. The vegetation is different, with bracken-covered heaths, stands of pine and birch and many handsome beechwoods. The hurricane winds of October 1987 flattened vast areas of woodland, but time has served to heal the landscape and, following programmes of replanting, large wooded sections have recovered well. One of the legacies of that hurricane is the welcome spread of bluebells, wood anemones and wood sorrel, so walking along the

greensand hills in springtime can be truly spectacular.

While the North Downs wall is accompanied for much of its length by major roads, the ridge of greensand has been spared such company, and rewards with some of the finest, and most extensive uncluttered views, not only in Kent, but in all of southern England. With so many great vantage points to exploit, walks along the greensand hills count among the best of all. Westerham, Crockham Hill, Toys Hill, Ide Hill, Sevenoaks Weald, Shipbourne; all these give memorable days out. But so do Yalding and Linton, where the south-facing slopes are hung with orchards; and Ulcombe and Pluckley from whose footpaths you gaze across great open spaces. For the long-distance walker the Greensand Way traces a route



A number of walks along the greensand hills go through orchards



along the ridge for 110 miles/177km between Haslemere in Surrey and Hamstreet, south of Ashford, and is a very fine route indeed. Recognising this, a few sections of that long trail are adopted by circular walks described in this book.

THE WEALD

In common with the North Downs and greensand hills, the Weald is not confined to Kent, but spreads beyond the county's boundary into Surrey and Sussex. This vast region is contained by the North and South Downs and consists of a complex series of fertile hills and vales, among which are to be found the fields of soft fruit, the platts of cobnuts, the orchards, vineyards and hop farms that gave Kent

the epithet the 'Garden of England'. But there are also large areas of meadowland and extensive woods; and in Wealden hollows hammer ponds, now a haven of peace and tranquility, recall a time when they were at the heart of England's 'black country' as local iron ore was smelted then hammered into cannon. Centuries later heron stalk the margins of these ponds, whose outlet streams flow between banks bright with wildflowers. Fine houses built by the iron masters remain largely tucked away, but some are seen from walks included here. Elsewhere, several of Kent's loveliest villages punctuate the Wealden landscape, their sturdy churches beckoning across the acres, their streets lined with black-and-white half-timbered houses and pubs.

The Wealdway makes a roughly north–south crossing of 82 miles/131km from Gravesend on the Thames to Beachy Head and Eastbourne in Sussex; and the High Weald Walk follows nearly 28 miles/45km of footpaths on a circuit near Tunbridge Wells. However, within this collection of walks, those that begin in the far west of the county at Four Elms, Marsh Green, Cowden, Chiddingstone, Penshurst and Groombridge are full of variety, while routes that explore the Weald's rolling hills around Brenchley and Tenterden are no less rewarding.

COASTLINE

Kent's long coastline is forever changing. While the tides chew away at the coastal fringe in some places, in

others land is reclaimed from the sea. Nothing illustrates this changing shape of the county more vividly than a walk along the Saxon Shore Way, from Gravesend to Hastings in Sussex. When the Romans arrived here they found a very different coastline from that which we would recognise today, for although some of it has disappeared beneath the waves, elsewhere we now walk on one-time sea-cliffs several miles inland!

Separating the Isle of Sheppey from mainland Kent, the Swale is edged on both shores with mudflat and marshland loud with wildfowl, while the River Wantsum (which until the Middle Ages was as wide as the Swale and, linked with the Stour, helped make Thanet an island) is now a minor stream, beside which ploughs turn the soil where ships



St Margaret's Bay, seen from the path leading back to Langdon Cliffs (Walk 40)

A hiker with white hair, wearing a blue sleeveless shirt, dark trousers, and a blue backpack, is walking away from the camera on a narrow dirt path. The path is flanked by tall, golden-brown grasses and leads into a vast, flat field of similar vegetation. The sky is not visible, and the overall tone is warm and natural.

THE WALKS

Leaving Ridley the way cuts across fields (Walk 26)

WEST KENT AND THE WEALD

With the Darent Gap seen off to the right, the way descends to a lane above Shoreham (Walk 1)



From the Darent Valley which slices through the North Downs, to the low-lying pastures edging Romney Marsh, the countryside south of the M20 rewards the walker with a magnificently diverse set of landscapes. Only a small part of the North Downs is included, but the Kentish half of the Greensand Ridge is here in its entirety, as is the vast sweep of the Weald with its historic villages, orchards, hop gardens and vineyards, and numerous scenes of timeless beauty.

WALK 1

Lullingstone Park to Shoreham

Start/Finish	Lullingstone Park Visitor Centre (TQ 526 638)
Distance	6 miles/9.5km
Maps	OS Explorer 147 and 162
Refreshments	Cafeteria at Lullingstone Park Visitor Centre; pubs in Shoreham
Access	Via Castle Road cutting southwest off A225 ½ mile/800 metres south of Eynsford railway bridge. Nearest railway stations: Eynsford and Shoreham.
Parking	Pay & display at the visitor centre

Formerly a medieval deer park, Lullingstone Park provides a focus of outdoor recreation on the west flank of the Darent Valley between Shoreham and Eynsford. In addition to the ubiquitous golf course, there are woodland walks and views from open meadows, while the visitor centre on the Darent's bank serves the public with refreshments, toilets, interpretive leaflets, walking guides and plenty of information on the area's natural history.

Apart from the pleasures of the North Downs, there are many other features to this walk. First, a riverside stroll with views across a man-made lake to the Tudor manor house of Lullingstone Castle, then an opportunity to make a short diversion to inspect the remains of a Roman villa. There are handsome farmhouses and flint-walled cottages, an imposing mansion set in neat lawns, and a rather striking viaduct marching across the valley. Near the end of the walk, Shoreham has lots of interest and attractive scenes at almost every turn.

From the visitor centre entrance take the very pleasant streamside path among trees, with the Darent on your right. Beyond the stream can be seen an extensive lake that extends as far as the red-brick mansion of **Lullingstone Castle**.



The Queen Anne facade of Lullingstone Castle conceals a Tudor mansion

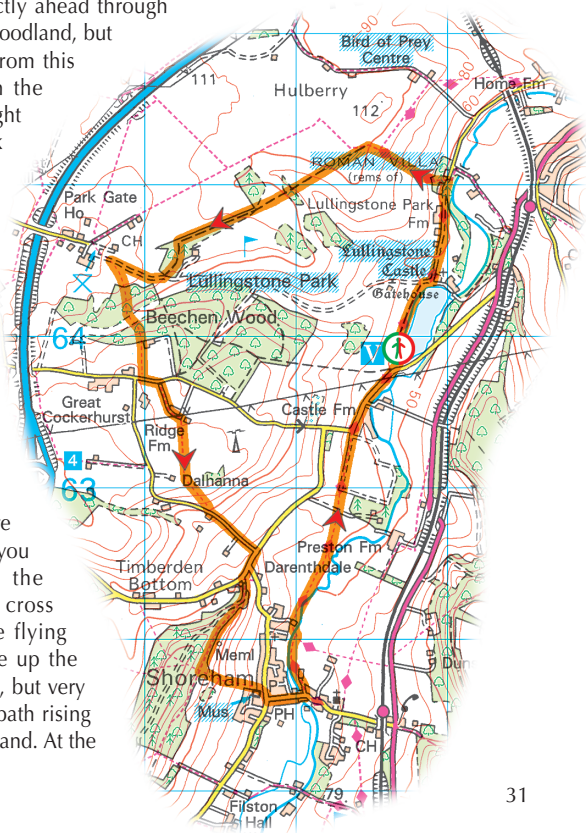
Lullingstone Castle is a Tudor mansion with a red brick Queen Anne facade set within 120 acres of countryside. Home to the same family since 1497, it has a 15-acre lake and the UK's first World Garden of Plants created by plant hunter Tom Hart Dyke. The house and gardens are open to the public on set days between April and September. For information see www.lullingstonecastle.co.uk.

Walk through a parking area and onto a lane by the castle's gatehouse entrance. Keep on this lane for almost ½ mile/800 metres, but immediately before reaching **Lullingstone Roman Villa**, turn left on a footpath rising among trees.

Lullingstone Roman Villa dates from about AD100, but was enlarged over some 300 years of occupation to house what was probably an important Roman official. There were baths and underfloor heating, a Christian chapel, and superb mosaic floors on public display now via English Heritage (www.english-heritage.org.uk).

Above the trees the way continues to climb, and near the head of the slope a path breaks off to the right. Ignoring this, continue ahead alongside trees, then veer left through the trees to cross the open brow of a hill with long views over the Darent Valley. Now the path slopes downhill, passes between scrub trees into a dip, then rises on the other side. When it forks keep ahead on the right branch, soon coming to an open meadow which you cross along its right-hand edge. On the far side the path divides again. Take the left branch (the other is a bridleway) which takes you through a long strip of woodland with a **golf course** on the left. At a crossing track continue directly ahead through another section of woodland, but when you emerge from this at a paved way on the golf course, turn right towards a car park and the clubhouse.

About 150 metres before reaching the car park, note a large wooden signpost. At this point turn left on what is part of a circular walk. Aim for a marker post and continue into **Upper Beechen Wood** where a broad path takes you down a slope, at the foot of which you cross a fairway – beware flying golf balls! Continue up the grass slope opposite, but very soon veer left on a path rising through more woodland. At the



There's an interesting memorial stone up a few steps on the right.

The way takes you above a large memorial cross cut into the chalk slope, with a dedication to the men of Shoreham who lost their lives in the 1914–18 war. From here there is a splendid view over the village and the Darent Valley.

top of the slope come to crosstracks and maintain direction to a ladder stile and a gate. An enclosed path now leads ahead to a field, which you cross to Redmans Lane at TQ 510 637.

Turn left, and after about 100 metres bear right on a concrete driveway leading to two bungalows. At the end of the second garden boundary the path enters a large field. Keep to the right-hand edge, and at the far corner cross a stile into a sloping meadow, with fine views to the steep scarp slope of the Downs. Hills of woodland and meadow fold into neat valleys ahead.

Descend alongside a fence to the bottom left-hand corner where you come onto a lane opposite a cottage at TQ 515 628. Bear left, following the lane through an avenue of mature trees, then turn right at a T-junction. ◀ Continue up the lane to another junction. Ignore the left turn for Shoreham and stay on the right fork for a short distance. On coming to a cottage on the left, turn onto a track immediately left of the driveway. This track runs above and to the right of a sunken path-way, veering to the right and rising steadily. When it forks at the entrance to Meenfield Wood continue directly ahead, with steep meadows sweeping down to Shoreham on your left.

◀ Continue ahead as far as a crossing path where you descend to the village, passing the **Shoreham** Aircraft Museum where teas are served (open weekends from May to September www.shoreham-aircraft-museum.co.uk). Turn right along High Street, then left into Church Street.

Shoreham is an attractive village with a number of tile-hung or flint-walled cottages, and a picturesque bridge over the Darent, a stream that adds much to Shoreham's charm. There's a railway station on the London (Victoria or Blackfriars) to Ashford line, and a bus service from Sevenoaks. At the railway station the Shoreham Society has developed an interesting Countryside Centre.



Wander down Church Street past the weather-boarded Kings Arms with its unusual ostler's box, then cross the Darent and bear left by the war memorial. Approaching the entrance to The Water House (where Samuel Palmer the artist once lived) veer left on a surfaced path accompanying the stream. When a footbridge allows, cross to the left bank where the continuing route is waymarked for the Darent Valley Path. It continues as a fenced path. When the fencing ends keep along the right headland of a field, then cross through the middle of the next field to a concrete farm road. Continue ahead and eventually come onto a country road by some houses. At this point veer slightly left, up steps and into a field where you follow its right-hand boundary for about 500 metres to **Lullingstone Park Visitor Centre**.

*Seen from the walk,
the Darent flows
at the bottom of
Shoreham gardens*