

Bedgebury Walk

12.7 miles (20.4 kms) allow 6.5 hours





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This 13-mile walk leads to Bedgebury National Pinetum – the most complete collection of conifers in the world - dating back to the 1840s, and managed by the Forestry Commission since 1925. The route takes the walker southwards from Cranbrook, to enjoy superb views over the rolling Wealden countryside, and on through the extensive Bedgebury Forest to the National Pinetum visitor centre, where refreshments are available. The return leg follows a sunken lane towards Hartley, before eventually joining Cranbrook High Street, lined with buildings whose distinctive architecture reflects the town's historic significance as the centre of the cloth and iron industries in the Weald.

You will find plenty to enjoy on this walk, experiencing superb views over the countryside, while strolling through fields bordered by the shaws (strips of woodland) and hedgerows so typical of the landscape of the High Weald. The route then leads through the mixture of ancient coppiced woodland and dense pine plantations that form Bedgebury Forest.





A History of Bedgebury

The Manor of Bedgebury was first mentioned in a deed of Coenwulf, the Anglo-Saxon king of Mercia, in AD 814: Bedgebury as a name being derived from the Old English for “pasture by the bend”. Six generations of the Norman family de Bedgebury lived on the former hunting estate in the original 13th century house, which stood where the Great Lake is now.

In 1450, the manor was acquired by the Culpepper family, who held it for more than 250 years through seven generations, including Thomas Culpepper who was executed for adultery with Catherine Howard, Henry VIII’s fifth wife. In August 1573, Alexander Culpepper and his wife Ann entertained Queen Elizabeth I at the manor. A few days later, Elizabeth knighted Alexander at nearby Rye. Sir Alexander encouraged the establishment of iron furnaces and foundries on his estate, where guns were cast for the fleet of English ships that defeated the Spanish Armada.

The Culpepper family was eventually broken up by the Civil War, and the 2,300-acre estate was sold to Sir Thomas Hayes in 1660. The present house was built in 1680 by Sir James Hayes. In 1836, it was taken over by Viscount Beresford, the Duke of Wellington’s Field





Bedgebury House



View of the Pinetum



Pinetum carving

Marshal. Names around the estate, such as Lady's Well and Louisa Lake commemorate Beresford's wife, Louisa Hope. In 1848, the estate was inherited by Alexander James Beresford-Hope, who restyled the house in the French taste of the Louis XIV period, with a Mansard roof and clock tower. The interior was richly decorated, with ornamented ceilings, paintings, carvings and exquisite works of art.

At the end of the 19th century, the house was sold to Isaac Lewis, a financier from the City of London. His modernisation included installing electricity. The estate was later sold to the government for forestry, as there was an acute shortage of timber during and after the First World War. Later, the government had no need for the house, so it was sold, together with 200 acres, to the Church Education Corporation, which established a school for girls there. Bedgebury School opened in 1920, and continued as an educational institution until it closed in 2006. The house is now occupied by an international language school.





Walking Notes

This is a 13-mile circular walk, starting and finishing at Cranbrook. The route follows established public rights of way, except in the Bedgebury Forest, where it follows surfaced tracks. The guide notes lead the walker in a clockwise direction, with a short cut available for walkers who do not want to visit the Pinetum - a saving of 4 miles. Light refreshments are available at the Pinetum café and the Hartley Dyke farm shop.

There is plenty of free parking available in the large car park by the Co-op supermarket off Cranbrook High Street.

✚ From the Weald Information Centre just below St Dunstan's Church, head up the High Street and turn left after the Post Office. Go past the public conveniences and over the Crane stream.

Continue straight along Brookside, bearing right into Bramley Drive, then right again into Freight Lane. Follow this lane down the hill and past The Freight house on your left.

Walk straight on and over the fields until you reach the edge of a large field, where the footpath divides. Bear right across the field (you may find it easier to follow the edge of the field if it is cultivated), until you reach the Swattenden Lane. Go straight over the stile, following the footpath south, and past the buildings of the Swattenden Centre. A Victorian house, used in the 1950s and 60s as a boys' secondary modern school, the centre now offers short residential educational courses.

✚ Follow the footpath across the fields until you reach a thin section of woodland. Go over the bridge and the stile on the far side, and into a field. Follow the left edge of the field until you see a signpost directing you left through a shaw, and towards a gate in the top left corner of the field.

On the other side of the gate, head straight across the field towards another shaw and two stiles. Emerging from the woodland, follow the footpath across the fields, and you will notice the rocky sandstone outcrop on your right as you walk up the slight incline towards Water Lane.

✚ As you come out onto Water Lane, turn left, then right, at Four Wents, and carry on down Potters Lane.

Sandstone



Outcrops of sandstone are common throughout the High Weald, and can often be seen on the banks of sunken lanes. The sandstone was formed more than 130million years ago, when layers of sand and clay were deposited and then compacted as south east England rose up into a broad dome. The process of erosion over many years exposed the harder sandstone rock from overlying layers of sand, clay and chalk. This produced the landscape of the High Weald we see today, including gills (or ghylls) – characteristic steep-sided ravines that often include examples of rare plants adapted to the micro-climates found in them.

✚ Pass the farm buildings on your right, and take the footpath on the right where the road bends. Follow the path up the hill and round the edge of a field, walking towards a gap in a line of trees. The footpath leads straight up through the middle of a large field, reaching a track at the top which you follow until you reach Water Lane at Tubslake, on one of the ancient drove roads.

At the junction of the lane, local lore insists that this was where smugglers in the past hid their contraband kegs in a pond named after the brandy barrels that had been found floating on the water.

✚ Turn left and follow the lane until you reach the A229, Hawkhurst Road. Cross the road with care and turn left, then right, into Park Lane. Walk across the disused railway line at Badger's Oak.

This was a former small branch line from Paddock Wood to Hawkhurst, which operated from 1893 to 1961. It was known as the Hopper Line because it brought hop pickers from London's East End every summer to work in the hop gardens of Kent.

✚ Follow the lane into Bedgebury Forest, and carry on until you reach Louisa Lodge - now a row of cottages.

If you want to take a short cut which does not visit the Pinetum, continue past the cottages, and follow the bridleway



past Sugarloaf Hill. Go up the incline to a quarry on the top of the ridge. Keep following the bridleway to Furnace Farm, and turn right on to the trackway, and go past the old oast houses. The track follows the route of the ancient sunken lane, and eventually arrives at Hartley and the A229.

To visit the Pinetum, take the left track at Louisa Lodge, then go down the first bridleway on the left, towards Frith Wood.

The name reflects the Celtic origins of this forest, which go back as far as AD 815. Starvegoose Bank prompts speculation that when flocks of domestic geese were driven long distances to market, the forest might have offered little forage for them.

† Follow the track and bear right at marker 32, following the blue cycle route around the forest.

At the bottom of the hill turn left and carry on towards the visitor centre and play area. Continuing to the top of the hill, turn right and enter the Pinetum through the gate, and follow the path that leads down to the visitor centre.

Bedgebury Pinetum



Kew Garden's loss was Kent's gain when the notorious smogs of London were considered too damaging for a planned collection of conifer trees. From 1923 until 1965, Bedgebury Pinetum was developed jointly by The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and the Forestry Commission. The Pinetum, which covers 320 acres, is now wholly owned by the Commission, managing more than 10,000 trees grown on the site. Not only does the arboretum include many rare and endangered species of trees, but it also contains some of the oldest, tallest and largest examples of conifers in Britain. They are surrounded by Bedgebury Forest, which is open for tree-top fun and games, as well as adventurous off-road cycling.



Bishop's Lane

Heading back towards Cranbrook from the visitor centre, follow the Pinetum Trail towards Marshal's Lake, and walk over the bridge. Go straight on up the steps, and bear right towards the public conveniences. Make your way through the gate and right onto the track, past the Forestry Commission offices on your left. Continue up the track until it forks, and take the left fork leading past Brick Kiln Cottages. Follow the track up the hill, taking the left turn at Iron Latch, and carry on along the footpath to the small quarry at the top.

Take the right-hand bridleway towards Furnace Farm, passing Three Chimneys Bank on your left (see above).

The names Three Chimneys Bank, and Iron Latch, are probably connected to the iron industry. The furnaces used for iron smelting had chimneys, and the name latch is a variant of leach, an area where water soaked through deposits.

Furnace Farm, formerly part of the Bedgebury Estate, was important in the iron-working history of the area. On this site, guns were forged to fight the Spanish Armada. Iron ore was available locally. Note the large number of streams that are still rusty in colour, and the area has several chalybeate springs, their water rich in minerals and iron salts. These streams provided water power for the iron industry, giving rise to local place names, such as Hammer Pond and Hammer Stream. The walk follows an ancient sunken routeway, known as Bishop's Lane, that leads from Furnace Farm to Hartley. This lane was probably used to transport iron products from the furnace to Cranbrook for onward distribution.



Chalybeate stream

Iron industry in the Weald



16th century blast furnace *

The Weald supported an iron industry for more than 2,000 years, spanning two periods of intense activity.

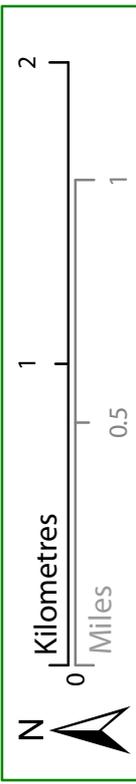
The first period was from the end of the Iron Age to the last years of Roman-occupied Britain, at the beginning of the 5th century. This was a time when small, primitive furnaces, or bloomeries, were common throughout the area. The ironworks used iron ore dug from quarries, or the banks of streams, and heated in furnaces fuelled by charcoal, to produce lumps of molten iron, which was then worked in forges to produce tools and other useful implements.

The second period coincided with the arrival of the blast furnace from Europe in the late 15th century. It lasted for 200 years, until the industry moved north. The Wealden iron industry left behind a landscape rich in coppiced woodlands that used to provide charcoal for the furnaces; numerous ponds created by damming streams to provide water power for the bellows and hammers, and place names that refer to furnace, forge and hammer. It is hard to imagine that such an extensive industrial landscape shaped the beautiful countryside we see today, but the signs are everywhere.

† Cross the road, and follow the A229 back to Cranbrook, admiring the buildings on either side of the High Street as you return to your starting point.

Key

-  Circular Walk - 12.7 miles (20.4km) Allow 6.5 hrs
-  Shortcut - 8.9 miles (14.3km) Allow 5 hrs
-  Gate
-  Pub
-  Museum
-  Picnic site
-  Take Care
-  Public toilets
-  Visitor centre
-  Gardens
-  Visitor attraction



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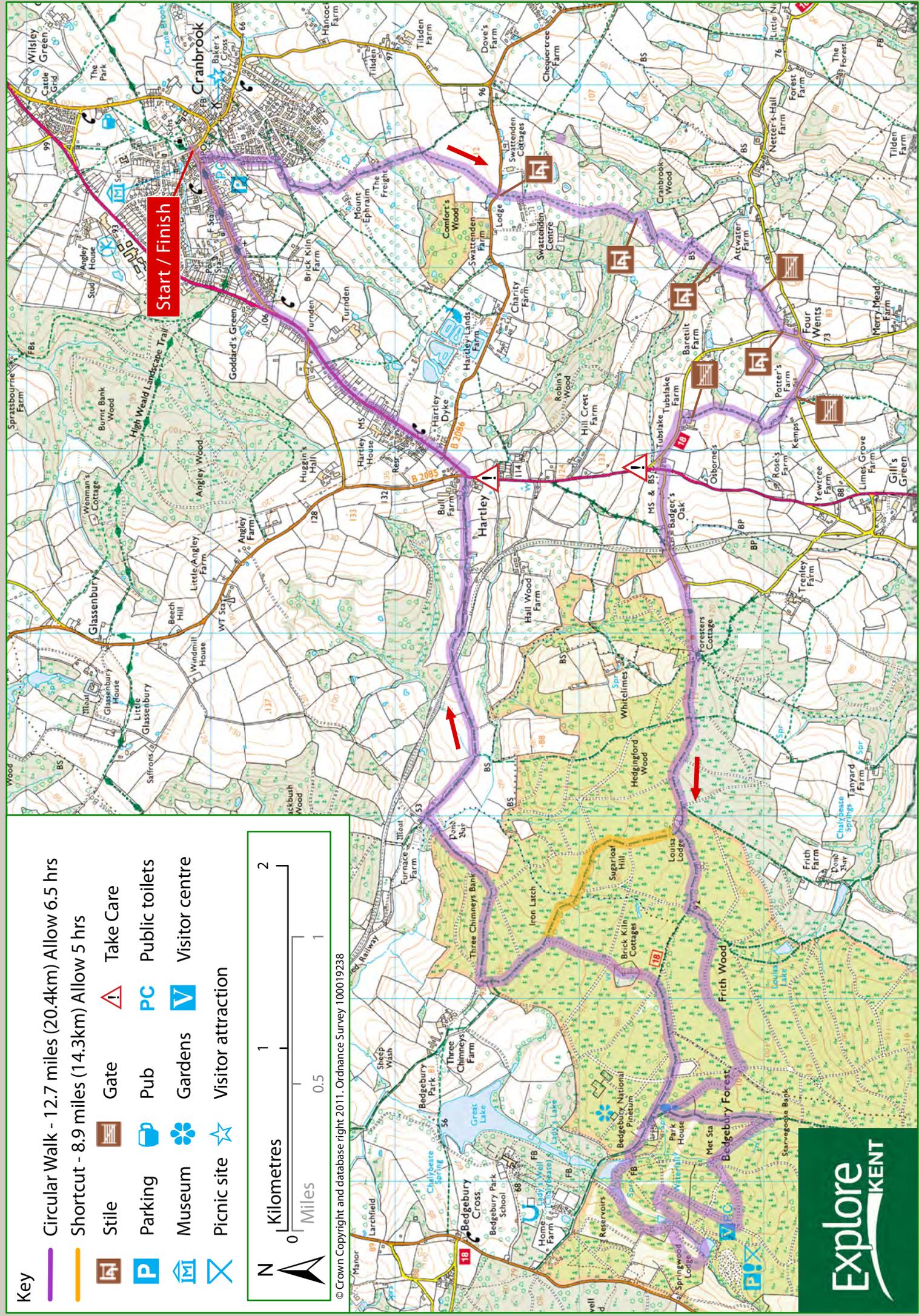




Image above courtesy of Fotolia

The Hop Industry

The hop industry was at its height in the 19th century, when hops were grown throughout Kent, and the county was the main hop-producing area in the UK. Kent's farmers supplied huge harvests of hops to an organised network of merchants, who sold the dried hop flowers to local and London brewers. Hops were a profitable enterprise compared to arable crops grown on the poor Kentish soils, and yields were the best in the country. The growth of the industry is signified by the many oast houses built throughout the county to dry the harvested hops, before bagging and distributing to the brewers. Although hop growing in Kent has declined over the past century, oast houses still dominate the landscape of the High Weald, although these days most have been converted into residential properties.

The value of the hop cone when dried lay in its ability to provide bitterness and preserving qualities to beer, appreciated by local tastes, as well as armies on overseas campaigns, such as India Pale Ale, which was a beer supplied to troops serving in the Indian subcontinent.

The second half of the 20th century saw the decline of the traditional Kentish hop industry as brewers imported foreign-grown pelleted hops. Small hop gardens still exist across Kent to supply local micro-breweries. The Scotney Castle estate near Lamberhurst produces some fine ales from hops grown on the estate.



The 'Walk Through Time' walking guides have been produced by Cranbrook In Bloom in partnership with the Kent High Weald Partnership. For more information visit www.walkthroughtime.co.uk

Walks available in this series:

- Bedgebury
- Benenden
- Cranbrook
- Goudhurst
- Sissinghurst

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Please respect the beautiful countryside you are walking through by following the Countryside Code:

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people



This walk has been produced in partnership with:



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