

# Sissinghurst Walk

10 miles (16 kms) allow 5 hours





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This route takes the walker northwards from Cranbrook through woods, past ancient houses and mills and over the rolling wealden landscape to Sissinghurst Castle. Famed for its gardens, designed by Vita Sackville-West, this National Trust property is one of the gems of the Weald.

It travels through orchards towards Sissinghurst village, past the parkland estate of Great Swifts on its return to Cranbrook, finishing at St Dunstan's churchyard, the starting point of the walk.



Saunden's Wood







# A History of Sissinghurst

Sissinghurst village was established from the wealth of the Wealden iron and cloth industries and was formerly known as Mylkehouse Street, or Mylkehouse. The village changed its name in the 1850s, possibly to disassociate itself from previous smuggling activity in the area.

Nearby is Sissinghurst Castle, now owned by the National Trust, famous for its remarkable gardens. The first house was built on this site in the 12th century, its name derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *hurst*, meaning a clearing in the woods. A moated stone manor house was built in the early middle ages.

The property was bought in 1480 by the Baker family, who restyled it, creating one of the largest houses in Kent to be built entirely of brick and only the front section of that house remains today.



Trinity Church





*The moat at Sissinghurst Castle*



*Lake Near Park Farm*



*Mylkehouse*

Between 1560 and 1570, Sir Richard Baker built an Elizabethan house that was one of the best of its kind in the Weald. In 1756, the house was let to the government after a decline in the family's fortunes. It was used as a camp for French prisoners of war, and hence became known as a castle. The buildings were damaged, fell into disrepair and were occupied by poor estate workers and brick makers for 50 years until 1855, when the property reverted back to the Cornwallis family, who built the farmhouse. In 1930, the estate, together with 400 acres of farmland, was bought by celebrated gardener Vita Sackville-West, who together with her husband Sir Harold Nicolson, created the garden, which first opened to the public in 1938.

After Vita's death in 1962, the estate was transferred to the National Trust in 1967, which ensured the garden was saved for everyone to see.







# Walking Notes

This circular walk of just under 10 miles follows footpaths, tracks and quiet lanes, through the characteristic High Weald landscape of small fields, ancient woodland and orchards, passing ancient houses and a mill site. The route passes through the grounds of Sissinghurst Castle, worthy of a visit in its own right, and where light refreshments are available, before reaching Sissinghurst village and returning to Cranbrook. The route follows public rights of way traversing gentle sloping countryside that offers superb views.

The walk begins and ends at Cranbrook, where free parking is available in the large car park by the Co-op supermarket, off the High Street.

† From the Weald Information Centre, go through St Dunstan's churchyard, and up past the former Victorian Church of England Primary School, now a doctors' surgery, on your left.

If you have time to explore the church, it is well worth a visit, its history available from the excellent information panels inside.

† Pass through a kissing gate and turn right onto an enclosed path, and you will eventually reach a field where you bear left through a gate, then walk up to the main road (A229).



Cranbrook

† Cross the road with care. When you reach the drive opposite, go through the gate, bearing left along a footpath, before you reach Fir House. The path leads past paddocks and a pond on the left, and a fence on the right. Take the right-hand fork where the footpath divides. Continue walking with the woodland on your left, then enter the wood. Note the evidence of old quarries in the wood (hence the name

Gravel Pit Wood), and follow the path over a bridge and up a drive to the main road (A262).

The stream under the bridge leads to a pond, formed by damming, at Spratsbourne Farm. This pond provided water to power the Spratsbourne corn mill until the 20th century.

† Cross the road to an enclosed path. Go along it and you will emerge on the driveway of a modern house standing on the left. Turn right down the driveway, towards the road. Cross the road with care, and walk up the driveway towards Hazleden Farm.

## Hoppers' Huts



An archaeological survey of the Oast House at Hazleden Farm dates it to the 17th century. The site also contains Hopper Huts, in which hop-picking families from London would have stayed during the picking season every September. These huts were usually very basic - constructed from corrugated iron sheets nailed to a wooden frame over a dirt floor. Wealthier farmers constructed their huts of brick, and examples of these were present on this site.

## St Dunstan's Church



St Dunstan's Church, often referred to as the Cathedral of the Weald, owes its present shape and size to the wealth brought to the town by the woollen cloth industry in the 15th and 16th centuries. A church on this site is mentioned as early as 1070, but it was greatly enlarged in 1400, when the base of the tower, the south porch, and the Chancel Arch, were constructed. On either side of the door to the tower you'll see four early Green Man roof bosses - a reminder that the Great Forest of Andredsweald was always present in the minds of local people. Between 1480 and 1550, the nave and the aisles were added, thanks to gifts and bequests from the wealthy clothiers living locally.

## Friezley House



A typical clothier's house built by the Hovenden family in 1608, by which time the cloth industry was in decline. By the middle of the next century, the house was no longer owned by the Hovenden family. It was leased by the Parish Vestry in 1780, to provide shelter and work for the poor on the Parish Farm. This was a very successful project that lasted until 1790, when it was moved to Sissinghurst. The 19th century sale provided the funds for the present-day Vestry Hall, Cranbrook – still in constant use.

Follow the path between the cottages and the pond on the right, bear right after the last bungalow on the right, where it leads out to open fields. Continue down hill, with the hedge on your left. Go through the gate at the bottom, opposite Friezley House.

After you come through the gate, turn left down Friezley Lane towards Hocker Edge.

A water mill existed here for more than 500 years and was the last to function in the parish. It is mentioned in 1523, in connection with the Courthopes and the Hovendens, prominent clothiers of the area. In the early 20th century, the mill was owned by Colonel Charles Hervey Gray, a horticulturalist and plantsman, who left Kent after the Second World War to develop the Royal Horticultural Society garden at Harlow Carr, in Yorkshire.



Hocker Edge

Follow the track through the woodland and turn right through a gate, just past a cottage, as the track opens out. Bear slightly left across the field, then follow the hedge line on your right until you reach a path. Turn left and keep on the track until a waymarker directs you through the wood. Follow the path through the wood, and you will come out at the top where a gate has been built into fencing to secure free-range chickens. Go through the gate and walk straight across the field to another gate on the far side. Follow the edge of the wood and go through the gap in front of you. Follow the markers through the wood until you reach a track which leads up to the main road (A229).

Turn left and cross the road with care, walking on the verge a short distance until you reach a driveway on the right, with a gate across. Walk up the driveway and turn right to follow a path through woodland, with a field boundary on the right. Bear right, and you will arrive at a stile and path between wire fencing, before meeting another stile.

Note the hornbeam-topped field boundary on your right, which shows signs of hedge laying in the past, where there are old horizontal stems with vertical shoots rising from them.



Field boundary hedge

Bear left at the waymarker across the field, emerging at the lane with a house on your right. Turn left up the lane, then find the footpath on the right, and go over a stile. Follow the path as it travels past gardens and into trees, past a pond. Go over the next stile that leads into two fields, carry on until you reach Dig Dog Lane, where you bear right.

The Lane is named after stray dogs that dug up the bodies of plague victims buried at this point in medieval times.

Continue straight along the lane until you reach the wide path on the right that leads to Sissinghurst Castle. Follow the track past the shop and restaurant, and head for the car park. Walk around the top edge of an orchard, go over a stile and along a bridleway until you reach the road. Turn left over a stile, and walk down through another orchard, bearing right at the bottom, where you reach a bridge over a stream. Pass the sewage works on your left and turn onto the track leading up to the main road (A 262). Turn right towards the village, passing the 19th century Trinity Church on your right.

The church was built in 1838 as an adjunct to St Dunstan's church, when Sissinghurst was a hamlet in Cranbrook parish.

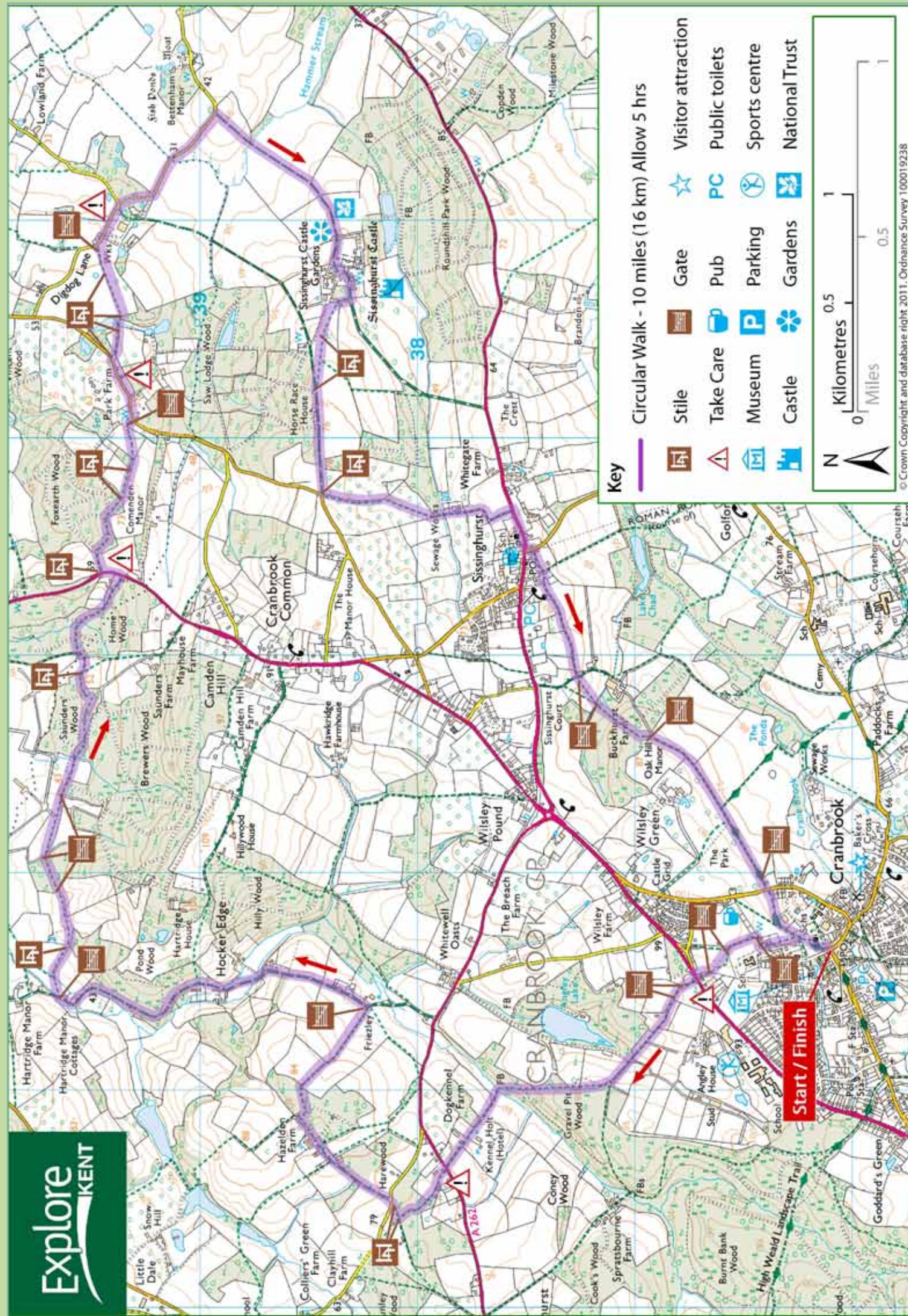
Cross over the road and walk down Chapel Lane for a few metres before turning right onto a footpath that leads between houses. Follow the path, which offers wonderful views over the fields on the left. Make your way down several steps, over the lane, up the other side and across a field to the woodland ahead. Go through the gate on the other side of the wood, and head back towards Cranbrook, with the Great Swifts estate on your right.

A major estate in Cranbrook, the Great Swifts estate was owned by Peter Courthope in 1447, and other owners have included Robert Tooth, the Cranbrook Hatter, in the 1840s. The house entertained a host of famous visitors, such as Anthony Eden and the Free Polish General Sikorski. As a child, Hollywood actress Elizabeth Taylor lived in a cottage in the grounds.

Continue straight on, cross the road into Cranbrook and walk below the open green space towards the churchyard to end your walk where you began.











*Image above courtesy of Fotolia*

# Apple growing

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Orchards flourish in the West Kent area, growing a wealth of apple, cherry, pear and plum varieties. The soil and climate are perfect for fruit growing, and orchards were originally planted in the south east by the Romans and Normans. In the 16th century, this form of agriculture really took off when royal plantsman Richard Harris was ordered by Henry VIII to create the first large-scale cherry orchards in Kent. These were planted in Teynham, near Faversham.

Traditional orchards with trees growing old fruit varieties are now few and far between, replaced by modern cultivars planted tightly in neat rows for easy management and harvesting. In the past, orchards were planted with different varieties of well spaced, tall and spreading trees, with sheep grazing below. These orchards supported a wide range of bird and insect species, such as the tree sparrow and noble chafer beetle, which adapted to this environment and are now in decline.





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](http://www.walkthroughtime.co.uk)

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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



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