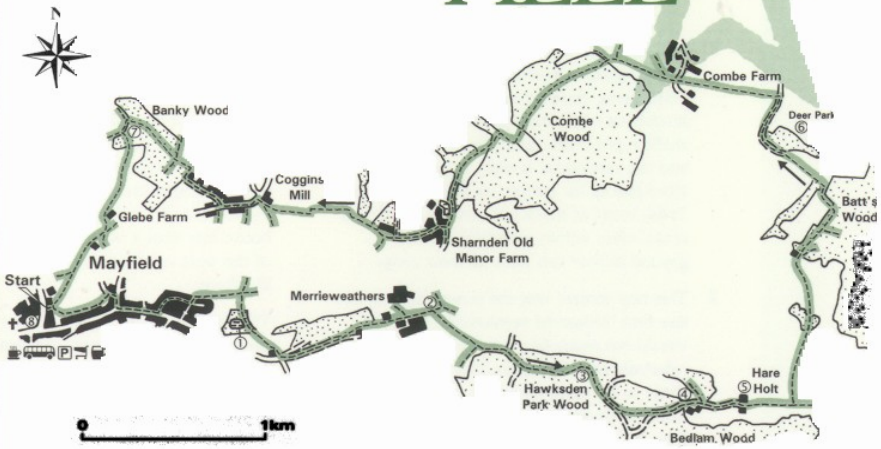
Wealden Walks

"A vision of HELL"



"A Vision of Hell" would not be most people's description of the area east of Mayfield today. However, in Tudor times this area was the iron-making, industrial capital of England, with the night sky lit up by the flames of furnaces and the glow of molten iron, accompanied by the turning of waterwheels and the blows of hammers. Today's walk takes in two furnace sites and many of the woods which supplied them - including one called Bedlam.

Length 7½ Miles = 12 Kilometres

Approximately 5 hours – Grade 3

START – King George's Field car park, Mayfield (adjacent to village hall). (O.S. Explorer 136 – NGR 588272)

ACCESS – Car – Mayfield King George's Field car park, access off Tunbridge Wells Road.
Bus – 252, 317 and Post Bus
Train – Nil

PUBLIC TOILETS – South Street, Mayfield

REFRESHMENTS – Pubs, Tea Rooms and village shops at Mayfield

7½ Miles

walk 16 A VISION OF HELL

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1 **The basic raw material of the iron industry was sandstone, in which traces of iron ore exist. Being close to, or at the surface, the sandstone was simply quarried out of shallow pits. Pure sandstone was removed and the remainder broken up into fist sized pieces for carting to the iron works. Today, most of these pits remain as flooded areas, often within woodland, as the ground is now too poor to bear crops.**

2 **This tiny stream was the power source for this first "industrial revolution". The High Weald has many fast flowing streams in relatively narrow valleys. This allowed them to be easily dammed up to create a hammer pond, from which water could flow in a controlled fashion to power one or more waterwheels, which were in turn connected to bellows, hammers etc. Today only a few of these ponds are still in water but the remains of the dam or 'bay' are usually still visible.**

3 **The other raw material needed in vast quantities by the iron industry was timber. Woods such as Hawksden were coppiced, that is the main trunks were cut back to provide a stool of rapidly sprouting branches which could be harvested on a 7 year cycle. The harvested wood was slowly burnt on the spot to make charcoal which was then transported to the ironworks.**

4 **Hawksden is the first of two ironworks on this walk. The most obvious remains are the pond bay, now breached by the stream near the bridge and the superb half timbered house adjacent, which once housed some of the principal craftsmen at the works. This was one of the more long-lived forges. In existence by 1574, it continued until final demolition around 1787. About 40 tons of iron constituted an average year's production.**

5 Hare Holt situated about 200 yards from the works and on slightly higher ground (thus less prone to flooding) is probably **the home of the ironmaster. Opposite on the right hand side of the stream is Bedlam Wood named after the unceasing noise and light emitted by the works. Indeed, ahead, a brief glimpse of a thatched house less than a mile away marks the site of the next works down the valley, at Bivelham.**

6 **The Wadhurst Park estate is an 18th century landscaped park with areas of woodland and fine isolated trees. Although not a hammer pond, the lake gives a fine impression of the size of one. More noticeable, however, are the many large herds of deer now using the park.**

7 **Only a paltry few remains mark the site of Mayfield furnace. The bay is still intact (having later been used as a stage coach road) with the water carried through it by a modern culvert. This gives an appreciation of the height of the water wheel which turned in the wooden trough visible in the stream. On the adjacent bank stood the blast furnace, a stone tower about 25 feet high in which were piled successive layers of iron ore and charcoal. These layers of charcoal were set on fire and huge bellows powered by the waterwheel were used to boost the temperature, until the ore melted and liquid iron ran out of the base of the tower. This was led into moulds to make firebacks, cannon or cannonballs. This works operated from 1545 until 1664. If the stream is low, a great mass of slag iron can be seen where it was pushed into the stream after the last firing.**

8 **On a plinth in Mayfield High Street is a small 16th century cannon. This was dug out of the remains of Mayfield furnace in 1864 and mounted in its present position in 1977 to commemorate the first great English industry.**

7½ Miles

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