

# High Weald Farming Information Pack



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Contained within this pack is a variety of information to enhance your knowledge about Farming in the High Weald. Please use this sheet on your farm visit to help you identify and learn about the features that you see. The High Weald farming pack contains information on:

- **Environmental Stewardship**
- **Farming History of the High Weald**
- **What's in a name?**
- **What's that crop?**
- **What's that Habitat?**
- **What's that building?**
- **What's interesting about the animals?**

For further information on this or the High Weald Heroes Education Programme please visit our website [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org) or contact the High Weald AONB Unit Tel: 01580 879500 or Email: [info@highweald.org](mailto:info@highweald.org)



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# High Weald Farming Information sheet

## Farming History of the High Weald



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The High Weald has a unique farming history. We can see clues to this history in the unusual pattern of scattered farms and villages, the small fields with strange shapes and a curious network of sunken lanes.

Early users of the High Weald were drovers. These were farmers from the North and the South Downs who used the woods of the High Weald as seasonal pasture for their pigs. Over the years their routes became sunken and can still be seen in the network of sunken lanes and footpaths that run in a north-south direction throughout the area.



Drovers stayed in areas called dens during the season but eventually decided to stay longer and so set up permanent farmsteads. Some dens have evolved into larger settlements, for example, Tenterden, Benenden. However, most have remained as farmsteads or woods - many with the name den still part of their place name e.g. Hammerden Wood, Sharden Manor farmhouse. Because dens were scattered all over the High Weald the more permanent dwellings also ended up being scattered all over the High Weald - something you can still spot today and one of the areas distinctive features.

Medieval farmers gradually cleared small and irregular-shaped fields from the woodlands in which they grazed animals. Later, other crops appeared such as wheat and barley amongst the small meadows.



The arrival of the railways in the 19th Century opened up the London market for hops, fruit and poultry which insulated the area from the worst of the 19th century agricultural depression and allowed farming to continue. The High Weald remains one of the areas traditionally associated with the growing of hops for beer making although only a handful of hop gardens and breweries remain.



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## What's in a Name?



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	<p>From the Bronze Age to the late Saxon period, <b>pigs</b> were driven into the Weald each autumn to feed on acorns and other woodland foods. Gradually, from around the seventh century, the Weald was parceled into small dens (swine pastures) belonging to people living in the north and east of Kent and the South Downs. Generally, the dens varied in size from about 50 to 400 acres (see <a href="http://www.benendenvillage.org.uk">www.benendenvillage.org.uk</a> as an example).</p>
	<p><b>Iron</b> was made in the Weald from pre-Roman times until the beginning of the 19th century. Furnaces were made out of stone and brick - yielded from the Wealden geology - and were used for smelting to produce iron from iron ore. Two types of furnaces were used; the bloomery furnace during the iron age and Roman period and the much larger blast furnace by the Tudors.</p>
	<p><b>Hammer</b> is another word associated with the Iron industry. During the time of the Tudor iron industry small streams were dammed to create huge ponds. The stored water was used to power enormous bellows (which blasted air into the furnace) and huge hammers to beat the iron into shape. Thus the ponds became known as Hammer Ponds - the sound of the hammers could be heard 12 miles away!</p>
	<p><b>A Hurst</b> is a small wood that has become separated from a larger area of woodland or is an enclosed wood on a hill. The word is used mainly in the Weald and still exists in place names such as Staplehurst and Goudhurst.</p>
	<p><b>Fold</b> is the Saxon word for swine pasture. It can also refer to the site of a Saxon or Norman church with its surrounding farmstead. Folds provided shelter for animals returning from pastures by the drover's roads. Many of these shelters developed into villages.</p>
	<p><b>A Shaw</b> is a wide belt of timber which borders a field but is too wide to be called a hedge. It may be the remains of a woodland which was cleared for crops and normally belonged to the Lord of the Manor rather than the farmer.</p>
	<p><b>Marl</b> is naturally occurring calcium carbonate which was used to improve the condition and fertility of poor Wealden soils. It was too costly to carry carbonate of lime from the chalk hills bordering the Weald. The easiest solution was to dig a pit at the corner of a field down to the strata of calcareous clay. It was winched up and spread liberally across the field. Many marlpits still exist as ponds.</p>

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## What's that crop?



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	<p><b>Unimproved, or wildflower, grassland</b> has been grazed/cut for hay for thousands of years. It has a great variety of grass and flower species and supports many insects and other animals. This type of grassland can only feed a small number of animals per hectare.</p>
	<p><b>Improved grassland</b> has had fertilizer added to it or has been ploughed up and reseeded. There are only a few species of grass and flowers that grow here and it has a lower wildlife value. The field looks a very uniform green colour. More animals per hectare can be grazed.</p>
	<p><b>Silage</b> is grass which has been preserved or 'pickled'. It is made during the summer months when there is a lot of surplus grass i.e. not needed for grazing. Grass is cut 2 or 3 times a year, stored in a big heap and subsequently squashed down and covered with black plastic. Air is kept away from the grass to enable it to pickle. Grass crops for silage are fertilised to increase production and can look very much like a conventional arable crop. Silage is fed to cattle and sheep during winter because it is quite moist, easier to eat than hay and of higher nutritional value.</p>
	<p><b>Hay-making</b> is the longest established method of conserving grass for feeding cattle and sheep through the winter. The grass is cut, with a tractor, in the summer and is then thoroughly dried before it is baled or stored.</p>
	<p><b>Oat</b> looks like a tall grass until it ripens and becomes golden in colour. After the oat kernels are harvested, the grass part (straw) can be used for animal bedding. Oats are either rolled or crushed into oatmeal, or ground into flour. They are most commonly used for making porridge and feeding horses and cows.</p>
	<p><b>Barley</b> is striking because of the long spikes (awns) that emerge from the end of each grain. Barley is easily identifiable on breezy days in the early summer when "waves" blow through the crop. Like wheat, barley can be ground to produce flour for the production of bread, but is particularly important in the production of beers and ales. However, around half of all barley ends up as animal feed.</p>

# High Weald Farming Information sheet

## What's that crop? continued



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	<p><b>Wheat</b> is a grass with a very swollen grain that can be ground to produce flour. Flour is used in the production of bread, biscuits, pasta and cakes. Wheat is a particularly useful crop in terms of human nutrition as it contains good levels of protein and carbohydrate.</p>
	<p><b>Oilseed rape</b> is widely recognised by its bright yellow flowers that can be seen from late April onwards. Today's varieties of oilseed rape have been bred to provide oil that is widely used by the food industry. Increasingly, it is processed to be used as bio diesel.</p>
	<p>Most of the <b>bean crop</b> is grown for stock feed and is used as a locally grown GM-free alternative to protein crops like soya. When the roots decay, the nitrogen in the root becomes available to the following crop as a fertiliser.</p>
	<p>The market for <b>peas</b> is animal feed, where they are useful because of their GM-free status and favourable protein content. Like beans, when the roots decay, the nitrogen in the root becomes available to the following crop as a fertiliser.</p>
	<p><b>Modern orchards</b> have small or 'dwarf' trees that are grown closer together to produce more fruit per acre or hectare. The grassy strips between the trees are mown with a tractor. Apple pickers use padded buckets to pick the fruit. Fruit is stored in large boxes called bulk bins - the wooden ladders of yester year are no longer needed!</p> <p>The High Weald is famous for its orchards full of fruit. In ancient times crab apples, sloes and gean (wild cherry) were the only types of fruits available. In the 16th century cultivated apples, pears and plums were increasingly planted in the High Weald. The Victorians were very enthusiastic about growing fruit and developed 1,500 different varieties of apples. High Weald orchards were particularly plentiful in a belt around Matfield and Brenchley.</p>
	<p><b>Blackcurrants</b> grow on waist high bushes in rows. The blackcurrants are picked in July by a machine that shakes the fruit from the bushes. They are turned into Ribena, jams and pie fillings.</p>

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## What's that Habitat?



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Leaving a wide **grassy strip** around an arable field provides a habitat for insects and small mammals, feeding areas for owls/other birds of prey and winter habitats for many invertebrates.

Farmers can leave strips of their crop unsprayed at the field edges or near water courses. This allows weeds to grow which provide nectar and pollen for insects and seed heads for birds. Weeds are usually controlled as they compete with the crop and so reduce their abundance.



From the earliest Neolithic settlements, **coppiced woodland** in the High Weald has supplied wood for fuel, construction and, later, hop poles and papermaking. Coppice comes from the French word 'coupe' meaning 'to cut'. Trees are cut to the ground and allowed to re-grow for 15 to 20 years before being cut again. Coppicing allows light back to the woodland floor prompting the flowering and growth of many woodland plants. Several species of plant and animal have adapted to this cycle of cutting and it is important for these species that coppiced woodland continues to be managed. Many types of tree are coppiced including sweet chestnut, ash, birch, oak, hazel and willow.

Flowers to look out for in coppiced woodland are bluebells, wood anemones, Yellow Archangel primroses and violets. You may also spot Oak standards in some coppiced woodland. These trees are not cut on rotation and are left to grow large to provide timber for building.



Most of the **hedges** in the High Weald are remnants of the once great Wealden woodland. Hedges have several functions. They indicate land ownership, provide shelter for farm animals, crops and were once a source of timber and fuel.

Hedges are also home to a variety of insects including beetles, butterflies, moths and bumble bees. These insects are a valuable food source for a variety of birds (including game birds) and some small mammals (such as hedgehogs).

Hedges act as songposts and viewpoints for birds as well as nesting and shelter sites. They are important wildlife corridors, linking different habitats together.



**Water** is essential for all life and attracts many kinds of wildlife. Ponds can provide food, cover and a nesting habitat for a variety of wildlife species including amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds and mammals. Many ponds in the Weald aren't natural but were purpose built.

**Hammer ponds** formed where a stream was dammed to store water. They helped power the huge blast furnaces of the Tudor iron industry.

**Marl ponds** where the topsoil has been dug out and spread over the rest of the field to improve soil quality for agriculture.

**Farm ponds** to provide water for animals or washing horses' feet and machinery



**Fast-flowing streams** have carved out steep-sided ravines called gills. These streams are often found in woodlands as the sides are too steep to be farmed. Damp gills provide ideal living conditions for ferns, mosses, liverworts and lichens. Many of these species are usually found in the mild, humid climate of Wales and Cornwall rather than that of the drier South East. Most famous is the tiny, and extremely rare, Tunbridge Filmy-fern. Streams play an important part in the water cycle and they serve as corridors for fish and other wildlife migration.

High Weald streams once powered furnaces, forges and hundreds of water mills.

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## What's that building?



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**Small farmsteads** (commonly 50 acres) in the High Weald often only required a farmhouse and a combination barn; one which could house both cattle and the corn crop. Other buildings, usually for cattle, were added to the farmstead at the end of the late 18th Century.



**An Oast house** is a building used to dry fresh hops before sending them to the brewers, for use in flavouring and preserving beer. There are usually 3 rooms in an oast; the kiln (oven), the drying room, and the cooling room. Kilns were fired by wood until the 17th century, then by charcoal and more recently by oil. Hops were dried in the drying room - usually located just above the kiln - then dragged into the cooling room, before being pressed or baled for transport to the breweries.

The distinctive conical roof of the oast is necessary to create a good draught for the fire. The odd projections at the peak of the roof are called cowls, which can be pivoted to create just the right airflow for the kiln fire to draw properly.



Hipped Roof



Half-Hipped Roof

**Barns** were used for housing cattle, storing the corn crop and, later, threshing corn. Barns were made either with an oak frame and clad with weatherboard (from local timber) or from brick/sandstone blocks. The roofs are hipped or half hipped and covered in clay tiles.



The Weald had so much **timber** it was the obvious material to use for building houses. It was also cheaper than local sandstone or ragstone which was reserved for churches and public buildings. Timber framed houses had exposed timbers with infilling of lath and plaster.

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## What's interesting about the animals?



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**The Romney**, formerly called the Romney Marsh or the Kent sheep, is a "long-wool" sheep with an open face and has wool that grows over its legs in full. It is the world's second most economically important sheep breed.



Conker coloured **Sussex cattle** form a traditional part of the farmed landscape. It is believed that the Sussex Breed of today is descended directly from the red cattle that inhabited the dense forests of the Weald at the time of the Norman Conquest. It is a medium sized cow with a smooth dark red coloured coat with white tail switches; in colder climates they can grow a thicker curlier coat.



**The Holstein or Friesian cow** is the world's highest production dairy animal - easily recognised by their distinctive patterns of black and white.



**Pigs** are important in the High Weald historically. They, along with their farmers, are responsible for the way the High Weald looks today. Now, pigs are reared to produce bacon, ham and sausages.



**Chickens and ducks** that are seen outside in fields are known as free-range and are kept to produce eggs and meat

