

The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of England's Finest Landscapes, protected for its historic character of: rolling hills draped with small irregular fields; abundant woods and hedges; scattered farmsteads; and sunken lanes. It covers parts of 4 counties: East Sussex, West Sussex, Kent and Surrey and has an area of 1,457 square kilometres (570 square miles).

High Weald Heroes is a primary school programme that encourages children to do the following actions:

Explore the local countryside around your school - there's nowhere else quite like it.



Take Care of your local environment as you walk. Remember to follow the Countryside Code. For more information, visit www.naturalengland.org.uk



Enjoy! yourself and have fun outdoors whatever the weather.



Find out about the habitats you walk through - discover the story behind the landscape. To find out more go to the learning zone on www.highweald.org



Be proud of your countryside. Tell other people about the special landscape around your school - even better, take them on your school's Welly Walk and show them!



Produced by the High Weald AONB Unit with support from:



Walk Facts



Distance: 3.5 miles/5.6 km.

Time: 1.5 hours (depending on conditions and numbers and excluding stops).

Description: A walk through woods and fields with stunning views across the High Weald landscape. The route passes through ancient woodland, by sandstone outcrops and along a sunken lane. There are stiles to cross and a steep section of road to walk up.

RISK ASSESSMENT - Points to consider

- Please use with an Ordnance Survey Explorer Map.
- Wear sturdy footwear or wellingtons, being aware of uneven ground and fallen trees, especially near water.
- Long trousers are advised.
- Check the weather - waterproofs or hats and sun cream might be needed.
- Take care when walking along roads with no pavements; stay close to the edge/on grass verges where possible.
- Taking a drink with you is advisable.
- Consider adequate adult to child supervision ratios as paths are narrow, the group will spread out and there are roads and stiles to cross.
- Plants such as nettles and brambles can sting and scratch; berries from plants can cause stomach upsets if eaten.
- Whilst there are toilet facilities in Birchden Wood, we recommend that toilet paper and hand wipes are taken as a precaution.
- Take care at the Forge Farm level crossing, paying close attention to warning signs and being aware of approaching trains.
- Everyone must clean their hands before eating.
- Remember a large group of people can be intimidating, especially to animals.
- *Footpaths and rights of way are subject to change. The walk should always be checked for new risks before venturing out, especially when planning to take groups of children.*
- **Remember to follow the Countryside Code.**

www.highweald.org

Groombridge St Thomas CE Primary School High Weald Welly Walk



Be a High Weald Hero - you can make a difference



For guidance only; actual conditions may be different from those shown, depending on the weather and time of year.

Photo guide and route description

Go out of the school gate and cross the road. Turn left and follow the pavement until it runs out. Follow Corseley Road as it bends sharply left **1**, taking care as there are no pavements. Walk downhill, past the water treatment works and over the bridge. Immediately after the bridge, cross the stile on your right **2** and head straight across the field towards the railway line. Go under the railway bridge and out into the open field. Continue forward and, where the path splits, take the left fork to head uphill **3**. Follow the well-worn footpath uphill across the field. Once over the brow of the hill, head towards the trees and a stile **4**. Cross over and bear right downhill into the woods. Walk along the wide grassy footpath, lined with trees on either side, and with the gill stream on your left. Keep walking until you reach a wooden gate, go through this and carry on but bear left where the path forks shortly afterwards **5**. Carry straight on and follow the path to reach a wooden gate. Emerge at Valley Cottage and turn left along the road. Walk uphill but take care as the road is narrow and there are no pavements. Continue to follow this historic routeway all the way uphill. As the road levels out, follow it to the left, passing the drive to Rocks Farm on your right. Keep going until you pass a red post box and Gateway Cottage. Shortly after here, look for a stile in the fence on your right **6**, set back from the edge of the road. Cross over and follow the path across the centre of the field to reach another stile. Cross over and walk downhill, through a small field, to another stile. Go over this and turn right to walk along the road. Keep going for approximately 400 metres until you reach a private road on your left.

Turn down here 7 and walk over the bridge, to reach the 'Forge Farm' level crossing. Pay attention to the warning lights and notices to ensure it is safe before you cross the railway line. Once through the gates, carry on along the path and follow it to the right to walk past Forge Farm Oast and Forge Farmhouse. Go over the stile next to the gate and walk along a grassy, and then wooded, path. Continue to another stile and gate, cross over, and immediately bear left uphill through the trees 8. Turn left along the track towards another stile and into Birchden Wood.

Turn left where the path splits and follow the main track through the wood. As you walk along you will be able to see parts of Harrison's Rocks, historic sandstone outcrops, on your left hand side - feel free to explore with care! Stay on the woodland track as it bends right and keep going, past the sign to Harrison's Rocks on your left 9. Carry straight on at the sign (don't take the left hand fork at this point) and then, at the crossroad of paths, turn left 10 along the gravel path, passing a wooden bench on your left shortly afterwards. Follow the path, lined with silver birch trees, until you reach another crossroads of paths with the car park on your left. Bear right here 11, following a narrow wooded path uphill to reach a wide concrete track. Turn right along the track and continue forward until you reach a wooden kissing gate on your left 12. Go through this and walk along the narrow footpath. Beware of barbed wire and electric fence on your left. Keep going, through two metal kissing gates and over the bridge that crosses the Spa Valley railway line. Carry straight on and you will soon be back at Groombridge St Thomas School!

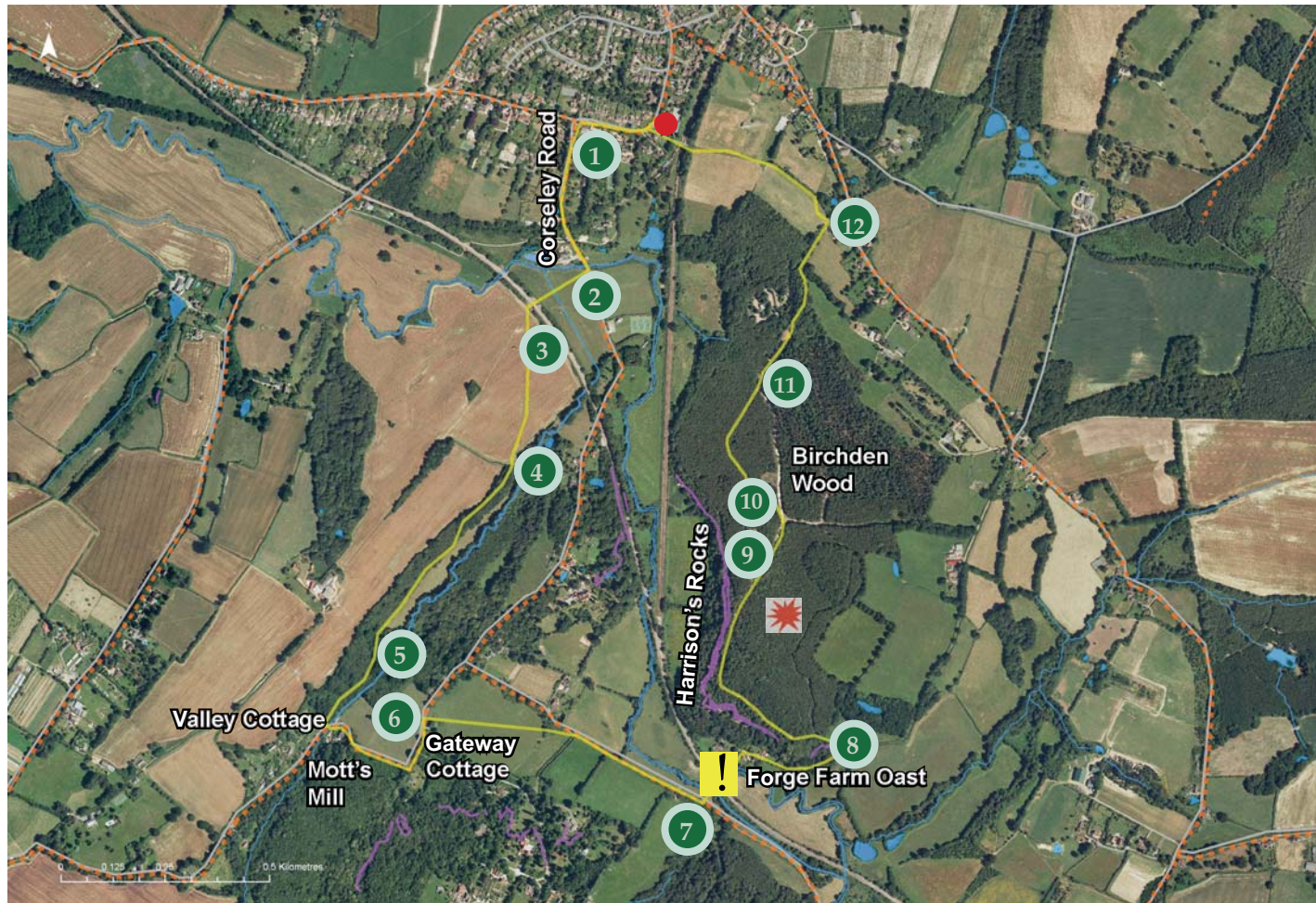
Look out for...



Sandrock



Rolling Hills



Key

-  Groombridge St Thomas CE School
-  WALK ROUTE
-  road
-  historic routeway
-  watercourse
-  numbered views
-  activity point
-  level crossing
-  sandrock

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Ancient Woodland

Trees and woodland cover over one-third of the High Weald and are a key landscape feature.

The woods of the High Weald were relatively slow to be cleared because they were a valuable resource: providing timber for building, fuel for heating and charcoal for iron smelting, as well as animal feed - acorns and beech mast for pigs. Even when agricultural clearance did begin in the High Weald, much woodland was retained and continued to provide valuable resources, particularly for the iron industry.

Today, 70% of the High Weald's woodlands are classed as ancient - having existed continuously since at least 1600AD. They have been maintained for centuries by skilled workers using a rotational coppicing system. On this Welly Walk, Birchden Wood is an example of ancient woodland.



Coppicing is when trees are cut down low to the ground in such a way that the stems grow back afterwards. The trees are cut once every 10-15 years. The harvested wood is used to make products such as fencing stakes, charcoal, hurdles and trugs. Buying local wood products helps to ensure the continuation of traditional management.

Look out for signs of coppiced trees in the woods - see if you can spot trees with multiple trunks!

When the trees are coppiced, the light can reach right down to the ground as the branches and leaves are no longer shading the floor. This means lots of wild plants can grow including bluebells, wood anemones and wild garlic. These plants attract insects to feed on the nectar, and birds and small mammals eat the fruits and seeds. Often, rarer species are now only found in working coppice.



The High Weald Iron Industry

For two periods - in the first two centuries of the Roman occupation, and during Tudor and early-Stuart times - the Weald was the main iron-producing region in Britain.

It is hard to picture the former iron industry in today's countryside of small fields, woodlands and steep, narrow, gill valleys, but in this landscape exist all the necessary raw materials that allowed iron to be smelted for over 2,000 years. The Wealden geology of sands and clays yielded the iron ore, as well as the stone and brick to build the furnaces; the coppiced woodland provided charcoal for fuel; and the numerous small streams and valleys ensured water power for the hammers and bellows of the forges and furnaces.



Just after point 7 on this Welly Walk, you will pass Birchden Forge, a former water-powered iron working site. The Forge, thought to have been built in 1524 was known to still be operating in 1719. The names of the buildings close by e.g. Forge Farm Oast give us further clues of the industry that used to exist in this area.

So, where are the remains of such industry? Building stone was too valuable to be left unused, so the works were dismantled, and the woods grew back over the former sites. Reminders of the once great Wealden iron industry can be found in place names, remains of charcoal hearths or pits in the woods - flattened circular areas with blackened soil beneath the leaf litter - or in finding chunks of telltale waste, called slag, from the smelting process.

Adapted from text by Jeremy Hodgkinson, Wealden Iron Research Group

Visit www.highweald.org to learn more about the High Weald's iron story.

Gill Streams

Steep-sided, wooded gills are a special feature of the High Weald. Gills are formed where a stream has carved a deep channel for itself through the clay and sandstone of a hillside. Gill streams flow into rivers that have formed wide valleys in the eastern part of the High Weald.



Admire the twisting path carved by a gill stream as you walk from point 4 all the way through the woods.

Special Sandrock

Sandrock outcrops are a distinctive local feature found scattered over the High Weald. Harrison's Rocks, on this Welly Walk, are a good example. The rocks are important geological features and home to some nationally rare ferns, mosses, liverworts and lichens. These species have survived so well in the High Weald because of a number of factors, including the relatively high rainfall and extensive woodland canopy, which have prevented the sandstone from drying out.



Sandrock outcrops were first used as shelters for Mesolithic hunters (c.8000 - 4300 BC). Later, sandstone was valued as a building stone. Remains of numerous small local quarries can still be seen in the High Weald today. Many grand houses and churches in this area are built of sandstone, e.g. Battle Abbey, Bodiam Castle and Wakehurst Place.

Can you spot any liverworts or lichens growing on Harrison's Rocks?

Ancient Routeways

As far back as the Neolithic period (c.4300 - 1400BC) farmers from the Downs and coastal plains would drive their pigs into the woods each year to fatten them on acorns and beech mast.



This happened during the late summer and early autumn, and the farmers would have built temporary shelters to keep warm while watching their pigs. These woodland pig pastures were called dens. Many places in the High Weald have names ending in den - for example Birchden.

The frequent passage of pigs being driven to and from the dens formed tracks known as droves. Over time the dens became settlements in their own right, and the roughly north-south droving routes remained. They can be seen today in the pattern of lanes, bridleways and footpaths radiating away from the High Weald. Centuries of use by many trotters, feet, hooves - and, later, cartwheels - have worn the soft ground away so that, today, many of the routes have deeply sunken sections. Look out for this as you climb the steep hill from Mott's Mill before reaching point 6.

Look at the map in this Welly Walk leaflet to see where historic routeways exist in and around Groombridge.