

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Historic landscape trails in Benenden

Trail 5: Iden Green, Coldharbour Road and Tom Watt



by

Ernie Pollard

The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

These walks explore part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) – a nationally valued landscape protected for its unique character of rolling hills with small irregular fields, many woods, shaws and hedges, scattered farmsteads and sunken lanes. To find out more visit www.highweald.org.

Practical matters

There are pubs in Benenden - The Bull and The King William in the village centre and The Woodcock in Iden Green - shops and a toilet in the village centre. If you park in a pub car park while on a walk, ask permission. There is a picnic site in Hemsted Forest.

Public Transport

Train: stations at Staplehurst (7.5 miles from Benenden), Headcorn (9.5 miles) on the London to Ashford International Line; two trains per hour Monday to Saturday, hourly on Sundays.

Bus: Transweald services 295 and 297 - Tunbridge Wells to Ten-Terden/Ashford via Benenden; Monday to Friday 9 buses per day, Saturday 8 buses, Sunday 3 buses – tel. 0870 608 2 608.

B&B - contact Cranbrook Tourist Information 01580 712538

Maps: Ordnance Survey Explorer maps 125, 136, 137 cover the area, as does the KCC footpaths map for Benenden. Maps are recommended to add interest and to help you to follow the routes.

This route has been developed without local authority involvement and there is no guarantee of standard rights of way furniture (gates, stiles etc), maintenance or waymarking. They should however meet the basic standards for rights of way. If you experience problems with any of the routes, contact the West Kent Area Public Rights of Way Team on 01732872829.

Introduction to the walks

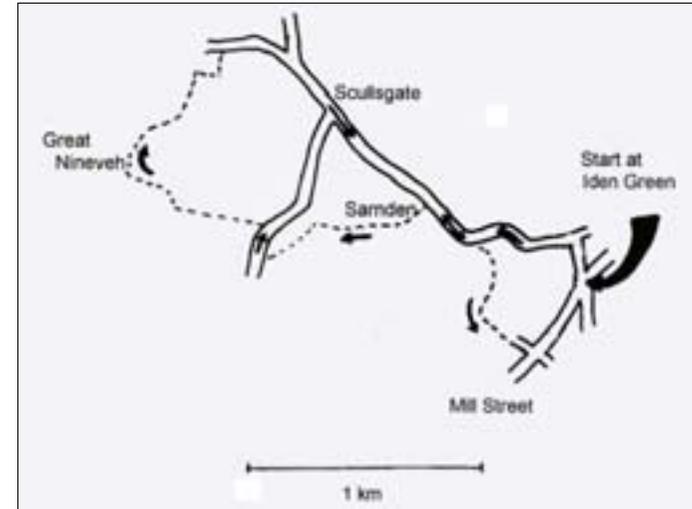
In these walks, we look at the landscape of Benenden in the light of its history. To do this we describe a series of historic trails along the roads and footpaths of the parish.

One early feature of the history of the Weald dominates today's landscape. In early Saxon times, from around 500 A.D. and perhaps even earlier, the Weald was used for the seasonal pasturage of pigs, known as pannage. Each autumn, pigs and no doubt other livestock, were brought into the Weald, which was divided into dens, or woodland pastures, belonging to settlements in the north and east of Kent. There were some thirty to forty dens in the area which later became Benenden parish, and approaching a thousand dens in the whole Weald although not all date from the earliest period. Each settlement, many later to become manors, owned dens scattered along their drove road into the Weald. At some stage, it is not known precisely when, the dens became settled and farmed, although still attached to the manors outside the Weald. This early history of the Weald determines the today's pattern of settlement, with isolated farmsteads and small hamlets reflecting the distribution of dens and often retaining their names.

The walks draw attention to just a few features of the landscape; much remains to be discovered and understood. The notes are as accurate as possible, but there will undoubtedly be errors and the author would be grateful for comments or criticisms.

I would like to thank Neil Aldridge of Headcorn, who has generously allowed the use of unpublished information on the Roman roads of the parish.

Trail 5. Iden Green, Coldharbour Road and Tom Watt



At Iden Green cross roads (Grid reference 803316), take Coldharbour Road west towards Scullsgate. Iden Green was a centre of the cloth industry in the 16th century and Frame farm and Weavers Lane are reminders of this. Further back still, Iden Green was common land within the den of Iden, the yew tree den, belonging to Aldington Manor. Yew Tree Farm at the cross-roads could perhaps mark the site of a notable tree (or trees) from which the Iden got its name.

The recreation field was given to the village by Lord Rothermere of Hemsted after the Great War and was named after one of his sons, Vere Harmsworth, who died in the World War I. On the left are the Thorn Cottages; run by the Almshouse Trust for the parish and owned by the parish for at least 200 years. Straight ahead, by Claremont Place, is Field Lane, an ancient road and, more recently, a much-used route from Iden Green to Hemsted House (Benenden School; it is now a private road to Field Farm. We fol-

low Coldharbour Road round bends to the left and right. The north-south Roman road crosses Coldharbour Road near here. The name Coldharbour, meaning a shelter from the weather, was thought to be associated with Roman sites. The implication is that a ruined Roman building survived into the Saxon period and provided shelter, a harbour, from the cold. Now place-name experts think that it means simply a cold, exposed, place. Soon on the left is a junction with a disused road, which we explore later in the walk. From this junction another old road, which has survived in places, ran northward to the ford.

Coldharbour Road is of the most impressive sunken roads in the parish, the high banks suggesting that it carried a heavy traffic in earlier centuries, eroding the road surface. The banks have many fine trees and a rich woodland flora, even now in January, celandine are in flower; more generally these ancient banks are amongst the treasures of the High Weald. On the right is a tall beech tree with its roots seeming to cling to a rock-face of Tunbridge Wells Sand.

Cross over the stream in its narrow gill and take footpath **WC313** left by Sarnden Farm. Sarnden was another of the old dens, but we do not know the east Kent manor to which it belonged. The Farm for a long period belonged to Cranbrook School and the rents contributed to the upkeep of the school.

The footpath crosses to a clump of hornbeam, a useful marker for the route. The trees are on the edge of an old marl pit; hornbeam may have been planted in such situations, because of its value for charcoal. To the left we get views of the gnarled old pines of the Jubilee Plantation, commemorating Lord and Lady Cranbrook's diamond wedding and Queen Victoria's diamond Jubilee in 1897. Recently, a proposal for a telephone mast amongst the pines was turned down. Also high to the south, and in sharp contrast to the old pines, is the new windmill on the ridge at Sandhurst. It is a

replica of a five-sailed mill, built in 1844 on the same site and worked until 1910; the replica is something of a "folly" perhaps, but very handsome. We eventually emerge on Hinxden Lane close to the medieval house of Diprose and its farm buildings, now dwellings..

Turn right (north) up Hinksden Road; there very obvious badger runs on the bank to the right when I passed. Take footpath (**WC365**) left (west). Soon there are views ahead of Bedgebury Forest and its radio mast and, half left and not so distant, Woodsdon Farm with its conspicuous conservatory. At the edge of White Chimney Wood we cross an old road, which ran from Hinksden Road, below Diprose Barn to Nineveh Lane. It is destroyed in places, but can be seen disappearing into the wood to the north of our route. This was Tom Watt Lane, a name described by a Kentish place-name scholar as "delightful" and probably medieval. It was stopped-up by the parish in 1850.

There are tall beeches along Tom Watt Lane and also by our path at the wood edge. In Benenden, beech is often found in such situations but more rarely within the woods. Its presence locally may be often the result of planting, although it is native to the area. The gorse on the path, spreading into the set-aside field, and the Rhododendrons in the wood edge suggest that the soil is acid. Rhododendron, an introduced plant, is very invasive and little grows under its shade.

Turn, briefly, into the wood and over the bridge. The steep slopes of White Chimney Wood are covered in woodland flowers in the spring, but now only dogs mercury shows, conspicuously green. Straight ahead is Great Nineveh, one of the old farmsteads of the parish, but not as far as we know, one of the dens. The origin of its name is a mystery – in 1777 it was Ninivey, but no earlier form is known. The footpaths linked the old settlements and this path formerly went through the farmstead of Great Nineveh; now it is di-

verted around it; take footpath **WC309** across the field and then alongside an old track, heading east away from the farm.

Open fields lie ahead and a post is needed to mark the footpath in the absence of the old field-boundaries. Many hedges have been lost in the Benenden countryside, although fortunately most along roadsides have survived. In some compensation there are good views; up to houses on the Cranbrook road ahead (emphasising its situation on a ridge), White Chimney Wood to the right and Little Nineveh to the left. Follow the path around the garden and turn right (east) on the road.

The field immediately on the right, known as “Tom What Field” in 1777, is perhaps the Tomwattes Croft”, mentioned in a will of 1549. Tom Watt Lane joined Nineveh Lane here. Close to the next road junction, an older line of the road can be seen to the right. Turn south-east on to Babbs Lane; around this junction there has been a great deal of quarrying and it continues on both sides of Babbs Lane. We are on or close to a rich seam of iron ore and it is possible that this was the material mined here. Once again, the intensity of use of the land and its minerals is evident.

Look to the right as you cross the stream and consider the possibility of an older crossing a few metres from the present road.



On the left of the road is Scullsgate, a farmstead with another ancient and mysterious name. A disused road, now a footpath, leads from Scullsgate up to the Cranbrook Road past Parsonage Wood, a nature reserve (Kent Wildlife Trust) in a spectacular steep gill, but that is for another day

Continue east along Babbs Lane, which at some point becomes Coldharbour Road, on which the walk began. There are many ancient contorted trees, mostly hornbeam, with their gnarled roots exposed by erosion of the banks. There are small stone quarries either side of the road. Eventually we reach Sarnden Farm, where we turned off the road on the route out, and get a view of Iden Green farmstead opposite, with its old barns; the complex roofline around the oast kilns suggests conversion of older buildings in the 19th century.

For a short way we retrace our steps, but turn south (right) at footpath **WC316** along another deeply-sunken road, now disused. Reed Wood is to the south of the lane and Plum Tree Wood a little way to the west, towards Sarnden; the lane was known at different times as Reed Lane and Plum Tree Lane. The woodland adjoining the lane is relatively new (perhaps 150 years old), on former farmland. For this reason the he ground vegetation here is much less rich in woodland flowers than older parts of Reed Wood (Trail 6).



Turn up Mill Street to Iden Green cross-roads and the end of the walk. At the cross-roads is the medieval Weald House, in a commanding position on high ground, and the Victoria Well, given to the village by Lord Cranbrook to commemorate Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. A notice prohibiting the use of the well by “engines and teams” (steam engines and teams of horses) is a reminder that the water supply from the well often failed. Lord Cranbrook provided a second well, the Earl’s Well, a little way down the hill towards the village, somewhere opposite the cottages on the site of the Royal Oak pub. The Earl’s well also had problems, because of fear of lead poisoning from the pipes; it was abandoned and no obvious signs of it remain.

***Benenden Amenity and
Countryside Society***

The main aim of writing these guided walks has been to encourage interest and enjoyment of the local landscape, whether the walks are made on the ground or in the mind. This accords with the principal objectives of the society, which are:

- 1. To encourage amenity and countryside activities in order to promote a fuller understanding of the geography, history, natural history and environment of the Parish and the Weald of Kent.*
- 2. To resist any proposals which would adversely affect the environment and amenities of the Parish*

