

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Historic landscape trails in Benenden

by

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with illustrations by John Hanson

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 Tennerden/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 walk 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 act 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 6: The Hexden Valley



Exploration of the parish is not complete without a look at the Hexden Channel and its water-mill sites. A footpath from Wandle Mill to the Paper Mill would be a wonderful addition to our footpaths, but to make the best of what there is we make an incursion into Sandhurst to link the mills. The walk takes about an hour and three quarters and is mostly along quiet roads, but on the one footpath we take, a liking for cattle is an advantage. Cattle fattening is a traditional use Benenden grasslands and here this has

continued to the present.

Start in Iden Green (Grid Reference 803316) and walk south down Mill Street. Turn right (west) at the farm shop/nursery entrance on to the footpath **WC314** parallel with the road at the top of the bank. Small pieces of iron slag, abundant in cultivated ground just before we leave the roadside bank, indicate that we are probably on the line of the Roman Road as slag was used to surface it. Cross towards the projecting southern end of Reed Wood. In

Trail 6: The Hexden Valley

spring there is a wonderful show of bluebells and other woodland flowers in this ancient wood. Then head for the rectangular enclosure which marks the site of a former oil-drilling platform.

There was a network of fields here which proved too small for modern farming, but some of the grassland, especially on the steeper slopes, retains a rich flora. In early July 2003, there were numerous caterpillars of painted lady butterflies on creeping thistles, otherwise unwelcome weeds. A large immigration of these butterflies (from Africa or the Middle East) in the spring this year will be followed, no doubt, by the emergence of “home-grown” adults in late summer. Drop down the valley to a footbridge across the stream running south to the Hexden Channel. Three herons rose from the stream at my approach.



Fields and footpath c1900 - the line of the footpath has changed only a little

Trail 6: The Hexden Valley

At the footbridge is a right-angled bend, clearly artificial but its history is unknown to me. The field immediately to the south was Flashey Field in 1777 and the next south Flashey Brook Field; these were almost certainly in, or adjoining, the den of Plashed (meaning a damp puddly area). Across the Hexden Channel we can see Roughland Wood in Sandhurst, of which more later. From the bridge, head for the left hand (south) side of a group of trees, dead or dying, around an old flooded pit. Now **SEEBOARD** posts provide a useful distant marker; the footpath stile is close by and eventually we emerge on Hinksden Road opposite Paper Mill House.

Turn south (left) towards Hinksden Bridge, where Sandhurst, Hawkhurst and Benenden meet. On the 8th May 1777, parishioners of Hawkhurst and Benenden began a perambulation of Benenden parish here and “*The following marks were made viz BH on Hinksden Bridge in the road from Benenden to Hawkhurst near the Paper Mill thence up the river & on the Paper Mill Floodgates BH*” On 10th May parishioners of Benenden and Sandhurst completed the circuit returning here with a walk along the Hexden Channel from Wandle Mill.

Look back across the meadow to the Paper Mill, one of the finest views in the parish. The mill itself, which is said to have been burnt down in the late nineteenth century, stood some distance to the west of the bridge.



It used waste cloth or wool to make its paper. By 1777 the mill was owned by the Hemsted Estate; a survey of the estate in 1801 records that it made paper and also ground corn. The mill stream

Trail 6: The Hexden Valley

was in a poor state and the surveyor commented of the mill “*at no time should I think it capable of doing much*” At that time the miller shared Paper Mill house with the farmer of the land, but originally the house was a wealthy gentleman’s or yeoman’s house. I believe that this was the mill known as Cryer’s Mill in the 1600s, but the identification is not certain. The Cryer family were prominent in the parish for a long period.

Continue south along the quiet sunken lane, with woods and orchards along the way; keep left along Foxhole Lane where the road forks. We know from a will of 1669 that Richard Sharpe, gent, of Benenden left Foxhole and Russland Wood (now Roughland Wood; we saw it earlier), both in Sandhurst, to one of his sons. Richard was the son-in-law of Richard Cryer; I like to think that he lived at Paper Mill House (without any hard evidence).

At Field Green turn left on to the lane labelled Sponden Lane (formerly Wood Lane I am told) and left at the T-junction on to the “real” Sponden Lane. Walk down into the valley again, past Challenden, a Sandhurst den; in the narrow wood alongside the road on the east (right) side we can see what may be the north-south Roman road, parallel with our road.

At the bridge, we cross from Sandhurst back to Benenden. To the east, the floodplain has been cultivated and crops are sometimes damaged by winter floods.

To the west is Wandle Mill with vestiges of its millpond and a surviving waterwheel; a weir to control the water flow is shown on old maps. Wandle seems to be a relatively recent name here, judging by the lack of old records. The present Wandle mill was built in 1828 and a steam engine was added about 30 years later. It closed in 1936 and some older villagers remember it as a working mill, complete with flour-covered miller. The mill was in a decay-

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ing state for many years, but is now smart in its new weatherboarding and has been converted to flats.

Opposite the mill is Watermill House, a hall house which graces the cover of *The Medieval Houses of Kent*. The pairing of mill and substantial old house mirrors that at the Paper Mill site, suggesting that watermills may have made some men rich in the medieval period. The Mill House, higher up Mill Street on the left, was probably built at the same time as the present mill. The daughter of the last miller lived at Mill House until the 1970s.

On Mill Street the contrast between old and new is striking. There are recent conifer hedges, some bordering farmland, ancient mixed hedges, and hawthorn hedges; the last may date from Mill Street’s transformation to a turnpike road around 1780. Mill Street Farm (once Little Eaglesden) and Eaglesden itself have rear wings of medieval origin (not easily visible from the road) and contrast with post-war bungalows and houses. Near Iden Green, we can see to the right a busy area of vehicle rescue and repair, close to where in spring, on the high west bank of the road, is one of the finest displays of primroses one could imagine. All is of interest to the landscape historian, but one can sympathise with the planners in their attempts to blend and reconcile old and new.

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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*

