

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Historic landscape trails in Benenden

Trail 7: Standen and Dingleleden



(Looking south-east down Standen Street from Iden Green, with Standen Wood on the left, divided by a postwar (disused) aircraft runway)

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 Tenterden/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 act the West Kent Area Public Rights of Way Team on 01732872829.

Introduction to the walks

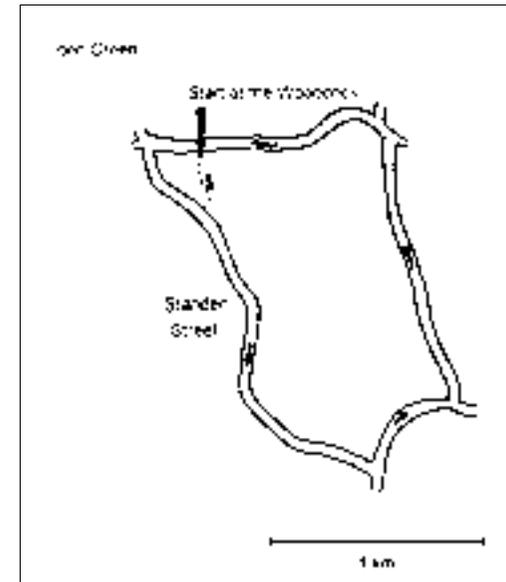
In these walks, we look at the landscape of Benenden in the light of its history. To do this we describe a series of historic trails along the roads and footpaths of the parish.

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 7. Standen and Dingleleden



This walk, of about one and a half hours, starts at the Woodcock pub in Woodcock Lane (Grid reference 8063013) and is mostly along quiet country lanes.

Take footpath **WC335**, running south alongside the Woodcock garden to the extensive Standen Street Orchards. There have been orchards here for over 100 years. In the 1970s the land was split into small plots and sold to people hoping to build, or just to own a small piece of countryside. Because of planning restrictions, the owners lost interest; most plots were abandoned and became overgrown. The orchard is now back under unified management under a Countryside Stewardship grant. It is mostly apple trees, planted in the 1950s, with a few older cherries. The footpath follows the hedge-line at the western edge of the orchard. A map of about 1850 shows a house called "Sharpes" in the orchard a few metres from the road ahead.

Turn south-east (left) along Standen Street, an old road dropping gently down to the Hexden Valley. Queen Elizabeth I is thought to have used this route on her journey from Hemsted (presumably across the ford and along Field Lane to Iden Green) in 1573. As its name suggests, Standen Street runs though the den of Standen, which, like the adjoining dens of Iden and Dingleleden, belonged to Aldington Manor on the edge of Romney Marsh.

Campion House, down a lane to the right, was named after the catholic martyr of Elizabethan times, Edmund Campion, by a recent owner, the actor Robert Speight. An earlier name was Standen the Less. Chapel House on the right, was perhaps used as a non-conformist chapel, although evidence is lacking, and on the left Little Standen and Old Standen (Standen the Great) are, like Campion House, medieval hall houses.

Opposite Old Standen is Leesden, restored after a recent fire. In the 1660s it was owned by Thomas Sharpe vicar of Beckley and occupied by his nephew Thomas Sharpe. At the same time, Old Standen was occupied by another Thomas Sharpe and Springhill Farm (then The Homestall) by still another Thomas Sharpe, uncle of Thomas Sharpe of Old Standen (pity the poor postman). Two hundred years earlier, John Sharpe had been a large landowner in Benenden; the family prospered and multiplied. No doubt the Kentish system of equal inheritance (by all sons) contributed the multiplicity of Sharpe landowners in the 1600s. By the end of the next century, few of the family were left in Benenden.

Beyond Springhill and a steeper slope with trees on high banks, the field on the left is known as Tank Field. The tank is still there close to the road; it was used for dipping hop poles and fence posts in hot tar, to preserve them. The small chimney is just visible from the road, partly hidden by ash trees. The tank probably dates from the late nineteenth century, when there were many in the parish; no doubt others have survived. Opposite Tank Field is a newly planted farm woodland, which may point the way to the future of some of the marginal agricultural land in the parish.

It is late May and yellow flag irises are in flower in the ditch outside Springhill Cottage. The cottage was built as a pair in the 1850s for farm workers at Springhill. The hedges along the walk are rich in shrub species, and beyond Springhill Cottage, with an old orchard on

one side, the road is especially attractive. We are now on the parish boundary, with Sandhurst to the right and Benenden to the left. On the Benenden side is a field known as the Thirteen Acre. In 1777, when it belonged to Old Standen, it had its present bounds and was one of the largest fields in the parish. It now has a cluster of small rectangular ponds in one corner; dug for fish farming but now the home of marsh or laughing frogs and much other wildlife. The marsh frogs have spread widely since they were introduced to Stone in Oxney from eastern Europe in 1935. We can hear them “laughing” half a mile away at Springhill in spring and early summer. At the T-junction junction turn left. The junction was a crossroads, with the lost road going straight on and curving south-east to Kensham. There is a shaw of horbeam coppice in Benenden on our left; hornbeam is a good for charcoal, no doubt used in the hop kilns.

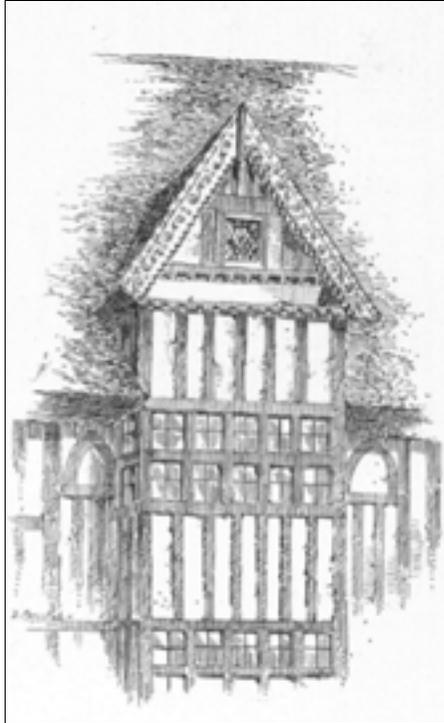
Near Cattsford Bridge, there are alder trees and meadow-sweet benefiting from the damp conditions and beyond the bridge several quarries, perhaps for roadstone. Cattsford, formerly Cersford and similar forms, suggests the “cress” ford. However, in the 1400s Richard Kirsford had (un-named) land in Benenden, Sandhurst and Rolvenden. Cattsford farm was the only farm with land in the three parishes, so farm and bridge probably take their name from the Kirsford family.

At the next junction, where the three parishes meet, turn left along Dingledden Street, as it was known. Cattsford House ahead dates from around 1800, but has old timbers, perhaps from the earlier Cersford house. The stream in the valley on the left is the boundary between the dens of Dingledden and Standen and also between the hundreds of Rolvenden, where we are now, and Selbritten. There was almost certainly a watermill near to the modern Bankside bungalow, as the 1777 map names an “old mill field” here.

Trail 7. Standen & Dingleleden

There is a wide variety of shrubs and climbers in the hedges, with hops and honeysuckle prominent. Trafford House, built as a guest-house in 1908, is high on the right. On September 15th 1940 a German Heinkel bomber crashed here; members of the Benenden Home Guard were congratulated, in a letter from a guest, on their calm and efficient response.

The stream has an old, broken dam near the drive to Benton's Farm; perhaps for a holding pond for the mill lower down. Both mill and the pond had gone by 1777. On the right is Dingleleden House, dated at 1420-60 and one of the oldest houses in the parish. The porch and the carved timbers above it, are illustrated in Haslewoods *Parish of Benenden* (1889). Laurel's Nursery does not have quite so long a history, but there has been a nursery here since 1920 and by the 1930s the first owner Stuart Low employed about 100 men. At the junctions, keep bearing left; there are some handsome ornamental maples by the road.



Soon on our left, just short of Woodcock Farm, is a large yew marking the site of cottage and its garden. We are now in Woodcock Lane, a deeply sunken road, with Moor Wood to the west and Standen Wood to the east. Both are ancient woods with rich floras; on the roadside banks wood melic, a woodland grass with graceful flower-heads, is abundant..

Trail 7. Standen & Dingleleden

Both woods have extensive chestnut coppice, probably planted for hop poles in the nineteenth century. In 1777 Standen Wood was divided between several farms in the den of Standen, with the woodland alongside the lane owned by Old Standen. It is possible that this pattern of ownership reflected the division of woodland, once held in common, between early settlers in the den of Standen.

The walk ends with our return to the Woodcock Inn – some of its history is shown on its wall inside.

The walk in 1777
map by Joseph
Hodkinson



***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*

