

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Historic landscape trails in Benenden

Trail 2: The Old Manor House, Hemsted and The Ford



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 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 01732 872829.

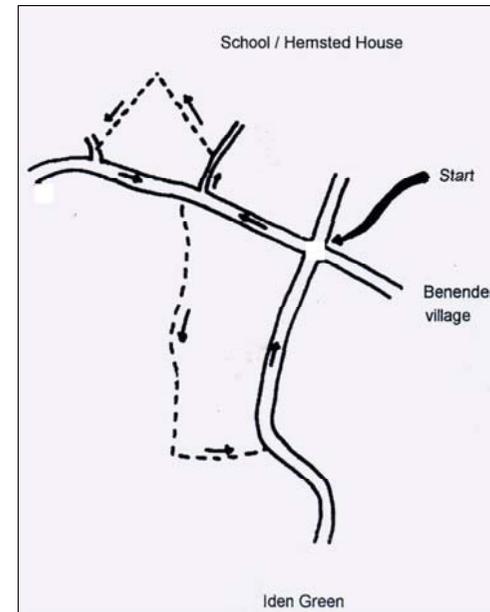
Introduction to the walks

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 that 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.

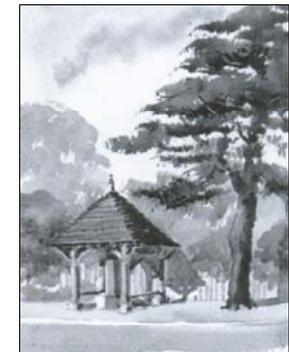
The walks draw attention to just a few features of the landscape; much remains to be discovered and understood. The notes are as accurate as possible, but there will undoubtedly be errors and the author would be grateful for comments or criticisms.

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.



A walk of about an hour and a quarter. Start at Benenden cross-roads (Grid Ref. 806331) west towards Cranbrook on the north side of the road. The Old Manor House is on the right and outside its wall is the Queen's Well, given to the village by Lord Cranbrook of Hemsted House. The well commemorates Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. It is on the site of a toll house at the intersection of turnpike roads.

Queen's Well





The Old Manor House

The Old Manor House is probably the oldest surviving house in the parish and was the manor house for Benenden Manor. It is still largely surrounded by its moat. The oldest part, aligned east-west, dates from about 1390 and includes a hall, originally open to the roof. In the early 20th century the house was occupied by five families. Like many other large houses in the parish, it was built by a wealthy man and was too large when hard times came.

Most of the land of Benenden Manor lay to the east of the manor house and included the village centre, the Green and church, and on towards Rolvenden, either side of the old drove road. The fact that the house is at the edge of its lands supports a view that there was an earlier, more central, manor house (Trail 8). In the 1700s, Benenden Manor was bought by the Norris family of Hemsted and joined in ownership to Hemsted manor.

Lines of oaks, on banks either side of the road, show the former width of the drove road, perhaps here narrowing from a linear common along The Street (Trail 8). The houses either side are mostly 20th century, built as the village became prosperous again.

Turn right into the drive of Benenden School and the former Hemsted Park, along footpath **WC119**. The lodge was designed by George Devey for Lord Cranbrook in the late 19th century.

Turn left, still on footpath **WC119**, soon after entering the park. The Guldeford family built the first great house here, replacing a timber-framed manor house and creating a deer park to the north-west of the house, probably when they rose to national eminence in the late 1400s. The earliest known map of the park is from 1599. The Guldefords also owned Halden Manor in Rolvenden, their main residence for a long period.

The Guldefords helped Henry VII, the first of the Tudors, to gain the crown and occupied high office for some 200 years. Queen Elizabeth visited Thomas Guldeford here and he was knighted by her at Rye a few days later. The next owner, Admiral John Norris, created a new park to the south of the house, as we see it now, in about 1715 and enclosed the old park of the Guldefords.



Hemsted House/Benenden School

Trail 2. Hemsted & the ford

After the Norrises, the house was reduced in size and, finally, Lord Cranbrook demolished it and built his new house a short distance from the old in 1859-62. As first built, the present house was a striking building with a prominent tower, the whole described as having “alarming vitality”; this vitality was toned down in 1912 by Lord Rothermere and the tower truncated. It has been occupied by Benenden School since 1924.

Just before we reach the pond to the left of the path is a slightly raised ridge, running north-south; this marks a medieval road from Hemsted to Parsonage farm and is mistakenly marked as a Roman Road on Ordnance Survey maps. The exact line of the Roman road is uncertain, but is further west. There is archaeological evidence suggesting a Roman settlement close to Hemsted House, at the junction between this road and the Roman road eastward towards Goddards Green (Trail 1).

Shortly beyond a huge sweet chestnut tree, turn left on footpath **WC315**, heading for the corner of the park on the Cranbrook Road. The tree is said to have been planted to mark the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, but is probably too young. In spring, its many hollows are used by nesting jackdaws.

At the entrance to the park there are banks, forming a roughly circular enclosure, where a substantial house stood in 1599. The lane running north from Mounts Farm Cottages was a major route to the north, before the turnpike was built, and was known as Simmonden Lane and Crabtree Lane at different times. Simmonden was a den, which spanned the Benenden/Cranbrook parish boundary, while “Crabtree” survives as the name of a farm close by.

Return towards the village on the road and turn south (right) along footpath **WC312A** at Corner Cottages, just beyond Parsonage Farm. The farm once belonged to Combwell Priory in Goudhurst, which held St George’s church before the Dissolution of the Mon-

Trail 2. Hemsted & the ford

asteries. There is said to have been a tithe barn here, giving the name Grange or Granche Hill to this part of Cranbrook Road.

The first part of the footpath is along a green lane on the line of the Roman Road, from Rochester to Hastings. The road was used primarily to carry iron out of the Weald and was surfaced in places with the waste (slag) from the furnaces. Our path continues on the east of side the sunken road. Finds of slag, suggest that the Roman Road ran close to the footpath, not on the line of the sunken road. The sunken road remained in use until the early 1900s. Its banks have old coppice stools and hornbeam pollard, with rarer trees such as wild service and crab-apple (both near the first hedge at right angles to the route) and a ground flora of woodland herbs.

Continue down towards Stream Farm (once “Ginders”, after Stephen Ginder a wealthy clothier and landowner). At the stream was a ford, with stones of Bethersden Marble. A 1930s photograph shows many stones in position, but now few remain. The ford is reputedly of Roman origin, although apart from the fact that it lies on the line of the Roman Road, direct evidence seems to be lacking. The line of the Roman Road beyond the ford is uncertain, but it can be picked up again close to Mill Street (Trail 6).



The ford is at the hub of streams, roads and field boundaries

A hundred stone near the stream marks the boundary of Cranbrook, Rolvenden and Selbritten hundreds. Thus both places in the parish where three hundreds meet are on Roman Roads (Trail 1), suggesting that the roads, at least in these places, were conspicuous features when the hundreds were formed.

Turn east (left) at the ford on footpath **WC320** along a green lane. The hedge alongside is a rich one, with a wide variety of woody species, including a single yew, and violets and primroses in the bank. On the left, just short of the road, is a small stone quarry where sandstone from the Ashdown Beds was dug, perhaps used in the rebuilding of the church in the 1670s, after a catastrophic fire. As we emerge on the road, there is a view of the church tower ahead; imagine how spectacular must have been the old timber steeple, destroyed by the fire: it was almost twice the height of the present tower.

Turn left back to the crossroads. On the left is Stonequarry Wood in its deep gill. It belonged to Stone Quarry farm (or Stone Land farm) on the other side of the road. The elm-like trees just opposite the entrance to Collingwood Grange are keaki, a Japanese species that must have been planted by Collingwood Ingram (Trail 8) and there are other “unexpected” trees in the area which probably have the same origin.

***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*

