

**Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society**

## **Historic landscape trails in Benenden**

### **Trail 3: Walkhurst Road and the Beacon**



by  
**Ernie Pollard**

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](http://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

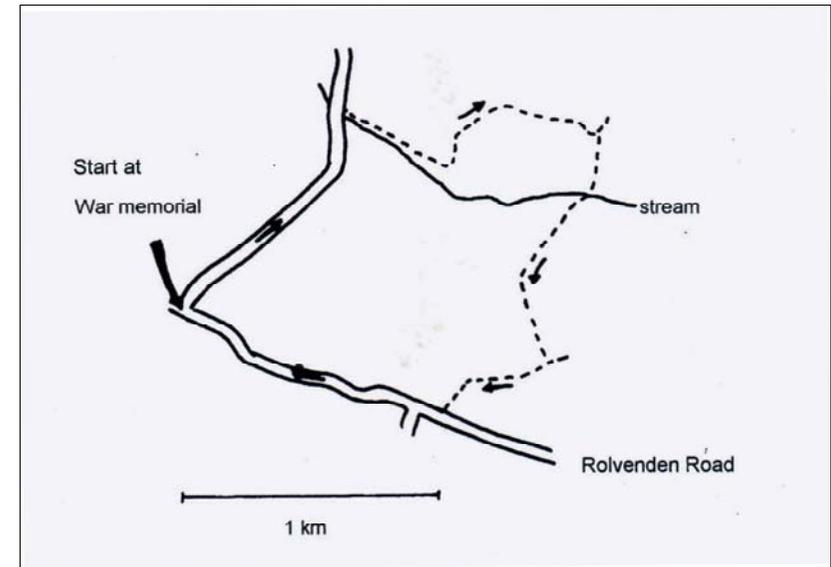
*In these walks, we look at the landscape of Benenden in the light of its history. To do this we describe a series of historic trails along the roads and footpaths of the parish.*

*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.*

## Trail 3. Walkhurst Road and the Beacon



A walk of about one and a half hours, starting from the war memorial (Grid reference 810328) northwards along Walkhurst Road.

Soon on the right are Rothermere Close and Harmsworth Court. Lord Rothermere of Hemsted gave the land to the village, originally for allotments, in memory of his sons Vere and Vyvyan Harmsworth, who died in the First World War.

Feoffees Cottages, further on the right and at right angles to the road, was the Benenden Workhouse from 1732 to the 1830s, when the Cranbrook Union Workhouse opened. A feoffee is a trustee and those referred to here were



the trustees of the workhouse.

Parishioners who were old or infirm or otherwise could not support themselves, and children who were orphaned or abandoned, were cared for in the workhouse. It was run by parish Overseers and paid for by a tax on property owners.

Brick-kiln house was first a farmhouse and later the home of the Munn family of brick-makers. A tile stamped "Thomas Munn Benenden" was included in a collection of wealden tiles on display at Iden Green Fair in 1999. The clay used for the bricks was probably from pits near the house. The kilns are shown on the first large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of the 1870s and around that time Walkhurst Road was known as Kiln Lane.

Somewhere along the road we enter the den of Walkhurst, one of the old dens. Walkhurst belonged to the manor of Eastry, east of Canterbury, 35 miles from Benenden and a great distance to drive pigs. Some land, mostly woods, in the den was owned directly by the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury. A document of 1290, recording the division of Walkhurst between the church and men of Walkhurst, can be seen in the archives of Canterbury Cathedral.

The Munn family of Brick-kiln included a black sheep, another Thomas Munn, the highwayman. His autobiography, a copy of which survives in the British Museum, was written in jail in 1750 while he awaited execution for robbing the Yarmouth Mail. On the title page he is styled the Gentleman Brick-maker. Local tradition is that he built the house known as Little Walkhurst, on the west side of Walkhurst Road.

The hedges each side of the road are rich in woody species and have woodland herbs such as primroses and dogs mercury in their banks, suggesting a woodland origin. Beech, unusual in Benenden hedges, is quite common on the east side. Continue down the hill into the wooded gill where the stream is crossed by Walkhurst

Bridge. One of the Canterbury woods, Little Walkhurst, lies beyond the bridge to the west of the road. Turn right just past the bridge on footpath **WC349**, through the woods. The footpath follows an old road for over a mile to Stepneyford Lane, although we leave it before then. The road was closed, together with three others, by order of the parish vestry in 1859, presumably to save the expense of upkeep by the parish.

The land falls away on the right to a stream, which can be turbulent in spate and the name Devil's Race was used for a field along its banks near here. The trees are mostly old coppice stools, with hornbeam especially abundant, but with some fine standard oaks. Woodland herbs, such as wood anemone, ramsons, primroses and bluebells are common, with sedges where it is especially wet. Follow the footpath around tight bends, left and then right, forking right at a junction with another (private) old road from Goddards Green. On the right are extensive pits, perhaps where marl from the Wadhurst Clay was dug to spread on the lighter land of the Tunbridge Wells Sands immediately to the north of the road.

Beyond the woods, the old road becomes a hedged green lane. The brand new (March 2002) apple orchard on the Tunbridge Wells Sand to the north of the road is a welcome sight, as so many old orchards have been lost in recent years. Look out for wild service in the hedge on the right. The leaves are rather like a maple, but are alternate along the stem whereas those of the maple are in opposite pairs.

Field Maple

Wild Service  
or Chequer Tree

### Trail 3. Walkhurst & the Beacon

After a right-angle bend to the left, take footpath **WC349A** on the right, running due south across the grass field. On the far side of the field is a row of hopper huts, where hop-pickers lived for the short picking season.

Continue down to a wooden bridge over the stream. Early Ordnance Survey maps mark stepping stones across the stream here and one seems to have survived to the right (west) of the modern bridge, clearly on the line of the original track. This “stepping stone ford” almost certainly gives the Stepneyford stream its name. The stream is bordered by a narrow strip of old woodland, but we soon enter a large conifer plantation on land which was farmed before the trees were planted some forty years ago. The fields were known in 1777 as Lower and Upper Hempdown. Most conifers cast a dense shade and for this reason there is little ground vegetation here; however, the lighter canopy and deciduous character of the larches, has allowed some plants to flourish.

We emerge from the plantation between orchards and Christmas trees and turn right (west) along footpath **WC352**. In 1777 this was Footpath Field, so we are on an ancient track. To the left are a modern telephone mast and the shell of Beacon Windmill, built in the 1790s. This is Beacon Hill, which gives its name to several farms as well as the mill. The beacon itself was one of a national network to warn of the approach of the Spanish Armada in the 1580s; the exact site of the beacon is not known, but it may well have been close to the modern mast as it shared the need for a prominent position. Follow the footpath to the road and walk back towards the village centre.

To the left, beyond Athelsden House and its yard and pond, is an area of young native trees, planted to mark the end of the second millennium. Pullington House on the right, with the large Irish Yew in the garden, was the home of Richard Neve, steward of the

### Trail 3. Walkhurst & the Beacon

Hemsted Estate for Lord Cranbrook in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The existing Victorian house was built by the Neves, but must have been on the site of an ancient farmstead. The earliest record we have is “Polontonnys” in a will of 1490. Opposite is a sunken road, long disused, leading to Iden Green; a footpath runs along its eastern edge. Beyond Pullington, our road is known as Grants Hill, the name taken from the Grant family (see village trail 8).

A map of 1777 shows no houses between Pullington and The Green, but now the road is lined on the north (right) side by houses, small closes and flats for the elderly. Tudor Cottage was a late nineteenth century toll house, as is suggested by its position close to the edge of the road, while Chequer Tree and Grants Hill cottages are attractive Edwardian cottages, presumably built for farm workers. The recreation ground in front of the Village Hall was, like the allotments at the start of the walk, a gift to the village from Lord Rothermere.

Finally, on the bend back into Walkhurst Road and set back from the road, is an old village post office, now Walnut Cottage, with its lovely old shop windows. The circuit is complete.

***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*

