

Benenden Amenity and Countryside Society

Historic landscape trails in Benenden

Trail 4: Stepneyford, East End and The Pump



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

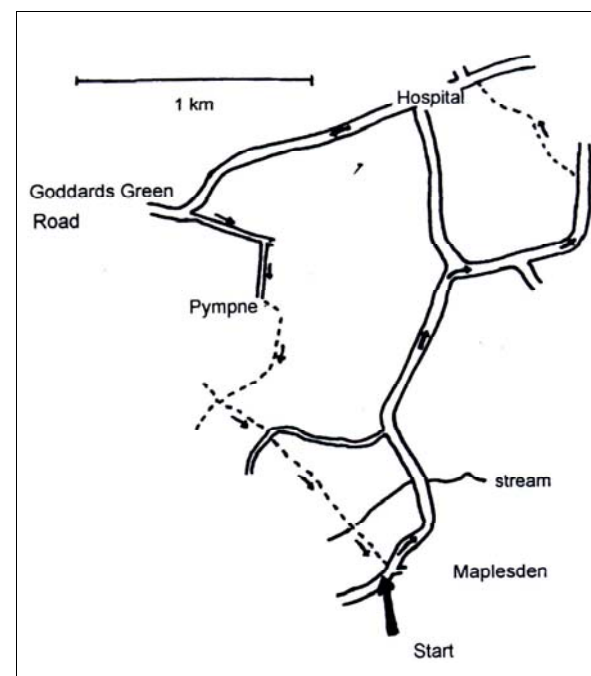
In these walks, we look at the landscape of Benenden in the light of its history. To do this we describe a series of historic trails along the roads and footpaths of the parish.

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.

Trail 4. Stepneyford, East End and The Pump



A walk of about two hours, partly along roads (mostly quiet lanes) and partly footpaths. Start on Stepneyford Lane near Maplesden (Grid Reference 834333) and walk northwards downhill.

Dogwood is common in the hedges here, although relatively scarce in most of the parish; in autumn the leaves turn a dark plum colour. Notice alder trees on the right, usually a streamside tree but here on a hillside, and sycamore, an early introduction from continental Europe. The commonest hedgerow shrubs during much of the walk are hornbeam and hazel, characteristic of old woods and hedges over much of the Weald.

Soon we cross the Stepneyford steam, where a stone marking the boundary between Rolvenden and Barclay hundreds stood on the far side, to the west of the road. This was accidentally broken by

Trail 4. Stepneyford & the Pump

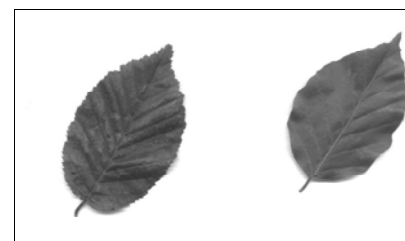
farm machinery within the last twenty years. Next on the left is the eastern end of the old road from Walkhurst Bridge (Trail 3). To the north of this road, in the angle with Stepneyford Lane, is an area of farm and woodland formerly known as East Walkhurst, far detached from Walkhurst itself. East Walkhurst was owned by the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral until the nineteenth century.

On the same side of the road is Backtilt wood, part of the old den of Bagtilt, owned by Dover Priory. In 1801 the wood was divided into Lower and Upper Backtilt, with a field between them, so that the central area of today's wood is fairly recent. There are a wide variety of trees, but much is chestnut coppice, probably planted in the nineteenth century for hop poles.

In the lowest part of the wood a large pit can be seen from the road. This is marked as a quarry on the first Ordnance Survey maps of 1870. We know from parish records that stone from Backtilt was used for road repairs in the 19th century and may have come from this quarry.

We soon cross from the Wadhurst Clay, where the road is sunken, with high banks, to the Tunbridge Wells Sand, where it is much less sunken. The difference is presumably related to the underlying geology, although elsewhere in the parish there are deeply sunken roads on Tunbridge Wells Sand, as on Coldharbour Road.

There are about ten striking, silver-barked, beech trees at the edge of Backtilt wood; almost all have several trunks, suggesting that they were coppiced or layered before being allowed to grow tall.



Hornbeam

Beech

Trail 4. Stepneyford & the Pump

Beech and hornbeam leaves are very similar in shape, but a distinguishing feature is the toothed edge of the hornbeam leaf.

The (now private) road to the west at the upper end of the wood was closed in 1859, at the same time as that from Walkhurst Bridge to Stepneyford Lane, which we passed earlier.

Turn right into Halden Lane at a junction with the little triangle of scrub at its centre (there is a seat on the far side, should one be needed). The lane leads on to Halden Place in Rolvenden, where the Guldefords of Hemsted (Trail 2) had another large house and park; we turn left at the first junction, after about 200 yards.

In the hedges, as the road drops down towards the stream, are hops, mingling with the hazel and hornbeam. Whether these are native hops or varieties introduced for cultivation I do not know. Hops were once grown on virtually every farm in Benenden, as confirmed by the numerous oast houses, but for the last decade or so there have been none grown commercially in the parish.

The stream rises from springs at the junction of the sands and the clays not far to the west; it flows east to the Newmill Channel and then south to the Rother and the sea. The bridge here was known in the 1600s as Pepper Mill Bridge and a paper mill stood about two hundred yards along the stream to the east.

Mounds close to the bridge suggest either an earlier bridge on a slightly different line or possibly a dam holding water for the mill. A yew tree stands by the larger mound. *The Atlas of Kent Flora* says that the yew is native in Kent only on the chalk, and that

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elsewhere it owes its presence to seeds dispersed by birds from churchyard and other planted trees. The many yew place-names in the Weald, such as Iden in this parish, together with its very wide distribution, strongly suggest that the yew is a true native of the Weald. As we climb the hill beyond the stream, look out for another local tree, a small but fairly old wild service (or chequer) tree high on the bank, beyond Bexhill Cottage and on the same side of the road.

Take footpath **WC343** to the left (north-west) just past Bexhill Nursery. The path runs to the north of the old house of Frogs Hole. Walk by the side of hedges and a deep ditch and then across an open field to join Goddard's Green road close to the conspicuous blue hospital sign, a useful if intrusive marker. Turn left (west) along the road. We are now in the East End of Benenden, the name probably a survival from the division of the parish into quarters, for rate collection, from at least the 1600s (The other quarters were West End, Iden and Dingledden, logical on the map but a curious choice of names). We are now on the broad drove road, Goddards Green Road.

The hospital began as a Tuberculosis sanatorium in 1905/6 with the purchase of the Cleveland Farm Estate. With the waning of Tuberculosis, the hospital diversified successfully and continues to grow. Even in these modern grounds a few ancient features have survived. For example, some of the tidy trimmed hedges within the hospital area contain a variety of woody species, revealing their ancient origin and at least one line of mature oaks marks the line of a former field boundary.

An old Benenden house can be seen attached to the medieval house of Great Dixter in Northiam, having been moved piece by piece from Benenden in 1910. It came from East End and was known as *The Old House at Home*. I think that it stood on Goddards Green Road on the west side of Mockbeggar Lane, where in

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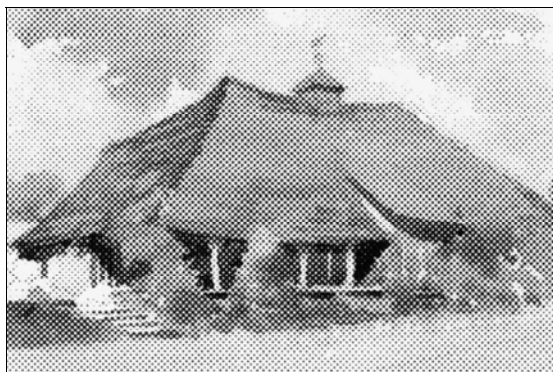
1777 there was a small farm known as *Further Home Farm*. The house belonged to William Ward who also owned Home Farm further along this road (Trail 1)

On the left is a high windmill mound. The mill had gone by 1777, although the name Windmill Hill, with Millbank House and Orchard, survived at least until then.

St Margarets Church was built by Lord Cranbrook in 1888. The attractive interior, using local oak, dates largely from 1959. Carvings include, amongst many others, the money-bags and sword of St Matthew the tax gatherer (the symbol of the Inland Revenue Branch of the Civil Service). Lord Cranbrook's gift to the parish included a schoolroom and an adjoining house for the teacher. The hospital now cares for this little church and bears the costs of maintenance.

Soon to the south (left) of the road is Uppergate Wood, the name (upper street) suggesting that it derives from either the road we are on or (less likely) from the Roman road that ran close to the southern edge of the wood. There is a record of oak bark, for tanning, taken from this wood around 1540. Parts of Uppergate Wood have, like many others, been planted with chestnut and, more unusually, some has been coppiced very recently.

Turn left beyond Uppergate Wood, along a quiet lane just short of Redhouse Farm. The lane, Pump Lane, is the one we passed earlier on Stepneyford Lane, at the northern edge of Backtilt Wood. Look out on the right for a boundary stone marking the junction of Rolvenden and Barclay hundreds. The boundary followed the road from Backtilt and turned westwards here across the field towards Goddards Green. We turn right (west) along the drive towards Pypne Manor (historically Pump Farm, The Pumphouse or just The Pump), one of the fine medieval houses in the parish, dating from around 1500.



The footpath **WC344A** leads us to the left, skirting around the old barn.

The Pump was a clothier's house in the sixteenth century, belonging to the Gibbon family, one of whom founded the Free School (Trail 8). Over the second stile is Hurdle Field where the wool was dried on frames after washing or drying and beyond the neatly laid hedge on the left is Tenterfield, where the cloths were dried under tension on hooks (tenterhooks); the field names survived into at least the 19th century. A sunken track leads down from the house into Tenterfield. In Hurdle Field there is another sunken way, perhaps dating from the time of the clothiers but in use until at least the early twentieth century and marked as a track on maps of that time.

Continue along the edge of Pump Wood, where there is a vast pit occupying most of the wood, perhaps the largest of the many large pits in the parish. It was dug in Wadhurst Clay and probably produced marl to spread on the nearby Tunbridge Wells Sand. Cross the field, which was an orchard until fairly recently, through the gate and along the track past another large pit and down to the stream. Beyond the old stone and brick bridge, take footpath **WC345** left (south-east) and cross the field towards Mounthall

(once Mud Wall) farm and the road, kinking slightly left and almost immediately right at the road, on to footpath **WC346**.

The footpath runs through fields, around a pond next to a distorted ash tree and then more or less centrally through fields and over the Stepneyford stream. Eventually, we emerge on Stepneyford Lane opposite Maplesden and have completed the walk.

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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”*

