

Discover Sussex

Exploring local towns

Royal Tunbridge Wells

Tunbridge Wells is 6 miles north-east of Crowborough.

Tunbridge Wells, officially Royal Tunbridge Wells, has been attracting visitors for almost 400 years.

Mineral springs were first discovered on the site in 1606. Building of the town began in the 1630s, from which time, until the late 19th century, it was a fashionable spa frequented by royalty. The Pantiles, its elegant shopping area, was laid out in 1638.

Today the town still retains much of the charm and elegance of its Georgian heyday, making for a great day out from Crowborough.

Spa Town

The town owes its existence to a nobleman called Lord North. Travelling to London by horse, he was suffering from a rather large hangover and stopped to take a drink from some reddish waters that were seeping from the ground. The water made him feel so much better that he concluded that it must have health giving properties.

Word spread quickly after the chance discovery of the spring in the early 1600's. People began to flock from London to try the 'health-giving' water.

Pubs, shops and accommodation soon sprang up near the spring. These were covered by a colonnaded walkway that later became known as the Pantiles.

The Pantiles is still a thriving area to visit today, with its small shops, cafés, bars and restaurants.



In Georgian times, Tunbridge Wells became particularly popular, a rival to Brighton. It was commonplace for the rich to spend the summer season in Bath and the winter season in Tunbridge Wells.

Visitors would start the day with a glass of spring water then spend the rest of the day promenading, gossiping and gambling, with a short break for church. The day would often finish with a dancing, music or a ball.



You can still sample the spring water during summer months at the Chalybeate Spring, near the Pantiles (see photo).

Royal Tunbridge Wells

Early in the 1800's many houses were built and Tunbridge Wells became a desirable place for the rich to live as well as holiday. The town expanded over the next 100 years and in 1909 King Edward VII officially recognised the popularity of Tunbridge Wells by granting the town its "Royal" prefix. Only two towns have been granted this title in the United Kingdom.

The current population of the town is 60,000.

Eastbourne

Eastbourne is 20 miles south from Crowborough.

Eastbourne's broad tree-lined avenues, splendid Victorian façades and grassy squares give a feeling of Regency splendour from days gone by.

Covenants stipulate that no shops or other commercial buildings are allowed on the seafront and, as a result, the elegant 3-mile promenade is lined with fine buildings, such as The Grand, Queen's and Burlington hotels. The town also has a fine array of concert halls and theatres.



Although the railway came here in 1849, it was not until 1858 that the main development really started. Once a collection of small hamlets (the old village of Bourne can be found a mile inland), Eastbourne's fate changed when the Earl of Burlington became the seventh Duke of Devonshire and one of the most wealthy men in England. The Duke owned some two-thirds of the land where the town now stands. He went about creating a 'town for gentlemen' on this practically green-field site.

The garish entertainment venues of other seaside towns are missing from the promenade. If you do have a yearning for penny arcades then these can be found on the pier.

The shopping area is a mix of the modern well-known high street stores and smaller specialist shops as well as areas dedicated to the antique hunter. The area known as 'Little Chelsea' contains many second hand bookshops.

Opened in 1993, Eastbourne's Sovereign Harbour now contains over 600 permanent moorings and more than 3,000 yachts visit each year. Well worth a visit, the marina has cafés, bars, restaurants and shops. Visitors can relax, taking in the picturesque views from the restaurant terraces or stroll along the walkways.

Eastbourne has had many rich and famous visitors since it was built. Charles Darwin wrote part of his 'Origin of Species' in Eastbourne and Claude Debussy composed here in 1905.

Having won many awards for its gardens and beach, Eastbourne is one of the finest resorts on the South Coast and the ideal place to visit.

Brighton & Hove

Brighton is approximately 25 miles south-west from Crowborough.

Known as 'London by the Sea', Brighton is the largest and most famous seaside resort in Sussex. Hove, by contrast, is quieter. The two borough councils were joined together in 1997, with Brighton & Hove officially becoming a city soon afterwards.

After a downturn in the fortunes of the area in the 1970's, the city of Brighton & Hove has emerged as one of the finest seaside resorts in Britain. With a wealth of facilities that range from conference venues to amusement arcades and modern shopping centres to sun drenched beaches - the city has something to offer everyone.

In Brighton, the area occupied by the original fishing village has become The Lanes - a collection of narrow alleyways now filled with a mixture of antique shops, restaurants,

bistros and pubs. In Hove, peace and tranquillity fills the wide boulevards, creating a welcome retreat.

The past and the present have fused co-operatively, creating a city that is as vibrant as it is relaxing.

Brighton was once the fishing village of Brighthelmstone, with a surrounding wall that had been built to protect it from fourteenth-century raids by the French. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the sea had washed part of Brighthelmstone away and as a result the village was in a fairly run down state.

Brighthelmstone's fortunes changed in 1753 when Dr Russell of Lewes published his thesis on sea bathing, which proclaimed the benefit to health of the salt water. By 1780, development of the Regency terraces had started and the town quickly became the fashionable resort of Brighton.

Lewes

Lewes is 10 miles south-west from Crowborough.

Lewes is the county town of East Sussex and features a broad range of speciality shops, an array of architectural styles plus an assortment of antique shops.

With its twisting alleyways and medieval streets, Lewes is a fascinating place to come, either to browse, to buy or simply to wander.

Lewes has always been an important town for local trade. The Saxons first developed Lewes on one of their cross country trade routes. They called it 'Hlaew' (which means small hill). In fact, the steep High Street, with its assortment of old buildings and ancient passageways (called 'twittens' in Sussex), is the path the traders took from the ancient port below.



Hastings

Full of history and character, Hastings is 20 miles south-east from Crowborough on the coast.

It has a very attractive Old Town, nestled between the East and West Cliffs. The narrow streets and twittens contain numerous small antiques shops, pubs and restaurants.

Hastings is also the heart of the region's fishing industry with Europe's largest beach launched fishing fleet. At the base of the East Cliff is the area known as the Stade. It contains tall buildings used for drying and mending the fishing nets.

Both the East and West Cliffs offer panoramic views of the surrounding countryside and coastline.

At the top of the East Cliff, there is Hastings Country Park, lovely for strolling or relaxing and taking in the views. On a clear day you can see the coast of France from here. To get up to the top, one can walk the many flights of steps from the Old Town or take the Cable Railway from the Harbour.



The cliff top has been inhabited from the Stone Age to the present day. Remains of a Stone Age encampment have been found on top of the cliff. During the age of smuggling false harbour lights were placed on the cliffs to lure boats onto the rocks.

The views down into the Old Town are spectacular, small lanes and houses nestled against the rock of the West Cliff.

The West Cliff divides Hastings Old Town from the rest of Hastings and St Leonards. The Normans built the first English castle here on the West Cliff in 1086.

Getting to the top is similar to the East Cliff. You can walk the many flights of steps from the Old Town or you can take a hidden cable railway from the George Street to the top. It is also possible to drive to the top from the Town Centre or by going inland from the Old Town.

There is a café on top of West Cliff and a large grassy park. You can see the whole of Hastings from here as well as the South Downs and Eastbourne in the distance.

It is possible to park in front of the Old Town at the harbour pay and display. There is a Tourist Information Office there as well.

Further along the seafront there is the recently refurbished pier that now boasts many interesting small shops.

Rye

Rye is 10 miles east of Hastings, near the border with Kent.

The sea that once surrounded this hilltop town has now retreated leaving Rye looking out over the river Rother and surrounding areas.

Rye was originally called 'Atter Ie' by the Saxons, meaning 'on the island'. Over the years this became 'Atte Rie' and finally just Rye.



Full of character, the ancient town has changed little through the ages. Medieval, Georgian and half-timbered Tudor buildings line the pretty cobbled streets and huddle around St Mary's Church at the highest point.

A good place to start is the local Tourist information Office housed in The Heritage Centre. This has free exhibitions and information on Rye, including details of guided and audio walks.

Perfect for strolling around on foot, there are many views to enjoy in Rye. The view from the Church tower shouldn't be missed. From the Church you can walk down Mermaid Street to the Quay. Have a drink in the Mermaid Inn, built around the 11th Century. Full of history it was once frequented by smugglers.

One of the most impressive views is from the old Town Gaol (Rye Castle Museum) looking back out towards Camber and the marshes.

Rye is the nearest town to Camber with a range of restaurants and shops. There are also many antiques shops and art galleries to explore. Rye has always attracted artists, potters and authors. It was once the home of author Henry James and E F Benson, creator of Mapp and Lucia.

The South Downs

From Crowborough the beautiful Sussex South Downs are within easy reach. Recognised as one of the most important chalk landscapes in England, much of the area has been designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Millions of years ago the South Downs were part of a massive chalk dome that covered much of southern England and the extreme north of France.

Extensive erosion has left the present land formation with a characteristic steep north facing scarp slope and gentle dip slope to the south. Anyone who has had the pleasure to complete the London to Brighton cycle ride will be able to testify to this!

One of the features of the Downs are the dry valleys (also known as wind gaps). They were created by rivers when the water level was much higher.



At the western end, the Downs merge into the hills of the Hampshire Basin and at the eastern end they are cut off by the sea, forming the Severn Sisters. There are four rivers that cut through the Downs; the Cuckmere, Ouse, Adur and Arun.

The Downs were originally covered by forest but extensive sheep farming has left a landscape of chalk grassland. During the Second World War much of the grassland was ploughed and has remained in cultivation. To the west of the river Arun, there is more woodland on the Downs.

Inhabited since ancient times the area has many historical features such as burial mounds, defensive sites and settlements.

The Downs are perfect for walking. There are a variety of landscapes to enjoy from inland county views to coastal views.

Explore the South Downs from Crowborough

The following route requires the use of a car. For pubs in the area see the section on 'Eating in and eating out'.

Head south from Crowborough towards Uckfield on the A26. At Uckfield take the A22 towards Eastbourne.

At Polegate take the A27 from towards Brighton. After 2 miles there is a turning on the left signposted to the **Long Man of Wilmington**. There is a separate sheet in the Discovery Booklet that covers the Long Man in more detail.

From the Long Man of Wilmington continue on the same road towards **Litlington**. For an interesting detour take the first right turn and visit **Alfriston**.

Back on the road to Litlington head through the village and continue until you reach the T junction with the A259. On the way look out for the **White Horse** marked into the hillside.

Where the road meets the A259 take a left turn. After 2 1/2 miles at **East Dean** take the right turn towards **Beachy Head**.

After 1 mile you will arrive at **Birling Gap**, a low point in chalk cliff line, and a good place to stop and explore the beach.

Steps lead down onto the rocky shoreline. From here you can see the **Seven Sisters** out to the west. There is evidence of coastal erosion here. A row of houses are disappearing into the sea.

Back on the coast road it continues along towards **Beachy Head**, gaining height. Look out for the cliff top lighthouse, once the subject of a TV episode of Changing Rooms.

The lighthouse was recently moved 15m away from the rapidly eroding cliff.

2 miles from **Birling Gap** you will arrive at **Beachy Head**. There is a 'Harvester type' pub here and a Countryside Visitor Centre (details below). It is also a good spot to park and take a stroll along the cliff tops.

If you follow the path to the viewing point you will see the new working lighthouse down below in the sea.

Continuing on the road from Beachy Head it eventually loops back and meets the A259.



Warning!!
At many points the drop at the cliff edge is sudden, with no fences.
Please take care.

Beachy Head Countryside Centre - The Countryside Centre is situated at the end of the Seven Sisters with fabulous views of Birling Gap and the magnificent Heritage Coast. There is a highly innovative exhibition about Beachy Head and the Sussex Downland. Free admission. 01323 737273.

Alternative walk – The road that runs along the front at Eastbourne turns inland at the westerly end of the town (B2103). Where the road turns inland there is a small drinks kiosk at the bottom of the hill. From here there is a path that leads around the front of the Downs. This leads to a short circular walk on the lower Downs. Following the path closest to the shore one can take a detour down onto the rocky beach via steps at Cow Gap.

Long Man of Wilmington

The Long Man of Wilmington is a 226 feet high figure cut into the side of Windover Hill, near Eastbourne. It is well worth a visit as part of a trip around the South Downs (see separate sheet).



Also known as the Wilmington Giant it is the second largest representation of the human form in the world. Only the Giant Of Attacama in Chile stands higher at 393 feet high.

Mystery surrounds the origins of the Long Man, and even the outline has changed over the years.

Originally the outline was marked in packed chalk but over the years grass grew over this. Right up to the 19th Century he was only visible in certain light conditions and after a light fall of snow. In 1874 he was marked out in yellow bricks.

During the Second World War the Long Man was painted green so that German planes couldn't use it as a landmark. In 1969 the bricks were replaced with concrete blocks. These are now painted each year, allowing the Long Man to be visible for many miles.

There are many theories about the origins of the Long Man. Some local people think that he is prehistoric. Others believe that he was constructed by a monk from the nearby Priory at some point between the 11th and 15th centuries.

"The Giant keeps his secret and from his hillside flings out a perpetual challenge."

Rev A.A Evans

Visiting the Long Man

The Long Man of Wilmington is signposted from the A27, 2 miles west from the Junction with the A22 at Polegate. Drive through Wilmington and there is a free public car park on the right hand side of the road. There is an information board in the car park providing further details.

Cross the road and follow the public footpath along side the road and then across the fields. This leads to the bottom of the figure. Even from the base of the figure there are outstanding views inland across the fields of Sussex with very little evidence of any built up areas.

For a longer walk take there is a circular path that runs along the bottom of the hill, up to the top, around The Long Man and back down again. Follow it in either direction.

The horizontal ripples in the side of the hill are due to weathering and animal activity. From the top of the Hill there are lovely views across the Downs, and down into the Cuckmere Valley. In the distance you will see the sea.



The landscape is covered in fragments of flint.

Thousands of years ago flint was mined on the hill. The filled in mine shafts can still be seen.

Preserving local railways

The railways grew up fast across Great Britain during the 19th and early 20th Century. Train was a popular mode of transport and allowed many, for the first time, to explore other towns and cities.

There are three locally run steam railways near to Crowborough that are worth exploring. Most are run as charities and use local volunteers to restore and maintain the rolling stock and track.

Lavender Line

The Lavender Line is part of the former Lewes to Uckfield Railway, opened on 18th October 1858. Between 1859 and 1922, the line was operated by the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway and passed into the ownership of the Southern Railway in 1923. In 1948 it then became part of the nationalised British Railways Southern Region.



In its heyday, the line saw extensive use by local, London, Brighton, Tunbridge Wells and Dover services. However, due to a combination of factors including financial cuts and the unsafe bridges on the approach to Lewes, the line was closed on 22nd February 1969.

Isfield station has now been restored to early Southern Railway colours and looks very much as it would have done in the 1920's and 30's.

The Lavender Line is located in Isfield, just off the A26 between Uckfield and Lewes.
Tel: 01825 750515 24hr info service on 09068 800645

Spa Valley Railway

Surrounded by the unspoilt beauty of the Kentish Weald, the Spa Valley Railway lies at the heart of one of England's most beautiful regions.

Visitors can take a trip by steam train for three and a half miles from Royal Tunbridge Wells through High Rocks to the village of Groombridge.



Tunbridge Wells had two stations built by rival companies. Tunbridge Wells Central was opened by the South Eastern Railway in 1845 (this is now the main railway station). Tunbridge Wells West was opened by the London Brighton & South Coast Railway in 1866 and is now the place where the Spa Valley Railway runs from.

In 1876, these two stations were linked by a tunnel enabling connections between the London to Brighton and the London to Hastings lines. From Tunbridge Wells West, there were direct services to the South coast at Brighton and Eastbourne and north bound to London Victoria.

SPA VALLEY RAILWAY, West Station, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN2 5QY.
Tel: 01892 537715. It's worth asking about special offer tickets that combine a visit to some of the other attractions in the area.

Bluebell Railway

The volunteer run Bluebell Line was the UK's first preserved standard gauge passenger railway, re-opening part of the Lewes to East Grinstead line in 1960. Vintage engines and coaches run through 5 miles of glorious Wealden Sussex scenery.



The Bluebell Railway has the UK's largest and most comprehensive collection of ex-Southern Railway locomotives.

All steam locomotives require a complete strip-down, for a boiler overhaul and insurance inspection, after every ten years of operation. With some of the oldest locos at the Bluebell Railway now 130 years old, there is a fair amount of work required to keep them in working condition.

At Sheffield Park station, there is a museum of historic railway relics and refreshments are available.

BLUEBELL RAILWAY, Sheffield Park Station, East Sussex, TN23 3QL.
Tel: 01825 722370 (talking timetable), 01825 720800 (general enquiries).
Open every weekend, Easter week, daily May to September and through half term weeks in February and October. Ample free parking at Sheffield Park station on the A275 between East Grinstead and Lewes. There is also a car park at Horsted Keynes station.

The Beeching Cuts

40 years ago Britain's railway network underwent a massive programme of change. This would be forever known as the 'Beeching Cuts'.

The blueprint, drawn up in 1963 by the chairman of the British Railways Board, Dr Richard Beeching, shut down almost a third of the railway system.

Five thousand miles of track and 2,000 stations were closed. This had wide ranging effects in Sussex with the Lavender Line and the Spa Valley Railway amongst the victims.

The Cuckoo Trail near Hailsham also runs along a railway that was closed by Beeching. It was called the Cuckoo Line because of the tradition of releasing the first cuckoo of spring at the nearby Heathfield fair. The single track railway used to carry passengers, milk, livestock and animal feedstuffs between Eastbourne and Eridge.

Dr Beeching's idea was to put the railways on a sound financial footing by abandoning hundreds of loss making branch lines and concentrating on more profitable InterCity routes instead.

But a recent report indicates that some of Dr Beeching's closures were mistakes and there are routes that could now be re opened. This will give people a public transport alternative to using the car, especially in rural areas.

Ironically, Dr Beeching would have been affected by his own policies because he lived on one of the Sussex railway lines that he closed. This ran between East Grinstead and Royal Tunbridge Wells and part of the Line has now opened as the Spa Valley Railway.



The railway house of this disused station can still be seen at Withyham, close to where Dr Beeching lived.