



Bodiam Castle and Great Wigsell

Distance: 13 km=8 miles

easy walking

Region: East Sussex, Kent

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Author: Stivaletti

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Refreshments: *Castle Inn*, Bodiam Castle, Hawkhurst Fish Farm

Map: Explorer 136 (High Weald) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

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Medieval moated castle, historic house, grassy meadows, woodland

In Brief

Here is a truly four-dimensional walk taking you back centuries in the gentle rolling countryside, some of which is little changed from centuries ago. This is a walk of variety and real surprises. Bodiam Castle is well-known but never disappoints with its perfect shape that takes your imagination back to medieval times. The magnificent grounds and Jacobean house of Great Wigsell are hardly known at all and you are in for an unexpected treat for your eyes, on paths easy for the feet that seem too good to be true.

Near the end of the walk, you go through the grounds of the castle on a public footpath which gives you a good view of the exterior. For a full visit (highly recommended) there is an entry charge, free to NT members.



There is a good pub opposite the castle (for information ring the *Castle Inn* on 01580-830330) and a tearoom by the entrance to the castle, not requiring a ticket.



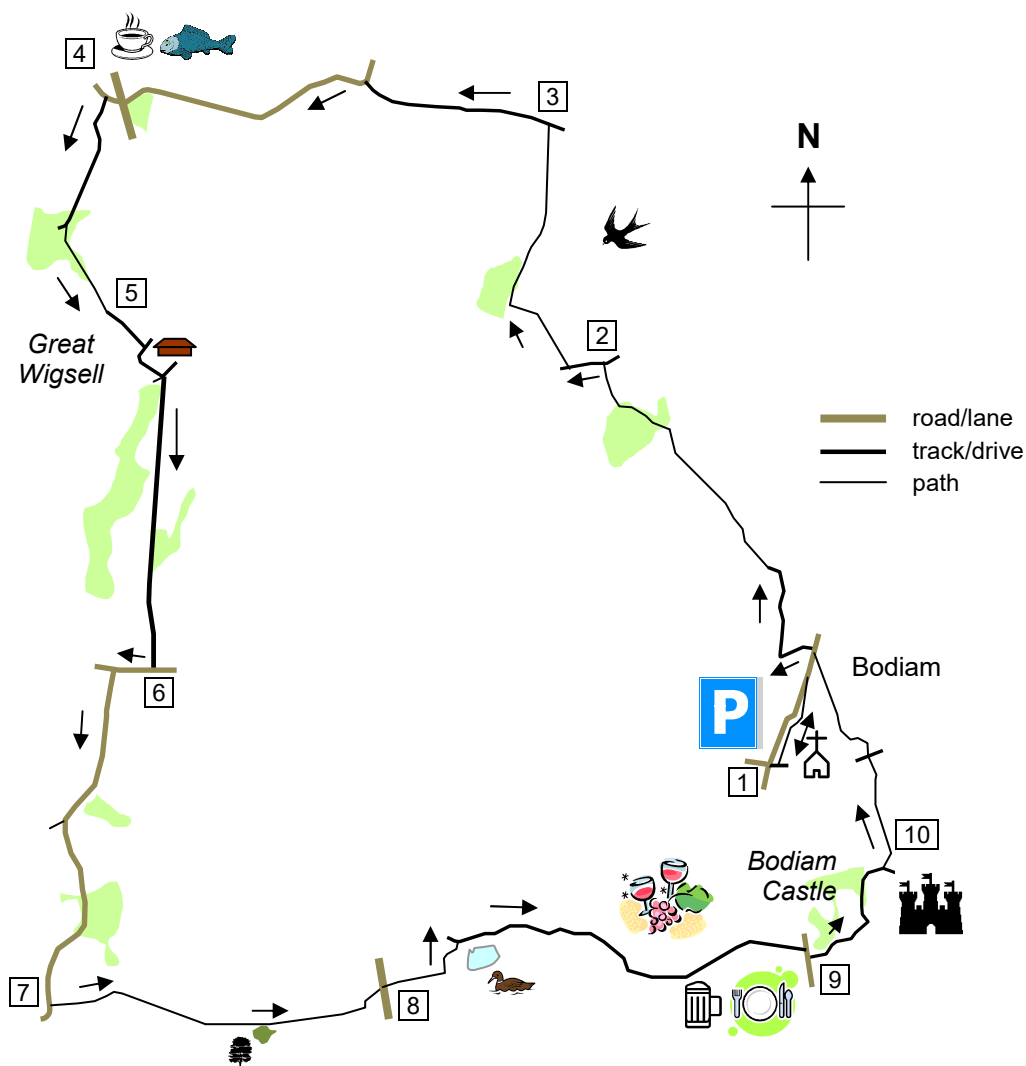
There are a few patches of nettles on this walks, so wearing shorts would not be advisable. There are some muddy patches on the farm tracks, not enough to make boots obligatory, although they are always a comfort, of course.



Your dog could come with you on this walk, if he is not very large (because of the stiles) but you would need a short lead on one of the roads and possibly in the fields; he would not be permitted in the Hawkhurst Fish Farm café.

The walk begins at **Bodiam village**, East Sussex, postcode **TN32 5UJ**. To get the best from this walk, *don't* park in the Castle car park. Instead, the starting point is the *village*, near residential roads and the church. You can reach it by following a sign to **Sandhurst** instead of to the castle. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1** Almost opposite the residential road, Levetts Lane, turn into the driveway marked *Court Lodge Farm*, but immediately turn **left** on a drive leading to the church. Go through the lychgate at the end and walk down the left-hand side of the church. *Early English-style St Giles church, built mainly in the late 1200s, is well known for its medieval brasses, visible on the west wall of the tower. The author found it closed but you may be luckier.* Go down a few steps and down a descending path which re-joins the road. Follow the road for another 150m and turn **left** on a tarmac drive showing name plates for four houses. *Note the old railway penalty sign on the gate of Bramble Cottage.* [This path is part of the Sussex Border Path, a long-distance trail running along the whole inland border of East and West Sussex.](#) Stay on the tarmac drive as it bends right after 120m. You pass farm buildings and a hop field. Northlands Farm comes next, with two cottages and some weatherboard houses, typical of this region. Go through a metal kissing gate and continue on a dirt track. A grassy path now runs between hedges. Your path comes down to woodland just after a large wooden gate on your left. Go over a stile here into the woods. Your path leads over a stream and rises to run beside a field on your right, followed by a horse grazing area on your left. At the top, you meet a 3-way fingerpost with good views all around.
- 2** Turn **left** at the fingerpost on a farm track. At a fingerpost by some farm buildings, turn **right** on a path running down between two grassy meadows. [You can see the storage tanks and oasts of Conghurst Farm up ahead – your next](#)

destination. At the bottom, by woodland, turn **right** as indicated. Ignore a wide gap on the left leading into another meadow and keep ahead in the same meadow, but keeping left on a narrow path. This path leads into bushes and goes over a sturdy bridge across the Kent Ditch. *Welcome to Kent!* The path leads to a junction of crop fields. Bear a fraction left here and take a path uphill between a crop field on your left and a hedge on your right. You come to a T-junction with a wide stony track.

- 3 Turn **left** on the track, passing storage tanks, some buildings old and new, an oast and five more oasts, belonging to Conghurst Farm. As you emerge from the farm, a track joins you from the right and, 50m later, you reach a road. Turn **left** on this road, watching out for traffic which may be surprisingly frequent for such a narrow country lane. Ignore a footpath on the right at a bend and stay on the road passing a small house and, after 800m or so, finally reaching the main B2244 Junction Road. *(If you would like a pleasant refreshment break now, you can make a short excursion by turning **right** on the road for 150m to reach Hawkhurst Fish Farm where there is the lovely Waterside Café, open all day seven days a week, with seating inside and out, overlooking the fishing lakes.)*



- 4 Cross the main road to a minor road opposite. *You are back in East Sussex.* In 50m, turn **left** on a wide farm track by a large metal gate. *Any initial mud here will quickly clear.* At a junction of fields, straight on up a path between trees. At the top, continue straight ahead into Brickhurst Wood. Where the forestry track turns right, keep straight ahead on a narrow path, indicated by a yellow disc on a tree. This is an especially interesting part of the walk, a little-known path between high banks in a botanically rich area, although with a number of fallen trees. Soon a crop field comes into view on the right, then on the left. Finally, after 400m on this path, you come out suddenly into the smooth grass of Great Wigsell opposite the old barn.
- 5 Keep to the left along a bank. A lake, probably with resident geese, can be seen on your right. Your path goes through a very large swing-gate, then on mown grass towards the house with its garden and perfect topiary. *[2017: the careful comprehensive renovation of the stonework was nearly finished and the house is now revealed, looking amazing and well cared for.]*

Much of the history of Great Wigsell is a history of that powerful Kentish family the Culpepers. (See the "Offham" and "Medway" walks in this series.) Thomas Culpeper was related to Anne Boleyn and was executed by Henry VIII for his supposed adultery with Catherine Howard. John Culpeper of Wigsell (died in 1612) was a 12th great-grandfather of Diana Princess of Wales. The land was purchased in 1348 by Sir John Culpeper, sheriff of Kent and passed through the family for 300 years. The current manor house has been greatly altered and rebuilt from a Jacobean house built by Richard English in about 1625 who had been in the service of the Culpepers and finally bought them out. The present owner is American and often walks her labradors in the grounds.

On meeting the shingle drive, turn **right** on it and follow it round to the left, with oast houses in the corner, passing an old barn and the side of the house. At a T-junction, turn **right** and go through a small wooden gate. Turn **left** onto a straight semi-tarmac track leading uphill beside a row of aspens. The track now runs between a pleasant grassy meadow and woodland. You finally come out between the buildings of Great Wigsell Farm, past a wooden gate, to a road.

- 6 Turn **right** on the road and, in 100m or so, turn **left** on a tarmac lane which has no nameplate but is actually Bourne Lane. Follow this very quiet lane,

avoiding a footpath right at a bend after 600m. The lane now runs between ferny banks, goes past *Bourne Farm House*, soon passing a metal gate at a right bend, and runs uphill under beeches. A total of 400m after the house, at the top of a rise and just before the lane curves right again, go **left** over a stile next to a large metal gate and into a large green meadow. A sequence of these lush pastures will take you all the way to the next road crossing.

7 Go down the right-hand side of the meadow and, at the far side, go through a large gap into a larger meadow. Head straight across the centre, heading for a small gap visible in the hedgerow at the far side. **The author saw evidence of cattle from earlier times; the pasture is so large, they could easily have been avoided.** On reaching the far side, go over a stile into an even larger meadow. Go straight across, aiming just to the **left** of a large clump of trees in the centre. When you pass the clump (which shields a hidden pond), keep straight on in **exactly** the same direction as before. (You may see faint marks from a farm vehicle to guide you.) Your target is a **stile** about 5m to the **left** of a large metal gate which is about 40m to the **left** of the bottom right corner. (If you find yourself in the far corner where there is a wide snaking farm track leading out, you need to go 40m to your **left** to find the stile which is not easy to see from a distance.) Go over the stile into the adjoining smaller meadow. Now take a diagonal path not far from the right-hand edge, towards the main road, where you will find a large wooden gate 50m from the right-hand corner. Go over a stile here and carefully cross the main road.

8 Go through a new kissing-gate by a large wooden gate directly opposite. Go straight across the centre of the meadow, aiming for a stile visible near a metal gate under a large oak. Climb the stile and go ahead for only 15m. Here, at a small crossing path, turn **left** and go over a stile into woods. The path veers right by a wooden fence and **left** on the grassy bank of a reedy pond near a large chalet-style building. **This pleasant spot is part of the Bodiam Business Park and on weekdays you may come across office workers taking a break. It is not clear whether the picnic tables are public, but they provide a tempting respite for walkers.** Go a little way round the pond and **left** over a bridge, as indicated by a yellow arrow. Immediately go **right** beside a plainer office building (*which used to be owned by Guinness when it was surrounded by hop gardens*). Follow the concrete drive past other units. Go past a large metal gate and through a wooden gate, continuing on a wide track. You are now on a nice easy route between fields and hedges, with a picturesque triple-oast on your left. At a decommissioned cricket pavilion you join a tarmac path and pass a vineyard on your left. On your right, the banks of the River Rother can be seen. You pass a village green and finally reach the *Castle Inn*.



As a Shepherd Neame pub, the Castle Inn provides reliable ales and acceptable food. Food is available daily from 12 to 9. The terrace looks onto a green field which acts as an overflow area for visitors to the pub and the adjoining field is a launching site for helicopter trips over the castle and vineyards. The NT castle tearoom offers the only competition.

9 Cross the road into the entrance to the castle. On your right are loos, shop and more-than-tearoom (not requiring a ticket). The tearoom is an old converted coal store. **[Autumn 2015: the tearoom is undergoing refurbishment until 4 Dec, but there is a stand-by facility.]** Just beyond, you can have a look at the river, the old bridge and a series of tableaux describing the history of Bodiam. *This walk uses the public footpath which gives you a good external view*



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of the castle. If you want to visit the castle (highly recommended) and are not a member of the NT, you need to buy a ticket at the entrance. Keep left on a narrow path, going past a NT sign. Go through a small wooden gate and follow the shingle path beside a paling fence. The path winds past the moat with the castle viewable up-close on your right. (Non-ticket holders must stay on the footpath, since the grounds are part of the entry package.)

You have to thank three larger-than-life characters for this almost-perfect fairy-tale castle. Sir Edward Dalyngrigge (1346-1393) was a soldier-adventurer who acquired vast wealth in France. This was the time of the Hundred Years' War and the French were causing mayhem (the River Rother was a weak link). Sir Ed already had a mansion here and the king (Richard II) was happy to grant a license to fortify it (a process known as "crenellation", i.e. adding battlements). Not a man for half-measures, Sir Ed built an entirely new structure, surrounded by a moat, enclosing a comfortable residence (now gone). As a relatively "modern" castle (a century after King Edward I) it saw no action until the Civil War (around 1644) when both sides were happy to see it fall into ruin so that it could not serve as a stronghold.

George Curzon, Marquess of Kedleston (1859-1925) was famous for his haughtiness and his extraordinary energy. ("My name is George Nathaniel Curzon / I am a most superior person" is the jingle that followed him around). Historian, statesman (and very nearly PM), he became Viceroy of India and restored the Taj Mahal. At Bodiam he converted what was then just a heap of stones to a fully-restored castle and gave it to the National Trust. The "heap" had been saved from pilfering by John ("Mad Jack") Fuller (1757-1834), Squire of Brightling, famous for building follies (see the "Brightling" walk in this series).



The castle, complete with spiral staircases, battlements and portcullis, is open every day except Christmas Eve/Day and, on a popular day, you may see demonstrations of medieval herbal cookery and crafts.



Keep **right** until you are opposite the castle entrance. Up on your left is an icecream shop and exhibition room. Walk past them to the far top right-hand corner.

- 10 Go **left** over a stile onto a narrow path that runs beside the Bodiam Vineyard from where, looking back, you have a view down over the castle and you may see the steam train in the distance, if it is running. At the top, you pass the triple oast of Court Lodge Farm. Cross a patch of grass and a concrete drive and go over a stile (avoidable using a gate on your left). Go down a grassy slope, through a chain stile, along the right-hand side of a small meadow and **right** through another chain stile. Go diagonally down the centre of a (rather claggy) crop field to a road, opposite the point where you joined the walk. Turn **left** on the road and keep left on an ascending path leading up steps, past the church and back to the junction in the village where the walk began.



Also recommended for end-of-walk refreshments is the *White Dog Inn* in Ewhurst Green, only 1½ miles away, a Harveys pub.

Getting there

By car: if coming from the London area, your route is on the A21. Bodiam Castle is signposted nearly 1 mile south of Hurst Green, at a fork in the road opposite a red-tiled house. Look for the familiar brown tourist sign. As you enter the village, there is a signpost pointing left to **Sandhurst**. Turn **left** here. In 150m, there is a dirt strip beside the road. Better still, in another 150m, there is a residential road on your left by a children's play area and skate park with plenty of roadside parking. The walk begins opposite this residential road.

By train: there is a seasonal **steam train** from Tenterden Station to the little Bodiam Station. In the high season, the service is roughly every hour, with a lunch break. In the quieter season, there may be no service on weekdays and in the winter there is no service. For more information, see www.kesr.org.uk/timetable. The entrance to the castle is a 400m walk.

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