



Firle, Alciston and the South Downs

Distance: 16 km=10 miles moderate walking with long easy stretches

Region: East Sussex

Date written: 28-jun-2014

Author: Hautboy

Last update: 14-oct-2023

Refreshments: nr Alciston, Firle

Map: Explorer 123 (South Downs Way) *hopefully not needed*

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

Public rights are restricted to printing, copying or distributing this document exactly as seen here, complete and without any cutting or editing. See *Principles* on main webpage.

High hills, views, villages, pubs, parkland, historic houses

In Brief

This is a terrific walk over the best of the South Downs near Lewes in East Sussex with a contrasting section through two picturesque villages giving you a chance to see or visit some historic houses. One house has important literary connections with the Bloomsbury Group and is full of artworks from the early 1900s. The other is a stately home going back to early Tudor times. This walk includes one of the most perfect views in the county and you may want to pack an easel, paints and brushes along with your walking gear. Along the way there are two pubs, serving lunch, one especially legendary in the area. (To enquire at *The Ram*, ring 01273-858222, for the *Barley Mow*, it's 01323-811033.)

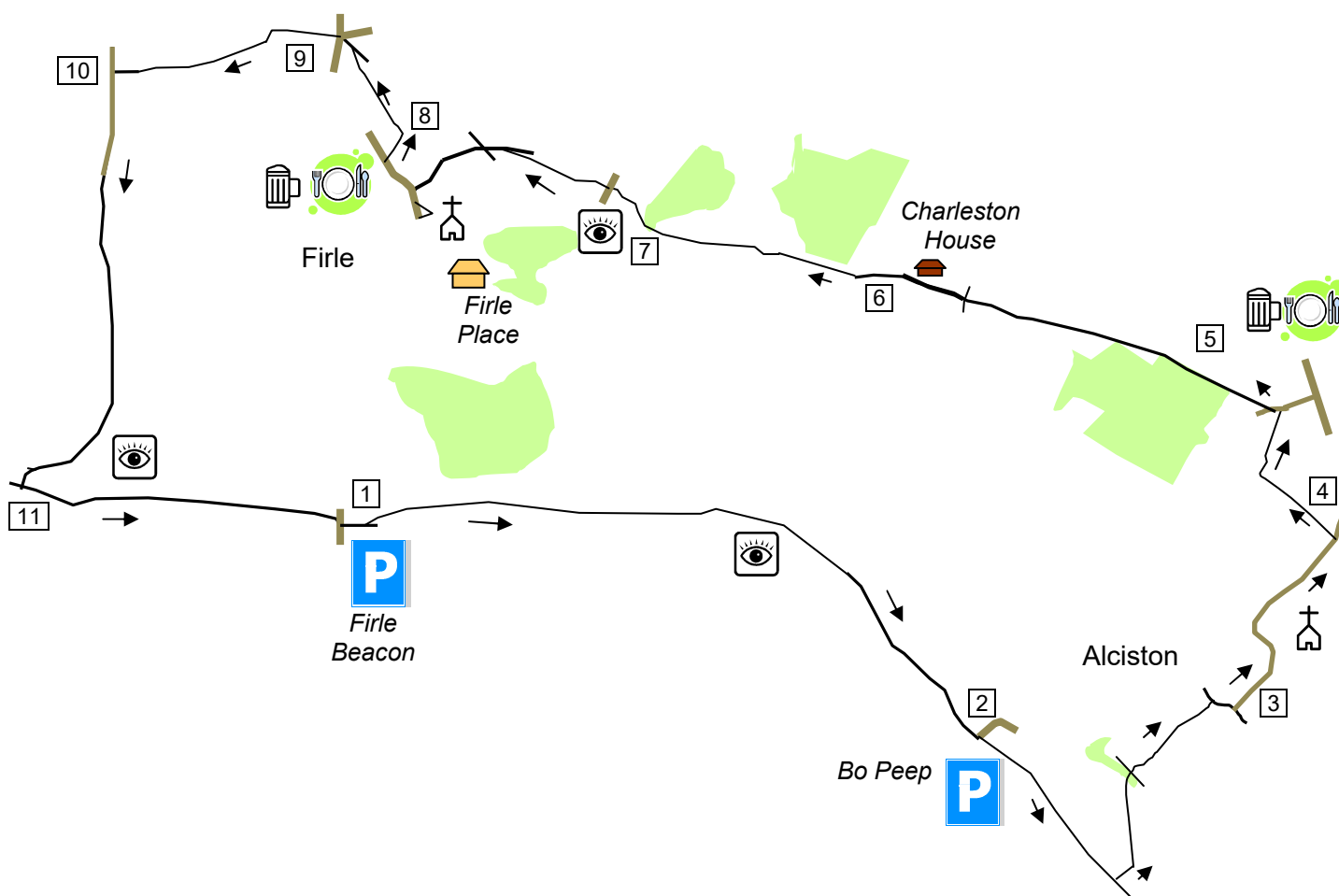



There are very few nettles or brambles to worry bare legs. This is a serious hike and most walkers would wear boots even though the terrain is easy. Your dog should be happy on this walk too, but you may need to be aware of occasional cattle just before Charleston House and on the Downs before the end.

The walk begins at the **Firle Beacon** car park (grid ref TQ4605, postcode **BN8 6LR**, www.w3w.co/long.remembers.monkey) or at the **Bo Beep** car park (grid ref TQ494051, www.w3w.co/contrived.foods.dented). (There is no near postcode: **BN26 6UJ** will take you past the holiday B&B from where you need to continue up the hill.) In 2023: a walker reports Firle Beacon now charge, e.g. £2.50 for 4 hours, whilst Bo Beep is still free. Both car parks are high on the South Downs, east of **Lewes, East Sussex**. Both are easily reached on a side road from the A27 road and are quite exhilarating places to begin a walk. Whichever you choose may depend on the time of day. Nominally this walk starts at the Firle Beacon car park, but if you want lunch at the half-way stage in Firle, start in Bo Peep. Another good start is near the *Ram* Inn in Firle, postcode **BN8 6NS**, with the promise of a reward at the end of the walk. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

Decision point. If you are starting in the Bo Peep car park, skip straight to section **2**.



- 1** Walk through the Firle Beacon car park, away from the tarmac access lane, and fork **left** through a small wooden gate by a sign for the South Downs Way (SDW). You will be following this easy grassy path for over 4 km to the Bo Peep car park. On your left are previews down into the valley of your route (or a reminder of your route if you began at Bo Peep). Follow the wire fence on your right, soon passing an unneeded wooden gate. You pass a marker post where a bridleway joins from the left. After a small wooden gate, you reach the highest point on the walk, Firle Beacon. As you round the top, near a triangulation pillar, you have views ahead of Arlington Reservoir, Eastbourne and Cuckmere Haven.  After another smaller hillcrest by some gorse bushes, veer **left** opposite a metal gate, leaving the wire fence, going past a marker post. Your path descends to a small wooden gate. Keep left here, coming down to another wooden gate to the Bo Peep car park.
- 2** **Behind the car park is a grassy bank with great views all round and two seats.** Continue on the South Downs Way (SDW), with the Bo Peep car park on your left. *(If you began there, there is a little gate at one end leading out to it.)* The SDW leads through a small wooden gate beside a large one uphill. 800m from the car park, in a level section, you come to a multiple finger-post. Turn **left** here across the grass. The path is unclear but your direction should be squarely left from your previous direction. You can see the village of Alciston below – your next destination. In 90m you meet a stile in the fence. Go over the stile and follow the grassy path **left** downhill.

In 300m or so, the path enters trees and is joined by a path from the right. Veer **left** and turn immediately **right** over a stile and down steps. Keep right on a narrow path between banks. The path crosses a farm track and continues as before. Sooner or later the path becomes completely overgrown: simply skip to the left and continue along the right-hand side of the adjoining field. When you reach a wide farm track, Comp Lane, turn **right** to reach a junction in 40m. *Note just beyond the junction a very unusual triangular wooden seat with directions to nearby villages [Oct 2023: alas! gone - hope it will be returned].* Turn **left** at the junction on a wide track and follow it into the village.

- 3 Stay on the tarmac lane, passing the converted *Burgh Barn* showing the sculpted horse inside. *On the right, through a gap, you can see Berwick Church and Wilmington Hill beyond. But the fingerpost should be ignored.* Keep to the lane passing thatched cottages and Alciston Court Farm with a colourful range of poultry. Keep **right** on the lane at the corner of the huge barn, famous for having 50,000 tiles, shortly passing near the 14th-century *Dovecote*. Immediately after that, on the right, is a path leading to the church which, although not on your route, is worth seeing.

The name "Alciston" means "Aelfsige's enclosure" and the village was once owned by the monks of Battle Abbey. The church, built of flint, is undedicated and is large and airy for such a small village. A little further along the lane the delightful Rose Cottage is a charming B&B, in case you'd like a night's stay.



After *Rose Cottage* and more thatches, just after *Greywether's*, opposite no. 53, at a very small (possibly hidden) fingerpost, turn **left** on a *footpath. [* May 2023: because of horses roaming free in the field, you may have to duck under, or unhook (and replace!), a wire hung across the entrance.]

- 4 Your path takes you through a wooden swing-gate and along the right-hand side of a meadow. At the other side there are two swing-gates either side of a 2-plank bridge. Continue along the left-hand side of the next meadow. In the corner your path bends right down the meadowside, through a gap and up the right-hand side of the next meadow. At the top, go over a stile onto a tarmac lane. Turn **left** on the lane and in 30m fork **right** on a concrete drive marked *Firle Estate*. *For lunch or refreshments at the Barley Mow, you can turn right here on a permissive path, about 300m. Return the same way.*



- 5 After *Mill Hill Cottage* with its ceramic workshop, continue on the grass passing *Tilton Wood* on your left. Your path goes through a wooden gate and continues ahead, cutting the left-hand corner of the pasture. Go through a wooden gate into the next pasture and continue straight across. At the other side is another wooden gate next to the garden of *Tilton Farm*. Continue similarly along the next pasture following wires. At the other side, after a small metal gate, cross a drive and keep ahead on a concrete drive leading to *Charleston House and Garden*.

Charleston was the country home and meeting place of various writers, painters and intellectuals of the Bloomsbury group. Principal occupants were Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell who painted the interior and put together a collection of paintings, furniture etc. that can be seen by visitors today. Other visitors were E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry and Virginia and Leonard Woolf who also had a summer house nearby (Monk's House in Rodmell – see the "Lewes and Rodmell" walk in this series). The walled garden is as captivating as the house. Charleston holds an annual festival with visiting artists and writers such as Grayson Perry and Stephen Poliakoff. The house



WC

and gardens are open to the public from April to October each year, from midday or 1pm. There is also a gallery, a new restaurant, a loo and a shop.

- 6 After the house, continue straight ahead through a metal gate, go across a yard by a cowshed and straight on through another metal gate. (The small metal gate may be padlocked, in which case you need to unchain the larger metal gates: it is quite ok.) Continue onwards along the left-hand side of a rather rough meadow, which could be muddy in winter, heading for a small tower you can see ahead on the hill. *This is Firle Tower, built in 1819 as a game-keeper's cottage and lookout.* At the far end, at a post with a blue arrow, veer left and right by a gate into the next rough meadow. Keep to the right-hand side and, in the next meadow, keep slightly left to cross the centre to a small wooden gate. The well-named Round Hill and Firle Beacon loom up on your left. After the gate, cross a crop field on a good but narrow path. After a gap in the hedge, continue similarly across the next field, with the Tower now on your right. At the other side, cross a track by a *Firle Estate* sign and continue through a belt of trees. As you emerge, you have one of the best views anywhere in the county.



Ahead of you is Firle Place, its parkland and village, beautifully framed by hills. To the right, under the hill, is Glynde where you can just glimpse the Opera House. A copper beech and a cedar, as though thoughtfully positioned, make a perfect composition.

- 7 Turn **right** along the side of the field and, in 30m, veer **left** on a path across the centre. Your path goes through a gap beside a wall, then on a narrow path leading to a small metal gate. You come out onto a tarmac lane, Heighton Street, by a red-brick house in East Firle. Cross straight over to a small wooden gate leading into the parkland of Firle Place. You and the many sheep share a view of the House and, as you proceed, the wider north façade will show itself. Your direction is guided by five marker posts, indicating a more-or-less straight line. After the third post and some horse jumps, you gradually meet a horse track on your right. The track crosses a drive. *If Firle Place is open and you wish to visit (see below), you could turn left on the drive and re-join the walk later in the village.* The drive curves left into trees and a small wooden gate leads onto a wide track between brick walls. You pass cottages and their gardens of hollyhocks before arriving at the village centre beside the Firle Stores, a delightful little shop that sets the tone for this historic village of (West) Firle.

The name "Firle" goes back to Anglo-Saxon and ultimately to Old High German "ferih-eih" a "place of oaks". After 1066, the village was given to William the Conqueror's half-brother Mortain (all his brothers were "half", of course) who also acquired West Dean (see the "Seven Sisters" walk). It then passed to the ancient de Livet (or Levett) family. But it is the Gage family, builders of the original Firle Place in the late 1400s, and holders of every kind of high office, who are forever linked with the village. The name "Gage" entered the language as "greengage" a fruit that Sir Thomas Gage brought to England. The 8th Viscount still lives here. Firle Place as seen today has a Georgian exterior in the French chateau style. The House is normally open to the public in the afternoons from June to mid-September, except Fri and Sat (when it prospers on weddings and other "dos"). There is a tearoom.

Firle's church can be accessed by turning left and left again down a narrow path. It dates from the 1200s but the most notable item is the modern large stained glass window by John Piper depicting William Blake's Tree of Life. The churchyard contains the graves of Duncan Grant, Vanessa and Angelica Bell.

Turn **right** on the lane, quickly reaching the *Ram Inn*.

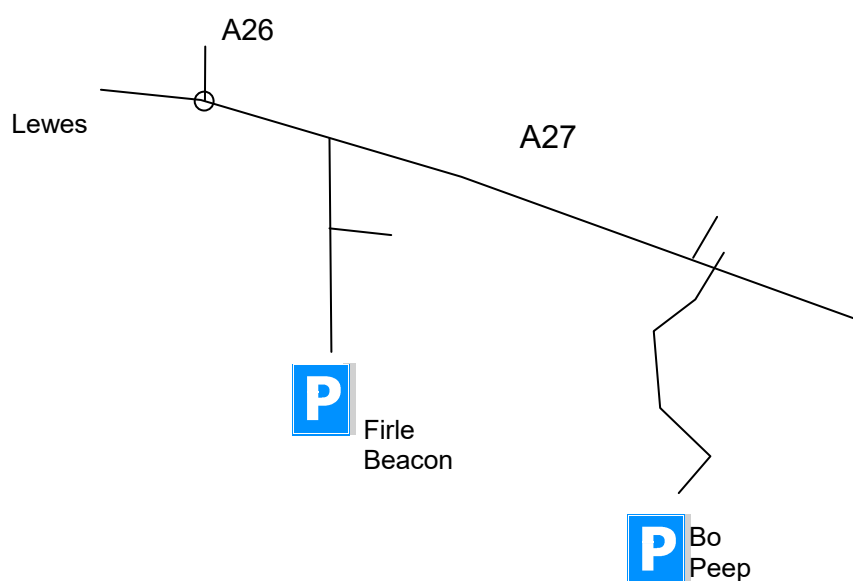


The 500-year-old “Ram” has an unpretentious look of a farm-hand’s watering hole with its flint shed and wooden tables. That is its charm, as witness the number of visitors. As the local village pub, it also sources its meat from Place Farm, its game birds from the Firle Estate, its fish from Shoreham and its bread from Glynde. They boast that the prawns are brought by the bucket load by the vicar from his fishing expeditions. The garden in the back was featured in Sunday Times series (June 2014) of best pub gardens. Beers rotate and one day you might have a choice of the nice golden Hopa Cabana, Rosie’s Pig cider and Harvey’s Southdown. Best of all, the “Ram” is open all day every day. The inn is also a B&B in case you can’t stagger home.

- 8 After your break, take a track to the **right** of the pub, signposted *cricket field*. (By the way, Firle Cricket Club dates from 1758; Sir William Gage (1695-1744) was a keen cricketer.) At an open space near the cricket field, bear **left** across the grass to a wooden swing-gate leading into a heathland used to graze ponies and sheep. Take a diagonal path past an oak tree, aiming for another wooden swing-gate in the far dark corner under trees. Follow the edge to a white gate and, on reaching it, use the smaller white gate to come out on a tarmac drive leading to a road junction.
- 9 Cross straight over, veering a fraction left, onto a dirt track marked as a private road. In nearly 300m, just before a barn, turn **left** as indicated by a yellow arrow and turn **right** around the barn. Immediately keep **left** so that you are walking along the right-hand side of a field. The path goes across the centre, giving you great views of hills on each side. At the far side, your path descends through undergrowth and a small wooden gate. Keep ahead along the short left-hand edge of a meadow, go through a metal gate and straight across the next pasture. In the far left corner go over a stile and continue on a track. In 20m resume on a concrete track which quickly upgrades to tarmac. You come out to a tarmac lane opposite a group of cottages of Littledene. Turn **left** on the lane heading for the hills.
- 10 The climb begins, although very gently at first. The tarmac becomes a dirt track, taking through a wooden gate beside a large metal one. Your track curves right towards the transmitters on Beddingham Hill. **If the long slow climb is taxing, this is a good time to turn around and admire the views behind of Glynde and Saxon Down.** Just before the top, ignore a stile on the left and persevere to a 4-way fingerpost on the top. Go **left** here through a small wooden gate on the South Downs Way.
- 11 The Firle Beacon car park is nearly 1½ km distant. Down on your right is Newhaven. In 200m, you pass close to the transmitters. 400m further, there is a small wooden gate. In 600m, you finally go through another small wooden gate onto a lane. Cross the lane into the car park. If you began here, the walk is ended. **If you began in Bo Peep, return now to section 1.**

Getting there

By car: both the Firle Beacon and Bo Peep car parks are reached from the A27 road. For the majority of visitors the best route is via the M23 to the outskirts of Brighton and then east on the A27 signposted *Lewes*. Ignore the turnoff for Lewes and continue eastwards. After the roundabout junction with the A26, the dual carriageway ends. The junction for the **Firle Beacon** car park is just under 3 miles=4½ km. Turn **right** at a sign for "*Firle ½*". In 250m, at a junction, keep straight on past a cul-de-sac sign. In another 250m, where the road bends left, leave it to go straight on at a sign for *Firle Beacon*. The car park is another 2 km=1¼ miles. The junction for the **Bo Peep** car park is just over 5½ miles=9 km from the A26 roundabout. Look for the defunct (?) *Barley Mow* and a filling station by a junction on the left for *Selmeston Village*. Continue past them for 200m to a minor 4-way junction. Turn **right** here on Bopeep Lane, signed as *By-Way* and a cul-de-sac. The car park is just over 1½ miles=2½ km, immediately left before the wooden fence.



By bus/train: bus 125 runs from Lewes station to Firle Village, not Sundays.
Check the timetables.

fancy more free walks? www.fancyfreewalks.org