

3·8a Alfriston to Eastbourne (footpath)

Map panel 6 (page 64)

Distance 10½ miles (17 km)

Terrain valley walk initially, first along riverbank path then hillside paths above, including stretch through forest; thereafter along cliffs

Grade easy start, then quite a few ups and downs along valley-side paths; strenuous final stretch along cliffs with many ascents and descents

Food and drink Alfriston (choice), Litlington (pub), Exceat (restaurant/tea room), Exceat Bridge (pub), Birling Gap (café and bar), Belle Tout (snacks), Beachy Head (restaurant and bar), Eastbourne (choice)

Summary the most scenic day of the whole Way: first part along the lovely Cuckmere valley leading to the coast, with the wonderful Seven Sisters cliffs and Beachy Head making a fitting climax



- Facing the George Inn, go left along to the Market Cross where the road forks: turn right down narrow River Lane to the river itself, the Cuckmere. Turn right and then left to cross the white footbridge.
- On the far side turn right and follow the riverbank path south for about 1 mile (1.5 km).

*St Andrew's Church,
Alfriston*





Litlington, Cuckmere valley

- Just before another footbridge, bear left away from the river along a path that leads to the road through Litlington. You'll notice signs for the Vanguard Way, a long-distance trail from East Croydon to Newhaven, which shares this stretch of the SDW. For Alfriston Youth Hostel, continue to the footbridge, cross the river and head straight up (about 500 m) to Frog Firle.
- Go right along the road (Litlington Tea Gardens to the left), passing the Plough and Harrow pub.
- Turn left just before the bend, and immediately right past the village hall, up a path that climbs the hillside and goes along the edge of fields. Across the valley to your right, look for the white horse carved in the slopes of High and Over.



Friston Forest

This was once open downland grazed by sheep, but during the 1920s the then landowners (Eastbourne Water Company) granted about 2000 acres to the Forestry Commission on a long-term lease in order to create a forest that would help protect the water supply below. Most of the forest was established after the end of World War 2. Today it is a mature, mostly broadleaved forest with beech as its main species.

- After a second kissing gate, keep ahead with the hedge on your right. The path descends to Charleston Bottom and the edge of Friston Forest, where you go left around Charleston Manor, then right up a series of steps into the forest.
- At the top, continue south/south-east along the track, ignoring all crossing tracks, to a T-junction: turn right and descend to the tiny secluded village of West Dean.

When you reach the road, a short detour left takes you to the nearby church. Parts of the building date back to Saxon times, although most of the present structure is Norman. Viewed from the west, the spire looks rather like a monk's cowl, while the small windows in the tower underneath give the appearance of a face. Alfred the Great had a palace here, but nothing remains of it. At that time the village was easily accessible from the sea and shallow-draft vessels could sail right up the valley.

- Continuing from the point where you join the road, keep ahead past the phone box and climb another flight of steps – over 200 of them – back into Friston Forest.
- At the top you come to a flint wall and emerge from the trees. Cross the wall and you'll be treated to a splendid view of the Cuckmere meanders below, with the sea beyond. On the east side of the valley is the river's route to the sea today, which was cut in 1846. But this view may be quite different in the future: see the information board at the viewpoint, and the panel opposite.

Cuckmere meanders, from Exceat Hill



Cuckmere Estuary

Beautiful as it is, the present estuary landscape is not natural.

The river is constrained by earth embankments and other flood defences, now nearing the end of their useful lives. Under government guidelines, public money cannot be spent on rebuilding and enlarging the defences because no homes are at risk of flooding. However, the old Coastguard Cottages on the west side of Cuckmere Haven would be threatened if flood defences in the estuary weren't maintained. At present the Environment Agency keeps the river mouth clear of shingle each year, but its preference for a naturally functioning estuary has provoked controversy. Options are being explored by the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership, a coalition of local councils, heritage and conservation agencies committed to ensuring its sustainable long-term future.





Classic view of the Seven Sisters

- Head down the grassy hillside to Exceat and the A259. The Seven Sisters Country Park occupies the lower part of the Cuckmere Valley, and its Visitor Centre is worth a look. It's housed in an 18th century barn and opens daily, 10.30-16.30 April - October and weekends only November-March, 11.00-16.00. Displays and exhibitions explain the history, geology and wildlife of the Park: see also www.sevensisters.org.uk.

For the classic view (above) of the Seven Sisters you need to make a detour to the west side of Cuckmere Haven, and retrace your steps afterwards (3 miles/5 km round trip). Turn right down the road to the Golden Galleon on the far side of the bridge. Head south to the sea (choice of two paths, one along the riverbank) and climb up past the cottages a short way until you can see the cliffs in all their glory. Note that the river can be forded with due care only at low tide. Swimming from the beach on either side of the river is best when the tide is well in, but keep well away from the river mouth, where the current can be dangerously strong.

- Cross the busy road, go through a gate and bear left as signed for the SDW (leaving the concrete track below to the day-trippers). The path climbs gently up the grassy slopes of Exceat Hill on the east side of the valley, with increasingly fine views below of the Cuckmere meanders. Soon you keep right at a fork, as signed.

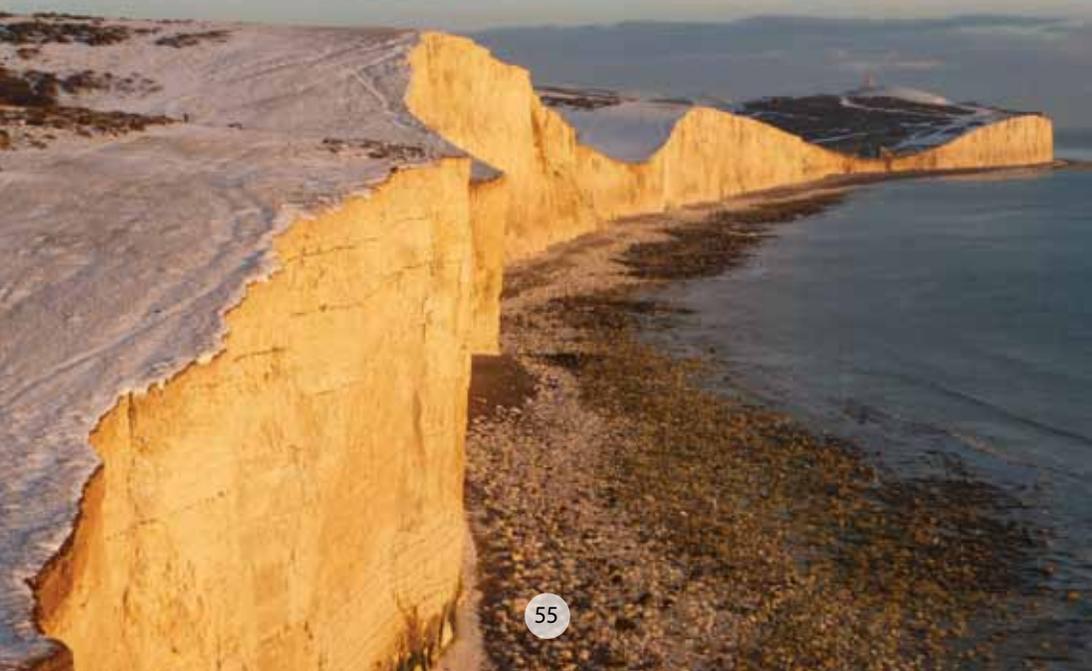


Swans and cygnets on the Cuckmere

- At the next grassy fork, the SDW keeps straight on to a gate. If instead you bear left uphill a short way, you'll reach a stone marking the spot where Exceat church once stood. The medieval village and church of Exceat did not survive beyond the 15th century – the Black Death helped to wipe out the population, as did raids by the French. Carry on down from here to the above-mentioned gate.
- Descend the grassy hillside (the path is faint but there are marker posts) back to the valley floor and a concrete track junction. Cross to a gate signed 'Seven Sisters Cliffs', then bear left at the SDW fingerpost.
- Head up the grassy slope (fence on your right) towards the cliff edge and the top of the first Sister, Haven Brow. Here are super views south-west over Cuckmere Haven, with Seaford Head beyond, and Belle Tout visible to the south-east: see page 56.
- The route is very straightforward from here: simply follow the roller coaster cliffs for about 5 miles/8 km all the way to Beachy Head. First you traverse the rest of deservedly famous Seven Sisters – although if you count carefully you'll find there are eight! Beware of the cliff edge throughout: it's unstable and rock falls can occur.
- You pass a couple of memorials on route, and eventually go down a track past a few houses and the Boat House B&B to Birling Gap. It has a National Trust bar and café and car park, and is about halfway to Beachy Head. This stretch of coastline is steadily eroding, year on year, and from time to time cottages on the far side of the car park have had to be demolished to avoid their collapse into the sea.



East over the Seven Sisters in winter



- Head on up to Belle Tout, a lighthouse built in 1832 and decommissioned in 1902, when the new lighthouse at the foot of Beachy Head came into service. After many changes of ownership and major renovation in 2008-10, it now functions as an upmarket B&B: www.belletout.co.uk.

- In 1999, to combat continuing coastal erosion, the lighthouse was moved back from the cliff edge by 17 m, and later a new access road was built by the present owners.
- The SDW keeps to the landward side of Belle Tout. As you descend the other side, towards a bend in the road, Beachy Head's famous red and white striped lighthouse comes into view: see photograph below.



Belle Tout

- Another ascent follows with a further descent and then the final climb up to Beachy Head itself, at 164 m (538 ft) the highest chalk sea cliff in Britain. The name is a corruption of the French *beauchef* meaning beautiful headland. Crosses along the cliff edge testify to its unfortunate popularity as a suicide location.
- The octagonal brick shelter on the cliff top was once part of a Lloyd's Signal Station. A bar/restaurant and Countryside Centre lie ahead to the left on the other side of the road. The Centre is open daily April to October (in March at weekends only). Like most of this coastal stretch, this is open access land so you can wander at will.

East towards Beachy Head lighthouse



- Staying on the cliff top you'll reach a tarmac path. Although the official route runs slightly below, and crosses the tarmac path twice, it's easier just to follow the tarmac. After a short distance, leave the path as signed and continue along a fairly narrow path, with Eastbourne now in view below.
- This path – quite muddy when it's been wet – goes through scrub before emerging onto grass once more. You look down on Whitebread Hole and its playing field.
- Bearing right, a final descent down the grassy slopes brings you to Duke's Drive – the official end of the South Downs Way. Two information boards are here, one on the SDW, the other the Wealdway. The no 3 bus stops just down the road on the left and takes you to Eastbourne station.
- To walk to the station instead (1.5 m/2.5 km), head down the road past St Bede's School and soon bear right down a tarmac drive signed for Holywell and the Promenade. Continue along the promenade passing a Martello tower over to your left – one of a chain built along English coasts to guard against a Napoleonic invasion. After the bandstand, but before the pier, look for a surfaced path sloping up to your left with a signpost at the top. This points to the town centre and railway station: cross the road and go along Terminus Road to the station.

Eastbourne developed in Victorian times as a prime seaside resort, which it still is today, its seafront lined with hotels and guesthouses. The long shingle beach is often packed with bodies in the summer, whilst the promenade is used daily, year-round, providing a good leg-stretch whatever the weather. The town's sheltered position behind Beachy Head helps contribute to its sunshine record. Eastbourne promotes itself as 'The Sunshine Coast' and can bask in the sun while elsewhere is under cloud.

Eastbourne seafront and pier

