

Dallington Forest Walk No. 1

Ancient Forest Ghyll, Hollow Ways and the PoW Tree

3.2 km (2 mi)
[includes 1.5 km round-trip from/to car-parking]

Level of difficulty for people in normal health: -

- Under 50 yrs = Easy; you'll hardly notice it
- 50 - 60 yrs = Good exercise; it'll raise your heart rate
- 60 - 70 yrs = Taxing; you'll know you've done it
- Over 70 yrs = Quite challenging



Introduction On this walk you will experience one of Dallington Forest's ancient woodland ghylls full of majestic veteran Beech trees, prehistoric rippled sandstone beds and the Prisoner of War tree, and also hollow ways formed by the feet of many millennia of travellers. In Spring the ancient woodland ghyll is full of the sight and scent of stunningly beautiful bluebells and ransoms (wild garlic).

The **starting and finishing point** is the end of the metalled surface of Bakers Lane, Dallington. This is also the junction of three footpaths and a bridleway.

Unfortunately, there is no car park here or in Dallington Forest and the nearest public parking is the lay-by on the B2096 at Wood Corner (Grid Ref. TQ 66454 19401, Lat/Long 50°57'00.1"N 0°22'05.9"E).

Park there, cross over the road and walk West (towards Heathfield) past the Post Office until you come to the entrance to Bakers Lane on your right. The starting and finishing point is some 600 m further along Bakers Lane.

To follow the walk please refer to the map and the numbered points of interest in the table below.

If you prefer to do the walk in the opposite direction, start with the highest numbered point of interest and work backwards!

Be Safe Before starting there are some things you should know to stay safe on this walk: -

- Mobile phone signals are unreliable in some parts of the forest
- The paths can be muddy and slippery (when wet)
- There are steep ascents/descents
- A stream is crossed at a ford which, in winter, can be fast-flowing and hazardous
- It is necessary to climb over fallen trees
- Protect yourself from ticks; from April through October wear long trousers and check yourself and your dog after the walk

Respect for the forest and landowners

Some parts of the walk take place on public footpaths and bridleways while others are on Forestry Commission land which I am given to believe is 'open access' for walkers.

Horses and cycles are only permitted on the bridleways, so the route described here is intended for walkers only.

It's important to remember that whenever we walk in the forest, we may cause some damage, unintentionally or otherwise. So let's balance the enjoyment and education we get from the forest and minimise the negative effects of our visit as much as possible by following the Countryside Code (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code>) and, in particular:

- Please be sensitive to the rights and sensibilities of people who live and work on the route of the walk *Some such people enjoy having unexpected and appreciative visitors, others wish to pretend that they don't exist while others actively resent what they perceive as intrusion*
- Please pick up and take home your dog's poo if within 14 days of worming or flea treatments. *The poisons in the poo and on the fur kill indiscriminately the insects and invertebrates that are an essential part of the ancient woodland ecosystem and are especially dangerous if they get into the watercourses.*
- Please keep to paths and, in Spring, avoid walking on the bluebells *Foot pressure kills the bluebell bulbs during the growing season*
- Please resist picking wild flowers or other plants – leave them there for others to enjoy *Part of Dallington Forest is a SSSI making it illegal to damage plants or habitat.
Even outside the SSSI areas it's illegal to pick species*

*protected under the 1981
Wildlife and Countryside Act.*

*Uprooting any wild plant is
strictly illegal under the 1981
Wildlife and Countryside Act.*

Points of interest (refer to map above)...

<p>1</p>	<p>From the end of the metalled section of Bakers Lane the footpath goes North-west down a track for a few metres (don't follow the other footpath down the concrete track).</p> <p>It then bears left at an easily overlooked yellow footpath sign on a short post.</p> <p>The footpath takes you downhill across ground that, in Spring, is carpeted in bluebells. Then under the high-voltage electricity lines and through once-coppiced woodland to Highlands Farmhouse.</p>
<p>2</p>	<p>Here the path crosses a track and drops down through the garden of Highlands Farmhouse to the ghyll stream. The owner of the farmhouse has made some of the footpath hardstanding and it's only fair that this thoughtfulness is repaid by keeping to the designated path and avoiding damage to the garden.</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>A small footbridge crosses the stream that in the winter months can be a raging torrent, threatening to sweep away the bridge.</p> <p>Follow the yellow markers as the footpath climbs steeply out of the ghyll through a Forestry Commission pine plantation.</p> <p>Don't be misled by the pink or other coloured paint marks on the pine trees; they indicate trees for felling. The footpath goes more or less in a leftward arc (see map) towards point 4.</p> <p>This part of the forest is becoming infested with <i>Rhododendron ponticum</i>, an invasive plant that damages ecosystems.</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>The public footpath drops down rough steps into what is usually a very muddy sunken lane. Here the footpath turns</p>

	North-east uphill but, instead, we leave the public footpath and go in the opposite direction, downhill and South-west.
5	As the footpath straightens out, a pine plantation is on your right but the ghyll on your left is the start of a tract of ancient semi-natural woodland . Old, big Beech trees line the sides of the steep ghyll.
6	Easily missed are two paths to the West-south-west (left) through bracken, either one of which you need to take. The first can be found by simply continuing the straight line of the path, the second you will come across a few metres later. Take one of these and follow the trodden path down into the ancient woodland ghyll.
7	<p>Cutting through the sandstone, the stream has created a waterfall providing a welcome cool environment on a hot summer's day.</p> <p>Laid across the stream over the waterfall is an old Beech tree whose roots were unable to keep it upright during high winds in May 2018. Sadly, it also took down a young Oak tree as it fell.</p> <p>The underneath of the waterfall is stained a rusty red colour due to the iron ore in the ground. The red colour is, indeed, rust; iron oxide. It's a reminder of why the High Weald was important for ironworking during Roman times and the 17th and 18th centuries.</p> <p>If you look carefully below the waterfall at the side of the stream just below your feet you may see the exposed fossilised Sandstone Ripple Beds.</p> <p>Ripple marks are found in sandy or muddy beds in many environments e.g. tidal flats, beaches, lakes, seas and rivers where the water depth can vary from very shallow down to a depth of 200 m.</p> <p>These fossilised beds were laid-down in the early Cretaceous, 146 to 100 Million years ago. Back then, this was much closer to the equator and the ocean levels were much higher. In fact, most of the landmass we are familiar with was underwater.</p>

	<p>One of the hallmarks of the Cretaceous Period was the development and radiation of the flowering plants and the insects that were needed to pollinate them – including the ancestors of today’s honeybees.</p> <p>During the Cretaceous Period more ancient birds took flight, joining the pterosaurs in the air. Large herds of herbivorous dinosaurs such as Iguanodon thrived during the Cretaceous (you can see Iguanodon footprints at Bexhill Museum).</p> <p>Theropods, including <i>Tyrannosaurus rex</i>, continued as apex predators until the major extinction event marking the end of the Cretaceous when a comet struck our planet just off the Northern coast of South America.</p> <p>Might we find Iguanodon or even T.Rex footprints here as more of the ripple beds are exposed over time?</p>
<p>8</p>	<p>Here and further down the ghyll, if you look carefully at the opposite side, you might spot a number of horizontal flattened areas. These are the remains of ‘charcoal hearths’.</p> <p>In the 17th and 18th centuries much of this forest was given over to Hornbeam coppice used for charcoal-making to feed the fires needed for heating iron at Glaziers Forge – the subject of another walk.</p> <p>To convert trees into charcoal they used flat areas cut into a slope near water (needed to control the fires and for use in emergency if the fire got out of hand!).</p> <p>Cut wood was brought down and stacked in an earth-covered ‘clamp’. A fire was lit and the supply of air was controlled to make the fire smoulder rather than burn and so cook the wood into charcoal.</p> <p>Once the process was complete the clamp was broken-down, the charcoal removed and the site cleared for the next burn.</p>
<p>9</p>	<p>The ghyll has a population of veteran beech trees that show no obvious signs of pollarding (unlike most other veteran and ancient beeches in the main part of the forest – the subject of other walks).</p>

	<p>There are also Oaks and an understory of Holly and other shrubs. In Spring, Bluebells and Ransoms (wild garlic) in this woodland ghyll are a really spectacular sight and smell.</p>
<p>10</p>	<p>We are now deep into this ‘Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodland’. This Ghyll has been shown as uninterrupted woodland on maps since at least 1600 (artificial planting was uncommon before this point in time).</p> <p>Ancient woods are our richest land-based habitat for wildlife. They are home to more threatened species than any other, and some may even be remnants of the original wildwood of the UK after the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago. Yet today, ancient woodland covers only around 2% of the UK’s land area.</p> <p>Because they have matured and changed slowly over such long timescales, ancient woods have unique and special features. Their soils remain relatively undisturbed by human activities, keeping layers laid down over centuries of falling leaves and providing a home for hidden communities of fungi, invertebrates and dormant seeds.</p> <p>A closely-knit network of plants and animals, some of which are rare and vulnerable, also depend on the stable conditions ancient woodland provides.</p> <p>Bluebells are one of the ‘indicator species’ of ancient woodland, as are the now very rare Wild Service (Sorbus torminalis) or ‘Chequers’ trees – one of which exists somewhere close by.</p> <p>These much-treasured woodlands are also living history books, with features such as medieval boundary banks, charcoal hearths, and old coppice stools - clues that tell us how woodland was used and relied upon in centuries past.</p>
<p>11</p>	<p>Just before joining the bridleway you will have to climb over or walk around a ‘Phoenix tree’.</p> <p>This is a tree that winds have pushed over, pulling part of its root system out of the ground. But, importantly, part of the root system is still in the ground and is able to continue extracting water and minerals from the ground for the tree’s benefit.</p>

	<p>Under these conditions, branches that were previously horizontal find themselves pointing up and start to behave like the old 'leader' of the tree (once at the top of the tree but now unfortunately in a horizontal orientation).</p> <p>That is, as long as someone doesn't saw up the tree and remove it in a misguided effort to 'tidy up'!</p> <p>Over many years, roots can be formed on the under surface of the trunk where it contacts the ground, the leaders establish themselves as viable trees, and then the trunk in between them rots away leaving new clones of the original tree at some distance from the old tree's location.</p> <p>Where the Tree Warden grew up in the Forewood in Crowhurst old foresters would call this 'trees walking'. Trees 'walk' incredibly slowly!</p>
<p>12</p>	<p>You are now in one of the many 'Hollow Ways' that run through the landscape. Take a while to walk up the slope to the top before turning round and coming back down.</p> <p>This hollow way was probably formed from the Neolithic period onwards by farmers from the Downs driving their pigs into this area's woods in late summer and autumn to fatten them on acorns and beech mast, an activity known as pannage.</p> <p>The track has been further worn through the Wealden clay and sandstone by heavy traffic servicing the 17th/18th century iron industry at Glaziers Forge (the subject of another walk). There are remnants of earlier hollow ways still to be seen alongside this one – probably abandoned when one track got too muddy and a new route had to be found.</p> <p>By the size of it, it may have been one of the tracks used to bring pig (unprocessed) iron from Robertsbridge Furnace to the Glaziers Forge and to bring the forged iron back out to its next destination.</p> <p>This hollow way is edged by veteran hedgerow remnants, now grown into trees. Previously 'laid' as young trees they were cut and re-laid many times before being abandoned some 100 years ago and becoming overgrown into the big trees you see</p>

	<p>today. This means that the stools, the bases of these trees, are almost certainly very old indeed.</p>
<p>13</p>	<p>Back where you joined the bridleway, look over the other side and up you will see the sad remains of the 'PoW Tree' that collapsed during a winter storm in 2019.</p> <p>It was a Veteran Beech and on its trunk is inscribed: -</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TB KÖLN 1946 POW</p> <p>Presumably by a German prisoner of war from Cologne.</p> <p>German Prisoner of War Working Camp GPWW 145 was situated at Normanhurst Court, Battle, less than 10 miles away, and continued to hold prisoners until 1948.</p> <p>Perhaps a working party of PoWs took a lunch break under the spreading boughs of this beautiful tree and one of the men shinned up the tree to leave a message for posterity. Who was he?</p> <p>If you are fit, why not scramble up the slope and see the carving for yourself? It's on the opposite side of the trunk to the bridleway.</p>
<p>14</p>	<p>Immediately on continuing West you'll see evidence of the Great Storm of 1987.</p> <p>If you search carefully, you'll find the sawn stump of a tree that fell across the bridleway and which was engraved by a workman's chainsaw with an arrow and the letters 'BW' for Bridleway.</p> <p>On your right are the remains of trees that were blown down and are still in the vitally important process of being turned into food and shelter for insects, plants and fungi.</p> <p>The substantial size still remaining of these tree trunks after more than 30 years shows how long this process of decay and recycling takes.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">15</p>	<p>The bridleway crosses the stream at a ford where you can see beds of sandstone again, but no ripple beds here I'm afraid – at least none that have been exposed yet.</p> <p>In winter when the stream is in spate after heavy rain the crossing here can be difficult, if not hazardous. Good wellies/walking boots, good jumping legs and a stout walking stick or staff are advised.</p> <p>At the ford, stop and think about how many people and animals have crossed the stream here over the millennia since the Stone Age!</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">16</p>	<p>Go through the upright anti-quad-bike posts as you reach the large track and turn South-east (sharp left).</p> <p>Take the bridleway through another set of anti-quad-bike posts and follow this track up the hill between the fields.</p> <p>Some years ago, ESCC Rights of Way Dept added sleepers to try and stabilise this bridleway but lack of maintenance and heavy rains have done a considerable amount of damage to the surface. The surface is very rutted and care is needed in placing your feet.</p> <p>On the South-west (right hand) side as you walk up the lane, you'll see the remains of a grown-out hedgerow that was once (probably 100 years ago) traditionally-managed by regular laying.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">17</p>	<p>As the track steepens you enter another hollow way.</p> <p>Look out for trees that were once part of laid hedges, there are some very old and venerable examples if you know what you're looking for.</p> <p>The track here is very steep and the surface very rutted. Take care in placing your feet.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">18</p>	<p>On the South (right hand) side of the lane you can see the remains of a track and overgrown laid hedgerows going away from you up the slope.</p>

	<p>This may have served as access to a long-disappeared ancient farmstead, possibly Iron-Age, that once existed on what is now grazing pasture for horses.</p>
End/ Start	<p>You're now back at the starting point at the end of Bakers Lane.</p> <p>Please let the Tree Champion (Warden) know what you think of this guide and how it could be made even better.</p> <p>treewarden@dallington.org.uk</p>