

Dallington Forest Walk No. 1

Ancient Forest Ghyll, Hollow Ways and the PoW Tree

1.7 km (1 mi) [plus 1.5 km round-trip from/to car-parking]

Introduction This walk was chosen for you to 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.

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. 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 to be aware of to stay safe on this walk: -

- Mobile phone signal is unreliable in some parts of the forest
- Muddy and slippery paths (when wet)
- Steep ascents/descents
- Crossing a stream at a ford (in winter it can be full, fast-flowing and hazardous)
- Climbing over fallen trees

- Ticks; from April through October wear long trousers and check yourself and your dog after the walk

Respect

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.

Wherever we're walking it is important to respect the forest, its plants and its animals.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please keep to paths and, in Spring, avoid walking on the bluebells | <p><i>Foot pressure kills the bluebell bulbs during the growing season</i></p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please resist picking wild flowers or other plants – leave them there for others to enjoy | <p><i>Much of Dallington Forest is a SSSI making it illegal to damage plants or habitat.</i></p> <p><i>Even outside the SSSI areas it's illegal to pick species protected under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act.</i></p> <p><i>Uprooting any wild plant is strictly illegal under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act.</i></p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please pick up and take home your dog's poo if within 14 days of worming or flea treatments. | <p><i>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.</i></p> |

- Please don't leave any litter. *You wouldn't leave any, would you?*

It's important to realise that whenever we go for a walk we may still cause some damage, unintentionally or otherwise, to the forest. So, let's balance the enjoyment and education we get from the forest by minimising the negative effects of our visit as much as possible.

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

1	From the end of the metalled section of Bakers Lane the footpath bears North-west from a track across ground that, in Spring, is carpeted in bluebells. It takes you under the high-voltage electricity lines downhill through woodland to Highland Farmhouse.
2	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 kindness is repaid by keeping to the designated path and avoiding damage to the garden.
3	<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>The footpath path climbs steeply out of the ghyll through a Forestry Commission pine plantation. This part of the forest is becoming infested with <i>Rhododendron ponticum</i>, an invasive plant that damages ecosystems.</p>
4	The public footpath drops down rough steps into what is usually a very muddy sunken lane. Here the footpath turns North-east uphill but, instead, we are leaving the public footpath and going 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 welcoming 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, from rust, ferrous 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 Sandstone Ripple Beds.</p> <p>These beds were laid-down in the early Cretaceous, 146 Mya to 100 Mya. Back then, this was much closer to the equator and the ocean levels were much higher; most of the landmass we are familiar with was underwater.</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>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 (do go and see the Iguanodon foot prints at Bexhill Museum, a favourite of children of all ages).</p> <p>Theropods, including <i>Tyrannosaurus rex</i>, continued as apex predators until the major extinction event at the end of the Cretaceous when a comet struck the planet just off the Northern coast of South America.</p>
8	<p>The ghyll has a population of veteran beech trees that show no clear signs of pollarding (unlike 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 in this woodland ghyll are a really spectacular sight and smell.</p>
9	<p>If you look carefully at the opposite side of the ghyll 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 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>10</p>	<p>We are now deep into this piece of Ancient Woodland.</p> <p>Designated as ‘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 (now very rare) Wild Service 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</p>

	<p>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 time, 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. Where I grew up in the Forewood in Crowhurst old foresters would call this 'trees walking' (and 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 in the Neolithic period onwards by farmers from the Downs driving their pigs into the areas' 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 during 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 it – 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 iron from Robertsbridge Furnace to the Glaziers Forge and to bring the forged iron back out to its next destination.</p> <p>The forest is scored with many other hollow ways, mostly ending at the forge. These tracks are much narrower and were</p>

	<p>most likely formed in the dragging of timber to charcoal hearths and then charcoal to fires at the forge.</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 and becoming overgrown into the big trees you see today. This means that the stools, the bases of these trees, are almost certainly very old indeed.</p>
<p>13</p>	<p>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>GPWW 145 German Prisoner of War Working Camp was situated at Normanhurst Court, Battle, less than 10 miles away, and continued to hold prisoners until 1948.</p> <p>I like to imagine a working party of PoWs taking a lunch break under the spreading boughs of this beautiful tree and one of the men shinning up the tree to leave a message for posterity. I wonder who he was?</p> <p>If you are fit, why not scramble up the slope and see the carving for yourself? It's on the side of the trunk away from the bridleway.</p>
<p>14</p>	<p>Immediately on continuing West you'll see evidence of the Great Storm of 1987.</p> <p>On your right are the remains of trees that were blown down and are still the vitally important process of being turned into food and shelter for insects, plants and fungi. The substantial</p>

	<p>size remaining of the tree trunks shows how long this process of decay and recycling takes.</p> <p>If you look 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>
15	<p>The bridleway crosses the stream at a ford where you can see beds of sandstone again, but no ripple bed here I'm afraid – at least none that has 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>I wonder how many people and animals crossed the stream here over the millennia?</p>
16	<p>Turn South-east (left) when you reach the large track and take the bridleway through the upright anti-quad-bike posts and follow it up the hill between the fields.</p> <p>On the South-east (right hand) side as you start 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>
17	<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 lots of them if you know what you're looking for.</p> <p>Some years ago, ESCC Rights of Way Dept added sleepers to try and stabilise the bridleway but lack of maintenance and heavy rains have done a considerable amount of damage to the surface. Care is advised.</p>
18	<p>On the South (right hand) side of the lane you can see the remains of a track going up the slope.</p>

	This may have served a long-disappeared ancient farmstead that once existed on what is now grazing pasture for horses.
End/ Start	You're now back at the starting point at the end of Bakers Lane.

Dallington Forest Walk #01

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and the PoW Tree, 1.7 km (1 mi)

