



Mill Hill

The Trail Guide starts from the top of Poplicans Road and follows a clockwise direction.

Mill Hill to Brockles

From the driveway at the top of Poplicans Road (1) the path immediately enters the woodland. After approximately 150 metres (165 yards) cross over the railway bridge on the right and immediately bear left and left again at the fork and follow the path RS198 running parallel with the London Victoria railway line, eventually arriving at Brockles Field.

The seemingly ancient path through Mill Hill Wood wanders past an area of chalk grassland then through the ancient woodland of hazel, beech, ash, silver birch and yew, running parallel along the high ridge above Bush Road on one side and the wooded slopes to Nether Great Bottoms on the other, also known as Southern Valley.

A vista clearing about half way along, (2) provides a glimpse of Upper Bush and Bush Valley.

Welcome to Brockles and the Focal Point – from enchanting woodland to stunning panorama

Brockles is a 57 acre chalk grassland field, last cultivated around 1995. It has since self-regenerated to a wonderful native wildflower, orchid-rich chalk grassland with ground-nesting birds.

The field is periodically grazed with cattle, therefore dogs must be kept under strict control.

Continue straight on, crossing footpath RS161, to the other side of the field and visit a Focal Point on the Trail (3).

See the wildlife carvings on the log seat created by sculptor Steve Portchmouth. Rest-a-while and take in the panorama of one of the finest examples of the rolling North Downs, with wooded hilltops and farmed slopes and valleys. Looking from left to right beyond the wooded horizon lies Maidstone, Upper Halling, and Wrotham. Coming closer from left to right is Cuxton, Dean Valley, Bush Valley, and Luddesdown rising far right to Cobham.

In the centre foreground (4) nestles the picturesque hamlet of Upper and Lower Bush.

In the reign of King John the hamlets were the Manor of Beresh or Beresse, which then changed to Birch in 1800 and to the present day Bush.



Wildlife bench at the Focal Point

Kitchen Field to Town Road

Leaving the Focal Point return to the path RS161, or follow the tree-line and proceed North to the top of Brockles. (5) The woodland on the left stretches away towards Cobham village. In its midst lies the Darnley Mausoleum, now restored and owned by the National Trust.

From the top corner of Brockles follow RS161 across the cultivated valley of Kitchen Field. (6) This field is of national importance being home to one of the largest assemblages of rare arable wild flowers.

This is a sheltered field and appears to be a refuge for Mediterranean type flora and wildflower species that are now disappearing from the general countryside such as the colourful Corncockle.

Leaving Kitchen Field, enter the woodland and continue along RS161, rising up to meet NS183 (Town Road).

The woodland left and right forms part of Great Wood, designated as Ancient Semi-natural Woodland and SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest), comprises actively managed Sweet Chestnut coppice, Hornbeam, Birch and Hazel scrub. In the woodland left of the path, near the top, hides the ruins of the Darnley Toe Monument. (7)



Cuxton Community Heritage Trail



A circular route approximately four miles long with breathtaking views, up and down hills and valleys, through ancient woodlands and farmland.

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Skylark

Great Wood and Clay Pond Wood to Magpie Shaw

On reaching the Town Road, NS183 (8) turn right (east) to continue along the Trail, or turn left (west) to visit the Darnley Mausoleum and then retrace your steps.

Continue along the track-way (Town Road) for approximately three-quarters of a mile.

'Town Road', as referred to by the present Earl of Darnley, formed the carriage drive through Great Wood from Cobham Park to Rochester. The track-way is an alluring avenue of mature Hornbeams, occasional Oaks and Sweet Chestnut, probably planted 200 years ago along a more ancient route. Some trees have been pollarded marking boundaries such as the woodcutter's rented Lot. The track-way also forms part of Cuxton Parish Boundary with some boundary trees carved with dates when the boundary is 'perambulated' during 'Beating of the Bounds'.

At the end of the Town Road, turn right into a wide woodland ride, (9) just before the Channel Tunnel High Speed Rail Link and the land-bridge that links to Strood. (Have a peek at the Rail Link first, then double back).

The Trail can be joined here from Strood using the Bligh Way underpass and the land-bridge.

Continue down the track, between the Sweet Chestnut coppice of Clay Pond Wood to the fields at the other end. (Enjoy the Bluebells in April and collect chestnuts in November).

On reaching the field at the end of the ride, turn left and follow the field edge, with Clay Pond Wood on the left and the open fields and former farm buildings of Ranscombe on the right. Follow round and take the second path on the left (10) with some young plantation on the left and Magpie Shaw on the right.

When walking around the field edge, think of wine. King Henry III's London Court did, around 1380. Vines grew in this area and, so we are led to believe, the grapes were blended with local blackberries and fermented to produce wine fit for the King. Hops were grown at Ranscombe from around 1790 until 1958. Magpie Shaw is a small woodland compartment closely planted with Sweet Chestnut, Ash and some standards of English Oak.

Coming out of the wood at the field edge, turn left and continue down, past Quarry Shaw (11) to meet RS203 (12) and then turn right (west).

Quarry Shaw has a short footpath through it and contains two small chalk quarries, for which the origin is unknown. The mixture of broadleaf trees includes Ash and Hornbeam that are approximately 40 years old. In spring the ground is covered with a dense mat of Bluebells.

The Trail can be joined here from Elgin Gardens in Strood



Quarry Shaw

Elgin to Bedlam Stool and Pebble Lane

From Quarry Shaw follow RS203, and cross the Ranscombe Farm Road, joining part of the North Downs Way. From the road continue approximately 150 metres (165 yards) to the start of RS204 (13) that runs left (south), across a pebbly field.

The Trail can be joined here from the Ranscombe Farm Reserve car park

Along RS203 can be seen the oast house, which is part of Ranscombe Farm. There were three more oasts here but they were destroyed when a wartime flying bomb hit a tree and demolished them in 1942. The farmyard has recently been re-developed as a hamlet of residential buildings.

Proceed across the pebbly field known as Nether Prebles and follow the path RS204 down through Longhoes Wood (14) to the bottom where, before crossing the railway line and the start of Pebble Lane, take the steps on the right to enter the meadow above. (15)

Longhoes Wood is a rare type of mixed broadleaved coppice woodland because it features Sessile Oaks on chalky soils. It is also rich with deadwood habitat and wildlife. The terrain is steep with an iron age lynchet, (probably an Anglo-Saxon) field terrace and two small chalk quarries of unknown origin. The area of the woodland on the right of the path is known as Bedlam Stool.



Southern Valley Meadow

Southern Valley to Mill Hill

From the steps on the right, pass through the kissing gate into the pasture. The field is periodically grazed with cattle therefore dogs must be kept under strict control.

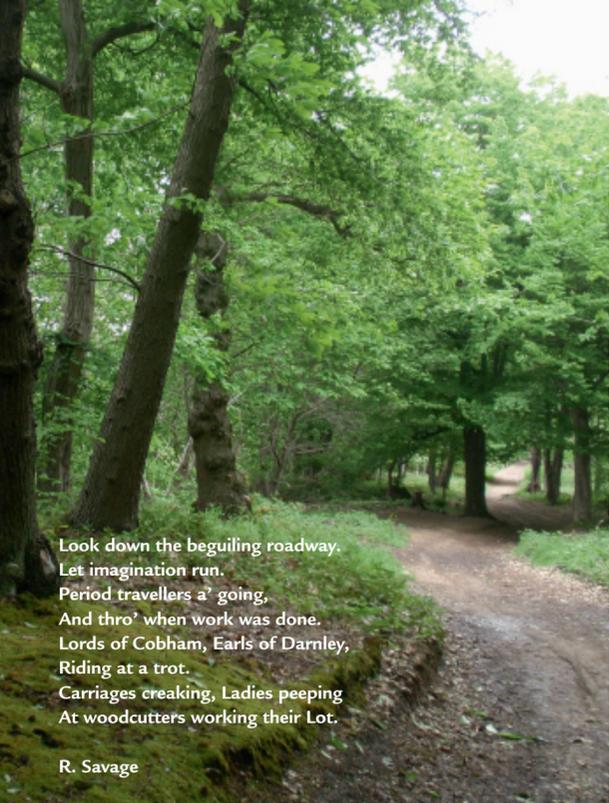
Walking down from the meadows, the delightful landscape of the Southern Valley comes into view. Leaving the meadows at the track that leads from Whiteleaves Rise, (16) turn right and proceed approximately 360 metres (400 yards) to rejoin the North Downs Way, RS203. Turn left (17) and follow RS203 back to the beginning of Mill Hill and the start of the Trail.

Evidence suggests that the landscape of wooded shaws and fields of Southern Valley have changed little since the lynchets (agricultural terraces) in the woods were created by iron-age farmers and later by Anglo-Saxons in the 5th and 6th centuries.

Conservation strips have recently been established around the field edge boundaries. The whole area is owned and managed by Plantlife International, in conjunction with a working farm tenancy.



Field edges/conservation strips in flower



Look down the beguiling roadway.
Let imagination run.
Period travellers a' going,
And thro' when work was done.
Lords of Cobham, Earls of Darnley,
Riding at a trot.
Carriages creaking, Ladies peeping
At woodcutters working their Lot.

R. Savage

Town Road

Introduction

Experience the changing seasons, the habitats and the wildlife as the Trail meanders up and down the hills and valleys with breathtaking views, through ancient woodlands and the working farmland.

Explore and discover the local heritage. Unravel the mysteries and consider the curious – where once the friendly hermit lived, the vanished mill and a monument for a chopped-off toe adds to the wonder of this particular Trail.

Take time to stand, stare, and turn around to look behind and take in the changing landscape.



Bluebells in spring

The Cuxton Community Heritage Trail provides a circular walk, approximately four miles, using existing public rights of way and permissive paths from the centre of Cuxton that links to other circular walks en-route and the footpaths from Strood.

The Trail opens up opportunities for the community of Cuxton and the surrounding area to enjoy the exceptional local countryside that is also part of Ranscombe Farm Reserve. The Reserve is one of Britain's important botanical sites of nationally rare arable wildflowers. The Nature Reserve is managed by Plantlife International and owned in partnership with Medway Council.

The Focal Point is situated on woodland owned by the West Kent Downs Countryside Trust. The Trust is endeavouring to



Winter wonders

acquire the fragmented, privately owned plots of woodland in the vicinity to conserve and provide access for the community to enjoy.

Be safe. Be prepared. The trail follows undulating, unmade tracks and paths, away from any road, and may be muddy at times. Livestock may be in some meadows so dogs must be on leads in those areas.

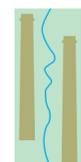
Access points from Cuxton and Strood:

Cuxton: From the top of Poplicans Road; Ranscombe Farm Reserve car park, off A228; Pebble Lane, off Pilgrims Road; and Whiteleaves Rise railway arch.

Strood: Bligh Way Underpass and Elgin Gardens.



Brockles in bloom



This trail is part of the Valley of Visions Community Trails project, encouraging people to enjoy, explore and learn about their local area and surrounding countryside. Why not explore one of the other community trails in the Medway Gap? Visit www.valleyofvisions.org.uk for further information.

For more information about Cuxton visit www.cuxtonpc.kentparishes.gov.uk

You can find out more about the wildlife and nature reserves of the area at www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk

The Cuxton Community Heritage Trail and the trail guide were created and compiled by members of Cuxton Parish Council, West Kent Downs Countryside Trust, Cuxton Countryside Group and Plantlife International.

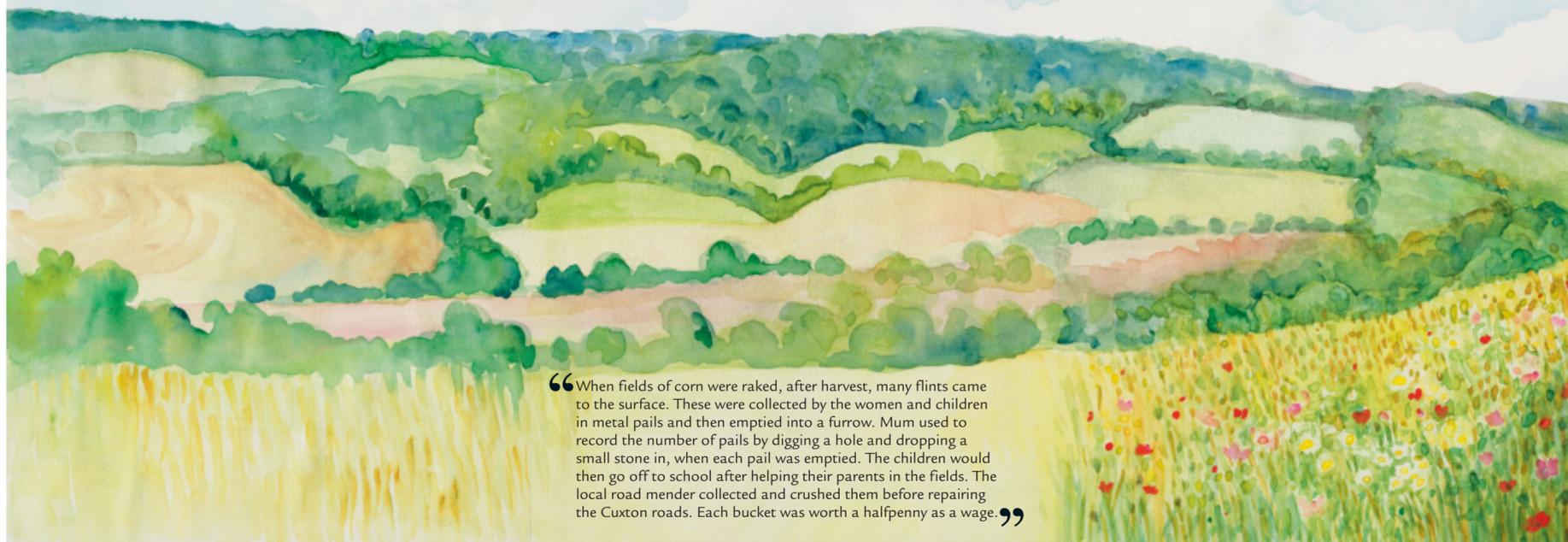
The 'Focal Point' site has been granted for public use by the West Kent Downs Countryside Trust, in arrangement with Cuxton Parish Council.



Names to ponder

Longhies. Because the woodland is shaped like a stocking?
Bedlam. Means a place, scene, or state of uproar and confusion. Or, named after the Bethlem Hospital for the mentally ill, and being a steep and twisting area to cultivate only "insane" farmers would think of cultivating it! And **Stools**, well they are tree stumps. Perhaps it was where a village fool sat on a stump to while the day away.

Brockles. Old English... brocchol meaning "land by the badgers".
Why Mill Hill? Somewhere hidden may be the site of the mill. One was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. But was it a watermill on a watercourse (now Bush Road) that could be seen below from the hill? It appears there are no known records of a mill on the hill but evidence may be there to try and discover!

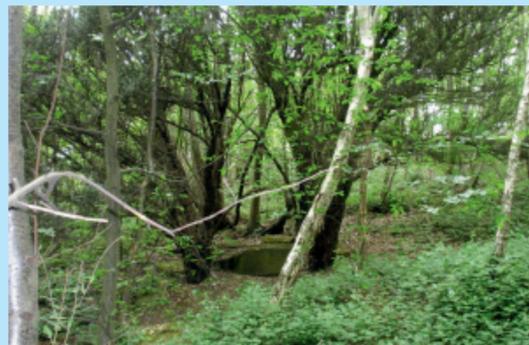


“When fields of corn were raked, after harvest, many flints came to the surface. These were collected by the women and children in metal pails and then emptied into a furrow. Mum used to record the number of pails by digging a hole and dropping a small stone in, when each pail was emptied. The children would then go off to school after helping their parents in the fields. The local road mender collected and crushed them before repairing the Cuxton roads. Each bucket was worth a halfpenny as a wage.”

Cobham Wood

The Friendly Hermit. In the mid 1970s, 110 acres of Cobham Woods that border the west side of Brockles, was sold and fragmented into privately owned plots. In these woods lived the Friendly Hermit, Andre Van Beest, who managed to survive on his plot for sixteen years, from 1972 to 1988, with only his domestic animals and the wildlife for company. The Planning Authority became aware that he was living on his land, contravening planning laws and was evicted.

The Darnley Toe Monument. In 1835 the 5th Earl of Darnley, when walking the grounds with two cousins, met a woodcutter and borrowed his axe to show his cousins how to cut a root. The axe glanced off, cut through his boot and almost severed his little toe. The Earl died of lockjaw a few days later. His widow erected a monument enclosed by railings and eight Yew trees at the scene of the accident. The ruin of the Toe Monument remains with three of the eight yew trees planted at the time of commemoration.



The Toe Monument Yews



Coppicing in Clay Pond Wood

Coppicing and pollarding

A **coppice** is a wood where the trees are grown for coppicing which means cutting the trees down to low level and allowing multi-stems to re-grow, as a continuing supply of timber. Sweet Chestnut Coppice was primarily planted for the hop poles and the fencing trades, because the timber grows quickly and straight; it is strong and relatively rot resistant. The site is ancient woodland (woodland dating back to 1600 or before in England and Wales) although the Sweet Chestnut plantations were probably planted around 200 years ago.

Pollarding is cutting off a tree stem above head height allowing branches only to grow above. This was done to protect valuable timber poles from deer and cattle or used as Boundary Markers.

Upper and Lower Bush

Up until around 1930 the hamlets of Upper and Lower Bush were thriving, baking, brewing, wheelwright and farming communities, with the parish forge at Lower Bush. Barrow Hill house at Upper Bush was built around 1390 and the forge site, at Lower Bush, has been occupied since about 1500 with the present Forge Cottage being built around 1730.

During the 1800s Upper Bush (Birch) was the main settlement within the Parish of Cuxton, with 22 dwellings. Cuxton Village having only nine dwellings. The decline was due to social and economic change as Cuxton expanded. Most of the houses at Upper Bush were demolished in 1960 by Strood Rural District Council.

Secrets of the Second World War

The first four-engined Heavy Bomber of the Second World War. Between 1936 and 1940 the famous Stirling Bomber was built by Short Brothers at Rochester. Their design and blue print office was concealed at Court Lodge Farm along Bush Road which was taken over by the RAF. After the war the site was used by plastic and paint factories. The site is now the housing estate that leads from Riggall Court.

A **decoy airfield** was sited in Bush Valley, with landing lights to attract enemy bombers away from strategic targets. Sadly it also attracted one of our planes, a crippled Halifax, which attempted to land and crashed, killing the American pilot and Canadian crew.

Operation PLUTO. (Pipe Line Under The Ocean). A section of one of the 17 pipelines was laid in secret at night through Cuxton and Dean Valley to supply fuel from the Isle of Grain to Dungeness and pumped under the English Channel to France. The first prototypes of the pipes were tested across the River Medway in May 1942.



Southern Valley Meadow