

# **Crowborough & Ashdown Forest**

# Crowborough history

The leafy town of Crowborough is situated on a hilltop and provides spectacular views out across the Ashdown Forest and towards the South Downs. At nearly 800 feet above sea level, is one of the highest points in the South East.

Crowborough is a very 'leafy' town (apart from the centre) and must be one of the most wooded towns in the country. From the recreation ground there are amazing views northwards across miles of typical Wealden landscape.

There is a street map of Crowborough provided in the cottage.

## History

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Crowborough is not a particularly historic town, it is made up of bits of three parishes. The town only really developed in the Victorian times when the railway arrived.

In Edwardian times it was regarded as a health resort due to the good quality of its air and several grand hotels that were built (now all demolished). People also often stayed in Crowborough so that they could explore the nearby Ashdown Forest.

Before the railway opened up the area the heathland was inhabited by pretty rough and ready country folk. They made their living as charcoal burners, woodmen and farm labourers. The odd smuggler and highwayman were also known to pass through the area.

The map below shows how rural the area was in 1609. In those days it was known as Crowburrow Hill. The following quote comes from a traveller Jeremiah Milles who was travelling through Sussex at the time.

*"I came to a great heath which is part of Ashdown forest, and ascending very gently for near a mile came to the summit of the hill, called Crowburrow Hill.*

*From hence there is a most glorious prospect every way, eastward over the Weald of Sussex into Kent, southward as far as the sea, westward as far as Lewes and the downs about it, and northward of the forests of Ashdown and Waterdown and into Surrey."*



The area between Crowborough and Tunbridge Wells used to be a hop growing area with most fields devoted to hop production - today only a few hop fields remain.

Not far from the cottage, on the corner of School Lane and St Johns Road, there is a rare Edward the V111 postbox. Edward abdicated after only 11 months on the throne in the 1930's so few Edward V111 postboxes were erected. After his abdication they were all supposed to be removed, but this one got overlooked.

## **A famous resident - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**

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In 1909 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle moved into Crowborough. Famous for the Sherlock Holmes novels, he built Windlesham Manor a large house in which he wrote more novels.

Conan Doyle died at Windlesham in 1930, aged 71. He was found lying in the garden, one hand clutching his heart, the other holding a single white snowdrop. Windlesham Manor is now a nursing home.

### **The inspiration for Sherlock Holmes**

Many people believe that Sherlock Holmes was based on one of Arthur Doyle's teachers from medical school in Edinburgh. The teacher Dr. Joseph Bell was described by Arthur Doyle as a:

*"Thin wiry, dark man, with a high-nosed acute face, penetrating grey eyes, angular shoulders."*

*Dr. Bell "would sit in his receiving room with a face like a Red Indian, and diagnose the people as they came in, before they even opened their mouths. He would tell them details of their past life; and hardly would he ever make a mistake."*

The doctor left an indelible impression upon the young student.



# The history of Ashdown Forest

The Ashdown Forest encompasses 7,000 acres of rare lowland heath and woodland. The stunning scenery can be explored from the many paths and there are numerous spots for picnics and relaxing. From high points, there are lovely views across the Sussex countryside.

The forest is part of the High Weald AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and is also an SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and an SPA (Special Protected Area). It is one of the few remaining 'wild' areas in the South East and has become a refuge for increasingly threatened wildlife.



Shrublands is located in the St Johns District of Crowborough, just to the east of the forest. Please use the map in the cottage that covers the forest area.

## Early development of the forest

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130 million years ago the area that is now Ashdown Forest was covered by numerous rivers. These crossed a vast flood plain.

The sediments that the rivers deposited consisted of sand, silt, siltstones and sandstones. They were called the Ashdown Beds.

In the years that followed these sediments were covered with up to 70m of clay and other deposits. A further layer of chalk was deposited around 65 million years ago which reared up to form a massive dome around 1000m high.

This chalk dome was then eroded gradually until the Ashdown Beds were revealed and gave rise to the soils of today's Ashdown Forest. The edges of the great chalk dome still remain as the North and South Downs.

Deciduous woodland developed where the soil was rich in humus and well drained. The Heathland area of the forest developed where the soil was acidic and grey.

## Man's early occupation

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The earliest evidence of man in the forest dates back to around 50,000 years. A flint axe head has been found that dates back to this time.

In the Bronze Age people used the area for hunting and to graze their animals. They cleared small areas of forest so that they could control their livestock. Flint arrowheads and other tools have been found. The arrowheads would have been made from the nearby chalk Downs.



During the Iron Age the area was mined extensively for the deposits of ironstone that found in the layers below the chalk.

The Romans built many roads across the forest and further developed the iron industry. After the Roman Empire collapsed the forest reverted back to a wild and inaccessible place.

## The Wealden Iron Industry

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The early method of extracting iron involved using a small furnace or bloomery. The furnace was fuelled by the plentiful local charcoal and blown by hand bellows. The process produced a lump of malleable but impure iron for shaping.

At the end of the Middle Ages larger furnaces were introduced into the area and it became possible to pour liquid iron into moulds or casts. Water power was needed to drive the huge bellows and this led to many of the rivers being dammed to harness the water.

The first cannon was cast in the Weald in 1543 and, as conflict with Spain grew, so did the reputation for Wealden cannons. Boringwood Farm, near Nutley, gets its name from the process of boring a cannon's barrel. It is even claimed that both opposing fleets were armed with Wealden cannons.



The landscape of Ashdown Forest was completely different in those days. It was described by a local man as:

*"Full of iron mines it is in sundry places, where for the making and fining whereof there be furnaces on every side, and huge deal of wood is yearly spent".*

## A Royal Forest

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In 1296 a large part of the Forest was enclosed and became Lancaster Great Park. This was used as a royal hunting ground.

The people who lived around the edge grazed their animals on the forest and collected wood, bracken, heather and turf for their own use.



During the Seventeenth Century, the Forest was granted to the Earls of Bristol and Dukes of Dorset. Significant areas were enclosed and parcels of land were taken for small-holdings. The local people, who then depended on the Forest for their livelihoods, became alarmed and a petition was sent to Parliament.

This led to the first Ashdown Forest Act, passed in 1885. The Act defined the forest borders and they have remained largely unchanged to this day.

The De La Warr family, descendants of the Dorsets remained freehold owners until 1988 when the forest was purchased by East Sussex County Council. Today the forest is managed by the Board of Conservators.

### **Ashdown Forest Information Centre**

The Information Centre exhibition has a display of wildlife, artefacts and a variety of sources of information about the history, management, flora and fauna of the Forest.

There is a garden with picnic tables and the Centre has the only public lavatories in the Forest. The Centre is situated approximately one mile east of Wych Cross on the Hartfield road. Access to the exhibition barn is free. Opening times are 11am to 5pm on weekends and Bank Holidays & 2pm to 5pm during summer weekdays. Tel: 01342 823583.

# Ashdown Forest wildlife

There is a great deal of wildlife to look out for in the forest. The two distinct habitats, heathland and forest, have their own characteristics. The Conservators work hard to preserve the balance of 60% heathland and 40% forest.

## Heathland wildlife

There are 770 hectares of heathland in Ashdown Forest, between 2 and 5 % of all that still remains in Britain. This section gives an explanation of some of the wildlife to look out for in the Heathland areas of the Forest.

### Heather

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Some of the most common plants on the heathland are members of the heather family. Ling Heather is the most common but also Bell Heather and Cross-leaved Heather can be found.

They grow well on the poor, acidic and sandy soils that characterise the heathlands. Heather was traditionally used for bedding, thatch, brooms, fuel, baskets, rope, orange dye and to flavour ale.

August is the best time to see the heather as it comes into full bloom at this time of the year.



**Ling Heather**

### Gorse

Two types of gorse are also particularly common, Common Gorse and Dwarf Gorse.

There is a popular expression 'kissing is out of favour when gorse is out of bloom'.



**Common Gorse**

### Other plants

The most common type of grass is Purple Moor Grass. Among the grasses look out for Tormentil, Heath Milkwort and Heath Bedstraw.



**Tormentil**



**Heath Milkwort**



**Heath Bedstraw**

## **Marsh Gentian**

The most famous plant in Ashdown Forest is the Marsh Gentian.

It has been getting more and more scarce in Sussex over the years and has now disappeared from West Sussex altogether. The Forest does still have a reasonably abundant colony, look out for the bright blue trumpet flowers.



**Marsh Gentian**

# Trees in the forest woodlands

Although the forest areas are extensive the variety of trees has changed over the years. This is mainly due to the effects of man, for example, clearance for the charcoal required for the iron industry. Try your hand at some tree spotting!

## Scots Pine

The most common and easily recognisable tree is the Scots Pine. They were planted mainly in the 19th century.

Scots Pine need careful management, and when the seedlings invade the heathland they are chopped down and used as Christmas trees.



## Birch

Silver Birch, and Downy Birch are also common. The Downy Birch can be found in damper areas of the Forest.

Silver Birch twigs are hairless but bear tiny warts and vice versa for Downy. The leaf edges in the Downy Birch only have a single series of teeth - they are double-toothed in Silver Birch.



## Beech

Beech can be found on the fringes of the Forest. The tree actually produces an edible nut, the Beech Nut. Although eaten by deer and squirrels it is also edible for humans who have enough patience to remove the shell!

## Oak

The forest contains many Oak trees, one of the traces of the former forest.

The English Oak supports the greatest diversity of organisms of any tree in the forest.



## Sweet Chestnut

Sweet Chestnut was planted by the Romans to harvest for oil. They are still planted on the Forest fringes for man's use.

The trees are coppiced on 15 year cycles and the wood is used for fences and stakes and recently for the inspiring ESCC Woodland Enterprise Centre building at Flimwell



# Ashdown Forest birds

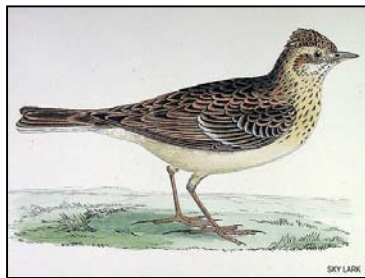
There are a wide variety of birds in the Forest, including some particularly rare species. This bird finder sheet will help you identify some of the species.

**Skylarks** and **Meadow Pipits** are common on the heathland. Meadow Pipits have a high accelerating song ending in a trill 'weesk weesk weesk'. This is given in flight.

**Reed Buntings** and **Yellowhammers** are also common in the scrub.

Rare species to look out for are the **Woodcock**, **Dartford Warbler** and **Nightjar**. In summer listen out for the churring sound of the Nightjar as it swoops and glides.

In the Forest areas look out for **Grey Wagtails**. They can be found around the ponds and streams.



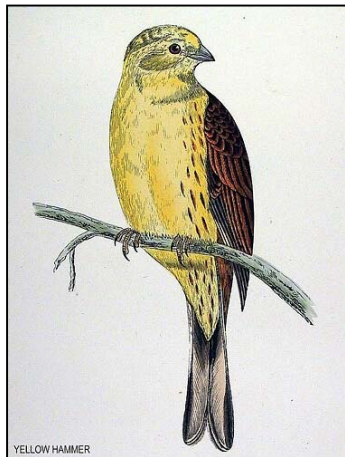
**Skylark**



**Meadow Pipit**



**Reed Bunting**



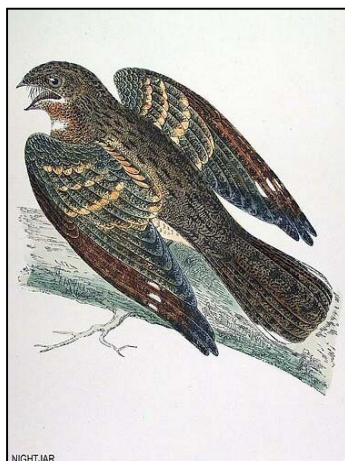
**Yellow Hammer**



**Woodcock**



**Dartford Warbler**



**Nightjar**



**Grey Wagtail**

# Ashdown Forest deer and other wildlife

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## Deer

Deer have always been an important part of the Forest landscape. Fallow Deer are then most common species in the Forest.

Introduced by the Normans (and possibly the Romans), they have been hunted right up to the 17th century. The edges of the Forest were lined with a stake-lined ditch that allowed deer to enter but not leave.



There are now up to 1000 Fallow Deer in the Forest. They are the largest wild animal in Britain. Some other species such as the tiny Muntjac can also be found.

If you go onto the forest at dawn or dusk and move about quietly you may well see wild fallow deer. This is also a good time to see bats feeding.

**The very word 'forest' came from the Normans. They used it to denote an area of trees containing deer for hunting!**

## Other wildlife

Many of the Forest's mammals such as foxes, badgers and bats are nocturnal.

There are also many species of butterflies, damselflies, dragonflies and moths. Look out for the very rare Purple Emperor butterfly.

The heathland contains Adders, the only poisonous snake in the British Isles. It is recognisable by the dark zig-zag along its length. They are very shy and only bite if they are attacked. There have been no deaths from adder bites in Britain for over 20 years.



**Purple Emperor**



**Adder**

# Places to visit in the Forest

There is a separate section on Ashdown Forest walks in the Discovery Booklet.

## Nutley Windmill

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This is one of the best preserved of the eighty or so windmills in Sussex and can be found in the Forest. Some parts of Nutley Windmill are 300 years old. It was restored to working order 30 years ago by the Nutley Preservation Society and is now the oldest working windmill in Sussex.



The windmill is open on the last Sunday of each month from June to September inclusive between 2.30 and 5.30 p.m. It can be found just north of the Nutley to Duddleswell Road, a couple of miles South West from Crowborough.

Ashdown Forest Walk number 6 passes nearby.

## 'Pooh sticks' bridge

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Ashdown Forest is where A.A. Milne set his famous Winnie the Pooh stories. Visitors can visit Pooh Bridge and try their hand at 'Pooh' sticks (although most of the twigs and sticks in the surrounding area have already been used).

Originally built in 1907 the bridge was restored in 1979 and totally rebuilt in 1999. The rebuild was funded by public donations, the East Sussex County Council and The Countryside Commission. An approach was made to the Disney Foundation for contributions. This caused a stir amongst local people who wanted to keep the bridge 'British'.



Another location from the book, Gills Lap can be visited. A. A. Milne renamed this Galleons Lap in his books. He described Galleons Lap:

***"Sitting there they could see the whole world spread out until it reached the sky, and whatever there was all the world over was with them in Galleons Lap."***

In 1979 The Conservators of Ashdown Forest agreed to the placing of a memorial dedicated to Milne in the forest. To visit the memorial, park in Piglet's Car Park, and walk up the steep pathway. When you reach the top, turn left and you should see the memorial in the distance.

Pooh bridge and Gills Lap can be found on the B2026 that runs north from Crowborough. There is a detailed walk to Pooh Bridge later in the Discovery Booklet.

### Forest Views

From high points on the Forest you can get great views of the South and North Downs. There is a particularly good view from the tearoom's terrace at the Barnsgate Manor vineyard.

