Programme 3
The Tudor Way

In this four-day walk we uncover the rich history hidden in the landscape of a quiet corner of the south east; in the fields, woodland and Downs of Kent and East Sussex. Half a millennium ago, these tranquil rolling hills echoed with the grinding noise of industry and simmered with competitive political intrigue. At the centre of this storm was none other than the towering figure of England’s most fascinating monarch – Henry VIII.

This historical quest takes us on a walk through an area known as the Weald. On a sunny day, there are few parts of the country so enchanting. Day 1 starts in Kent, at the great estates of Penshurst and Hever; both central to the bloody game of Tudor politics. Day 2 reveals the remains of a Tudor industrial revolution. Walking into Sussex on Day 3, we explore the spectacular Ashdown Forest, once a playground for our sporting King. Finally, we head over the South Downs to Lewes, and into the orgy of destruction that defined the final years of Henry’s reign.

Please use OS Explorer Maps 147, 135, 123, 122 (1:25k) or OS Landranger 188, 198, 199 (1:50k)

All distances approximate.

Day 1 Penshurst to Cowden, via Penshurst Place, Chiddingstone Village, Hever Castle
Distance: 8.5 miles

Day 2 Cowden to Hartfield, via Crippenden Manor, Furnace Pond, Pooh Sticks Bridge
Distance: 9.5 miles

Day 3 Hartfield to Blackboys, via Kings Standing
Distance: 22 miles

Day 4 Blackboys to Lewes, via Laughton Place, Lewes Priory, Anne of Cleves House
Distance: 13.5 miles
Day 1: Penshurst to Cowden, via Penshurst Place, Chiddingstone Village, Hever Castle. 8.5 miles

Our walk begins just 10 miles south of the M25, in Penshurst, between the North and South Downs of Kent and East Sussex.

Starting at the Leicester Arms in Penshurst village, follow the road in a north easterly direction passing Penshurst Church and Leicester Square, to the main entrance of Penshurst Place. Head though the stone gateway into Penshurst Place.

Penshurst Place

Henry VIII, famous for his fearsome rage and numerous marriages, transformed English politics; in particular, he changed the make-up of the royal court. This shake-up began here, at Penshurst Place, in the early years of Henry's reign. At this time the medieval manor house was owned by prominent Tudor courtier Edward Stafford, better known as the Duke of Buckingham. In 1519 Buckingham hosted a lavish party, costing the equivalent of almost £1 million. It was one of the great events of the age and Henry VIII was guest of honour.

A powerful aristocrat, Buckingham had a royal pedigree stretching back centuries; but this demonstration of his wealth and influence was a terrible mistake. Henry witnessed how powerful Buckingham was and his paranoia got the better of him. A year or so later Buckingham was found guilty of treason and beheaded, and Henry seized Penshurst Place for himself.

Buckingham was one of the first to fall foul of Henry's ability to find treason in his own court. His execution was just the beginning and by 1520 the confident young king was turning into a suspicious, brutal monarch.

Inside Penshurst Place head for the Baron’s Hall, a fine example of medieval gothic architecture built in 1341. This hall would have housed Buckingham’s 1519 bash. Leaving Penshurst Place by the north west exit we briefly take the road back towards Penshurst village, before joining the Eden Valley Walk heading west. This path links Penshurst to Hever and is known locally as 'The Coach Road'. In the Tudor age it was the main line of communication between Penshurst Place and Hever Castle.

We follow the Eden Valley Walk to Chiddingstone, a stunning Tudor village owned by the National Trust, boasting a manor house once owned by the Boleyn family. From here we continue on to the hamlet of Hever and Hever Castle. There is an entrance fee for both Penshurst Place and Hever Castle.

Hever Castle

Hever Castle was one of the burgeoning powerhouses of Tudor England, linked to the new rising order in Henry’s court. Henry cut down the old aristocracy and promoted men of lesser nobility, some with trade backgrounds like Thomas Boleyn. Hever Castle was the family seat of the Boleyns from 1462 to 1539 and the childhood home of Henry’s most famous squeeze, Anne Boleyn. While still married to his first wife Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII reputedly made romancing trips to Hever Castle. Thomas was fast gaining power in the royal court, but his daughters were his secret weapons. In the early 1520s, daughter Mary became the King’s mistress. Later Henry’s attention switched to Anne, the younger Boleyn sister.

We stop at The King Henry VIII Inn to quench our thirst, before heading south on the road to Markbeech, taking the footpath south, crossing Markbeech Tunnel, past Pyle Gate Farm, before finishing Day 1 at Cowden village.
Day 2: Cowden to Hartfield, via Crippenden Manor, Furnace Pond/Cowden Furnace, Pooh Sticks Bridge. 9.5 miles.

Having spent the night in Cowden, Day 2’s walk winds south, crossing from Kent into East Sussex to the edge of Ashdown Forest.

The Iron Industry

Surprisingly, in the early 1500s this tranquil area surrounding Ashdown Forest resounded to the noise of frenetic production. Almost three centuries before the Industrial Revolution, the Weald underwent an economic transformation which marked the beginning of Britain’s modern iron industry.

Leaving Cowden we take a slight detour north west, following the Sussex Border Path before taking the footpath to Crippenden Manor.

Cannons and the Tudor Arms Industry

In the garden of Crippenden Manor is a 16th century iron cannon. In Tudor times, the iron ore of the area was being utilised on a massive scale. Not only was iron used to produce domestic items, it was also used to construct weapons of war. The technology to cast iron on a large scale was new, and here Henry VIII built the cannons that would arm his south coast forts. The King himself was encouraging the expansion of this new economy and entrepreneurial types such as the Boleyn family became lessees or owners of iron works.

We follow the footpath as it heads south between Minepit Wood and Liveroxhill Wood. Here we join the Sussex Border Path heading south towards Pondtail. At a T-junction we head east towards Furnace Farm, Furnace Pond and Holtye Common.

Furnace Pond and Cowden Furnace

By the end of Henry’s reign the Weald was intensely exploited, with 50 furnaces and forges; look carefully to spot the clues in the landscape. As you walk down the road you’ll see Furnace Pond, which in 1500 was no more than a stream. The straight edge at the eastern end is evidence of a dam built by the Tudors to power the Cowden Furnace, Britain’s first blast furnace. This dam turned the stream into the large expanse of water seen today, and gathered enough water to power the production of 200 tonnes of iron a year. Sadly, all the iron industry buildings disappeared over 200 years ago, but if you look closely you might just find fragments of the industrial past on the ground in the form of iron slag.

From Furnace Pond we head through Holtye Common and Holtye Golf Course. Then continue south east between Lower Brockshill Farm and Chantlers Farm, through Coomb Wood and past Bolebrook Castle, another Tudor pile. Joining the B2026 we head through Hartfield and bear right through Newton’s Hill before taking a footpath south, leading to Pooh Sticks Bridge.

Pooh Sticks Bridge

We briefly leave the Tudor era and enter the world of Winnie The Pooh and his magical Hundred Acre Wood. Look out for the author’s home, Cotchford Farm. AA Milne wrote the tales for his young son Christopher Robin and was inspired by the local landscape, including the ever-popular Pooh Sticks Bridge. Believe it or not, the home of ‘Pooh Sticks’ was once a Tudor forge. Winnie the Pooh would have undoubtedly been particularly displeased by the noise of a hammer slamming down on red-hot iron. Eeyore would have been furious.

Leaving Pooh Sticks Bridge we retrace our path back to Hartfield, where Day 2 of our walk ends.
Day 3: Hartfield to Blackboys, via Ashdown Forest. 22 miles

Continue on the footpath which heads south west to Newbridge, then take a short detour north to the tiny hamlet, Colman’s Hatch, to call in at the Hatch Inn for a pint.

Hatch Inn

The Hatch Inn was originally a row of three cottages said to date back to 1430, which means that they were there before the Newbridge furnaces were blowing, and might well have housed the workers from this water-driven hammer mill at the bottom of the hill.

Retrace your steps to follow the road south through Newbridge, joining the Vanguard Way as it heads south to Kings Standing, where we turn our attention to the sport of Tudor kings.

Ashdown Forest and Kings Standing

Ashdown Forest escaped the turmoil of the Tudor iron industry, and is today the biggest public space in southeast England.

Ashdown doesn’t seem like much of a forest, at least not in the densely-wooded sense. However, it was the Normans who introduced the concept to our country and forest law could apply almost anywhere, and Ashdown was marked out as a deer hunting forest.

The mix of heath grass and woodland is perfect hunting ground, and if there’s one thing we know about Henry VIII, it’s that he loved hunting. This forest not only provided good sport but brought him close to the Boleyn daughters’ home. It’s rumoured that Kings Standing was the location of one of Henry VIII’s hunting lodges. Although, given its name, it was probably more likely the location of a sort of Tudor grandstand, where spectators could sit in shelter and watch the hunt.

From Kings Standing we join the Wealdway to Camp Hill. From here we take the footpath west to Marlpits and head Northwest past Nutley Windmill to Chelwood Vachery, before heading west to Braberry Hatch and The Pale which is located half a mile east of the hamlet of Chelwood Gate.

Ashdown Forest and The Pale

Ashdown Forest has a rich archaeological heritage, with the earliest evidence of human occupation dating back to 50,000 years ago. Locals used the forest to collect wood and graze livestock, which later helped maintain the prime hunting terrain.

But under Henry VIII’s reign there was now a real pressure on the land. The iron industry looked covetously at the undeveloped Ashdown, with its potential for iron ore and wealth of timber. To protect it Henry built a ditch, bank and fence stretching 23 miles around the forest. It was known as The Pale and was built on the remains of a similar Norman construction, and is still visible in places. The name Pale comes from the word palisade, its main function was to keep the deer in and poachers out, locals were still granted access to the natural resources.

From ‘The Pale’ we retrace our steps back to Marlpits before heading south to Fairwarp. At Fairwarp we re-join the Wealdway as it heads southwest through Buxted. Look out for the Oast Houses used for drying hops as part of the brewing process.

At Tickeridge Wood we leave the Wealdway and join the Vanguard Way heading into Blackboys, where we stop for a drink at the 600-year-old pub Blackboys Inn. Day 3 finishes here.
Day 4: Blackboys to Lewes, via Laughton Place, Lewes Priory, Anne of Cleves House. 13.5 miles.

Leave the Vanguard Way at Bushy Lane, heading west along the road, before joining the Wealdway south. At Decoy Pond follow the footpath through Laughton village to Laughton Place.

Laughton Place

The most tumultuous decade of Henry’s reign is now known as the Reformation, when England split with the Catholic faith and established itself as a Protestant kingdom. Laughton Place offers a remarkable snapshot of life on the eve of this great religious schism.

In the 1530s, royal courtier Sir William Pelham set about building a house to flaunt his wealth and status. Only a small section of the house remains, but the dramatic brick tower gives an indication of the mansion’s original grandeur. Bricks were a new craft and very expensive, but the tower’s main glory is its Italian-style mouldings. William Pelham was bringing the latest London fashions deep into the countryside. But this continental fashion didn’t last long; soon after it was built Henry VIII broke with Rome, and anything remotely Italianate fell out of favour. Today, Laughton Place is owned and managed by The Landmark Trust.

From Laughton Place follow Laughton Road west past Barnfield Farm where we take a side road to the left heading south past Arches Farm. We then take the footpath heading south west past Glyndebourne across the South Downs to Lewes and Lewes Priory.

Lewes Priory

In 1533, Henry declared his first marriage invalid. He married Anne Boleyn and was excommunicated by the angry Pope. With a taste for Protestant reform sweeping the nation, the King was established as Supreme Head of an independent Church of England. Henry may have been the figurehead of the English Reformation, but its architect was Thomas Cromwell. By 1534, this son of a Putney brewer had risen to be the King’s right-hand man, and Lewes Priory is the perfect place to see his work. Cromwell spearheaded the dissolution of the monasteries; under the banner of religious reform, he succeeded in the greatest re-ordering of wealth and power since 1066. Lewes Priory was the richest religious house in Sussex and the beating heart of the town for 450 years. But by November 1537, Lewes priory was in the hands of the government and this huge monastery was leveled in less than 10 days! Its saving grace was Cromwell’s greed. He wanted to establish his own seat in Lewes and saved the Priors Lodgings and other buildings for himself.

From Lewes Priory we head west along the main road of Southover High Street to take in another Tudor pile significant to our tale, Anne of Cleves house at 52 Southover High St.

Anne of Cleves House

Even in the unpredictable world of Henry’s court, Thomas Cromwell’s story is remarkable. Having assisted Henry to divorce once, and marry twice, he made a momentous mistake with the fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, who Henry rejected. The greatest self-made man was to have a notorious downfall. Before his execution Cromwell was forced to assist the King’s divorce from Anne. The divorce settlement gifted the German noblewoman the manor house now known as ‘Anne of Cleves House’. She also received Cromwell’s Priors Lodgings, no fewer than nine grand houses in Sussex and both Hever Castle and Penshurst Place in Kent. And, she lived to enjoy them long after both Henry and Sir Thomas Cromwell were in their graves.

Retracing our steps to Lewes priory we complete our four day hike.