

## Wild Walk – Seven Sisters and Friston Forest

**Map:** OL25 1:25000 – Eastbourne and Beachy Head

**Distance:** 9 Miles/14.5KM

**Time Taken:** 3-4Hours

**Total Scent:** 497m/1630ft

### Transport Links

**Car:** Exceat Car Park - £4.40 for the day

**Bus:** From Seaford, 12X or 12A to Seven Sisters Park Centre.

### Directions

1. Leave the carpark at Exceat (GR 519 995). Cross the road at the phone box and follow the South Downs Way up the hill. Through the gate at the top, down the forest stairs to West Dean.
2. Follow the road straight up then to the right. Take a left up into Friston Forest. Road turns into forest path. Keep to the right on any forks in the path until large forest path. Up hill straight ahead, until tarmac road.
3. Turn left at road and follow round to right. Keep on until public footpath gate on the right. Walk through field, then cross into the next field. Path continues in top right of the field into a wooded path. Follow to main road.
4. Cross main road and walk to the left of the church, parallel with the road into East Dean. At the pub take a right, before Hikers Rest, and follow the street to the gate. Through the gate and up onto Went Hill. Follow marked footpath to Birling Gap.
5. From Birling Gap, walk back up the way you came, but turn at the marked South Downs way. Walk across the marked paths of the seven sisters until the brow of the final sister.
6. Facing Cuckmere haven, take the path to your right towards the river. Walk down and follow the marked path back round to the car park.

### Words

This challenging but captivating walk has been frequented by East Sussex Scouts every first Sunday in January since before 2008. That was the first year I joined them as a fresh-faced fourteen-year-old scout, walking my first organised hike.

Much has changed since then (I am a worn-faced scout leader, walking this route out of pleasure rather than necessity for one), but everything looks just the same. I park at Exceat on a late May morning, having flashbacks of pre-dawn risings and icy mornings.

They called it the cobweb hike, named as it was used to prepare for the upcoming hiking season. I have walked this route in every weather imaginable, be it snow, rain, sun however, this is the first time I have walked it on the cusp of summer, so my bag feels worryingly light of layers.

This hike starts in a shell of the old village of Exceat. It does not exist anymore, having first been wiped off the map by the plague, then finished off by French raiders.

Further on, Friston Forest brings a welcome peacefulness. I can hear birds singing in the trees and smell the natural scents of the forest. Sadly, they have removed a lot of the trees down here, with more looking to be culled soon. I fear the next time I come; it will be completely different again.

The walk to Birling Gap is short but gives the landscape time to stretch out like a dog after a long sleep. Each step provides more of the glistening sea. I see a gaggle of hikers, grouped around an ice cream van. By their faces, I can tell they've finished their seven ascents before I've started. A viewing platform provides the perfect vista over the cliffs, which are often used in media to portray the famous cliffs of Dover. Allowing coastal erosion here means they don't have the same mossy affliction as their more famous counterpart.

As I start over the undulating cliffs, I am walking alongside a man in a distinctly blue coat. We pass each other during short breaks; I overtake him when he stops for water, he slips by shortly after, and so on. I try to name the bumps but soon lose count. Rough Brow or Flat Hill? Is this the one that doesn't count as a full sister?

On the last brow, the blue-coated man is ahead of me. He jovially waves as he disappears over the horizon, solidifying the bond we have formed during our expedition.

Descending into Cuckmere Haven, I remember we had the choice as youngsters to go up to the beach itself to explore. Thirteen years on, it doesn't sound as appealing, so I start along the river back to Exceat. I am grateful for this decision moments later as the familiar rain comes heaving down.

I dig out my waterproof and wrap myself up, smiling to myself as I arrive back to the non-village. This is more like it.