

Ashdown Forest & Medway Valley

A pair of contrasting walks, one with a long but gentle climb up to the highest point on Ashdown Forest, the other a leisurely stroll in the upper Medway valley. They can be combined in several ways to make longer walks of around 11 to 15 miles.

Start: Ashurst Station (or Hartfield, via bus from East Grinstead)

Finish: Hartfield (or Ashurst Station)

Length: 18 km (11¼ miles)

Toughness: 5 out of 10[†]

The main walk combines the first half of the Medway Valley walk with most of the Ashdown Forest walk. Longer or shorter options are possible.

Transport: There is an hourly service from London Bridge to Ashurst, taking 50 minutes. For the variations which start or finish in Hartfield, the village is served by an hourly bus (Metrobus 291) which runs between Crawley, East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells. *There is no bus service on Sundays.* At the time of writing, the most convenient connections are with trains to and from East Grinstead. The last buses back from Hartfield are at about 6.30pm to Tunbridge Wells, 7.30pm to East Grinstead.

If driving, there is no public transport between Ashurst and Hartfield, so do one of the circular walks. Ashurst Station has a small free car park.

OS Explorer Map: 135. Ashurst, map reference TQ507388, is on the East Sussex/Kent border, between East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells.

Hartfield, map reference TQ478357, is in East Sussex, 4 km **sw** of Ashurst.

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Walk Notes

Ashdown Forest is the only area of elevated heathland in the south-east of England. It is now rather isolated from the rail network, but it is a fine area for walking and well worth the extra effort of reaching it. The full circular walk from Ashurst described here is fairly long, but shorter options are possible using the bus service between East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells.

The route of the Ashdown Forest walk includes many features that will be instantly recognisable to readers of AA Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh stories¹, not

[†] 2 out of 10 for the Medway Valley Walk; 7 out of 10 for the Extended Walk.

¹ Pooh Corner in Hartfield sells all manner of Pooh memorabilia, including the Official Rules of Pooh Sticks. It closes at 5pm, with last orders in its tea room at 4.30. The shop is regularly overrun with coach parties of Japanese tourists.

least the famous Pooh Sticks Bridge. The Medway valley is a quite different landscape and makes a contrasting addition to the Ashdown Forest walk, or indeed a pleasant short walk in its own right. All the walk options take in the attractive Wealden village of Hartfield and go past Withyham church (which is well worth visiting, although it is sometimes locked).

Some of the low-lying areas in the Medway valley may become flooded after very heavy rain, but the soil on Ashdown Forest drains well and this walk should be less affected (especially if you take the short cut suggested below and start in Withyham).

Walk Options

- M Main Walk, Ashurst to Hartfield.....18 km
- (A) Ashdown Forest Walk (Hartfield Circular).....15½ km
- (B) Medway Valley Walk (short Ashurst Circular).....13¾ km
- (C) Extended Main Walk (long Ashurst Circular).....24 km

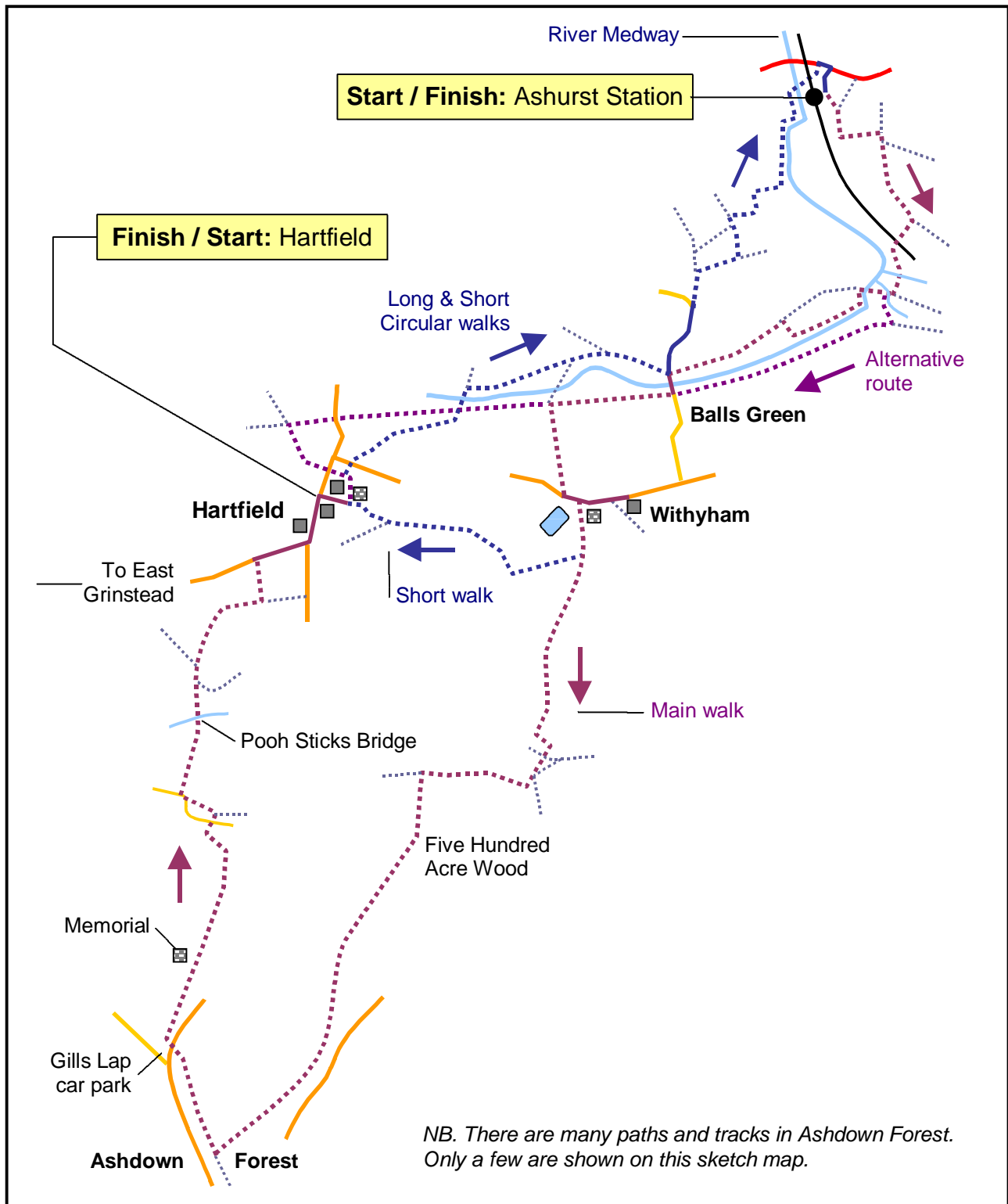
Shortening the Walk

You can shorten the Ashdown Forest walk at the start by continuing on the 291 bus to Withyham, rather than alighting at Hartfield (this is a useful trick if you miss the connection and would have to start an hour late). You should be aware that there is no public transport on the long stretch up on Ashdown Forest between Withyham and Hartfield.

Saturday Walkers' Club

Take the train nearest to 10.00 from London Bridge to Ashurst. For the Hartfield Circular, take the East Grinstead train connecting with a 291 bus at about 10.30 (ie. leaving Victoria around 9.30). The Medway Valley walk would make a pleasant afternoon walk, with a train leaving around noon.

Walk Map



Walk Directions *(for the Hartfield Circular Walk, start at [3])*

[1] Ashurst Station to the Medway Valley (2 km)

From the station's small car park do not take the obvious way out to the A264, but **take the private road in the opposite direction**, heading **s**, shown

on the OS map as the Sussex Border Path. This lane winds uphill and curves to the right where a footpath joins from the left. After 200m along a level stretch, **turn left** and go through a wooden gate to the left of a metal field gate, to go up a wide grassy path between hedges.

At the top, turn right onto a wide track. This soon starts to go back downhill through trees, and later with fields sloping down to your right. After 500m you pass some derelict brick outbuildings on your left.

In another 150m, just after a short stretch through some trees, **fork right at a prominent footpath sign** to go down a wide grassy path (joining the Wealdway). At the bottom of the field go through a gate and under the railway. On the other side turn left into a meadow, with a loop of the River Medway ahead on your right.

Follow a faint path through the meadow as it curves gently to the right. Cross the River Grom on a footbridge and bear right to go across the next field, aiming for a metal gate on the far side if there is no path visible. At a signpost there, **turn right onto a concrete bridge** to cross another of the River Medway's tributaries, the River Eridge.

[2] Along the Medway Valley (2¾ or 2½ km)

After crossing the concrete bridge, you have a choice. If the field ahead is waterlogged, take the alternative route along the Forest Way¹.

[2a] Along the Medway *via riverside walk* (2¾ km)

Go across the field following the overhead power cables. Cross the River Medway on a concrete bridge and **immediately turn sharp left** to go alongside the river, passing a DEFRA notice about Conservation Walks. Follow this permissive path for 800m until it rejoins the Wealdway at a path T-junction, where you turn left.

This permissive path was rather overgrown when last checked and you could just stay on the public footpath. Aim to the left of the farm buildings ahead and then bear left to head SW, soon with a hedge on your right. The riverside path eventually joins from the left.

Follow the Wealdway for another 700m, initially through a copse and over a small footbridge, then along the right-hand edge of some meadows. The river is always close by on your left. Eventually you come to a minor road opposite Summerford Farm. Turn left and go along this road, crossing the river on a stone bridge. At the 30mph sign, **turn right onto the Forest Way**. *Continue the directions at [•] below (see the note above this for a short cut to the pub).*

[2b] Along the Medway *via Forest Way* (2½ km)

Immediately after crossing the bridge, **turn left** to go alongside the river for a short distance, then through a gap in the hedge. On the other side do

not follow the river round to the left, but **take a narrow path ahead and slightly to the left** which goes across the field towards some trees.

On reaching these, go over a stile, up some steps to the Forest Way and turn right. Follow the route of this old railway line for 1½ km. Eventually you come to the old Withyham Station building (now a private house) on your left and go across a minor road.

If you are doing the Main Walk and want to take a short cut to the pub in Withyham, do not continue along the Forest Way but instead head s along the minor road through the village of Balls Green. In 700m turn right at the T-junction with the B2110. The Dorset Arms is 300m along this road. After visiting the pub, continue the directions at [6].

[•] Head w along the Forest Way for 750m, passing the occasional picnic table and then crossing some streams. 75m after the second of these bridges, **turn left to cross a stile into a field**, rejoining the Wealdway.
To continue the walk, go to [4].

[3] Hartfield to and along the Forest Way (2¼ km)

From the centre of the village between its two pubs, head E up Church Street towards the church. At the end of the tarmac surface, **turn left into the churchyard** (passing under part of Lych Gate Cottage). Go along the left-hand side of the churchyard, exiting down steps onto a tarmac path past a school. At the end of the drive turn left to return to the High Street.

Cross the road and take the bridleway opposite, with a sports field on your left. In 150m pass to the right of the Youth Centre and follow the path through a gate and downhill. After heading NW along the edge of two fields the path goes into trees and across a bridge. On the other side **turn sharp right** and drop down to join the Forest Way¹ below, heading E.

In 300m the track goes under the B2026. Turn left on the other side and then in 20m turn right to resume your original direction, passing the old Hartfield Station building (now a private house) on your right.

Continue E on the Forest Way. After 800m ignore a path crossing (with a stile and footbridge over the River Medway on your left), but in another 400m **turn right to cross a stile into a field**, joining the Wealdway.

[4] The Forest Way to Withyham Church (¾ km)

Follow a faint grassy path s across the field for 400m. In the next field continue in much the same direction for another 250m, to meet the B2110 just to the right of Hewkins bridge.

Cross over the road and turn left to cross this old stone bridge (take care as there is no pavement and the road narrows here). Just after the bridge,

fork right up a lane towards Withyham church². In 75m you come to a junction of lanes, with three possible routes off to your left.

To visit the church, turn left and go up the rightmost of the three lanes, then take any of the paths on the left which lead up to the church. Afterwards, return to this lane junction.

If you are on the Medway Valley walk and not visiting the pub in Withyham, go to [10].

[5] Withyham Church to the Dorset Arms (¼ km)

From the lane you originally came up from the B2110, ***turn left and take the leftmost of the three lanes***, which curves past Rectory Cottage. After passing through a wooden gate you rejoin the main road. Go along the pavement, crossing the road carefully when it continues on the other side. The path nips behind a hedge to go alongside the village hall; when it emerges the pub is ahead of you on the other side of the road.

[6] The Dorset Arms to Five Hundred Acre Wood (4 km)

Retrace your steps to the junction of lanes below the church.

*If you took the short cut through Balls Green, head **w** along the B2110. At first the pavement is on the other side of the road and then you cross back. Where the pavement ends, go through a wooden gate on your left with a sign for the Buckhurst Estate, up a tarmac lane and then past Rectory Cottage. At the junction the church is up on your left.*

Take the lane heading **s** marked as a Private Drive, signposted as the Wealdway (which you follow all the way to the top of Ashdown Forest). There is an impressive house³ up on your left. Stay on this lane, ignoring all ways off. After 1½ km go past a cattle grid. 200m later, where the way ahead to Fisher's Gate is blocked by a gate marked Private, cross a stile on the left to go along the edge of a field beside a fence.

Follow the path downhill, round to the right and over a stile as it goes into some trees. Where the path comes out at a lane junction, continue in the same direction and soon bear right at the next junction. After passing a house (Forest Place), fork right and stay on this tarmac lane as it bends right and goes downhill, ignoring forestry tracks ahead and to the left.

At the bottom continue **w** past Kovacs Lodge to go uphill on a rough track. In 250m a field appears on your right and the path curves to the left; 25m later ***fork left on a path*** into Five Hundred Acre Wood⁴.

Keep to the main path, which climbs steadily through the wood. In 450m fork right and then in another 200m go over a path crossing and through a wooden gate to enter the Access Land of Ashdown Forest.

[7] Five Hundred Acre Wood to Gills Lap car park (3½ km)

Continue **sw** on the main path through the wood, still climbing. In 600m, where open heathland finally appears up ahead on your right, ***fork right*** (still

following the Wealdway signposts: the white-painted notches on the top of these posts indicate the direction). As you emerge there are fine views towards the North Downs behind and to your right.

Continue to follow the Wealdway signposts across the open heathland of Ashdown Forest for the next 2 km. Essentially you are following the main path, initially **s** and later curving gently to the right above a valley⁵. At one point the path narrows, goes through the edge of a clump of trees for a short distance and then merges with a wide track from the left. 100m after this, fork right in front of another large clump of trees, and take the left fork (virtually straight on) 100m later. You are now walking parallel to a road a little way off to your left (mostly hidden behind trees).

As you reach the highest point in this part of Ashdown Forest there are fine views ahead of the South Downs. Eventually your path approaches a road directly ahead of you, coming to a T-junction with a wide track 50m before reaching it. **Turn right onto this track**, leaving the Wealdway, to walk parallel to the road towards Gills Lap car park.

After 500m you could detour left to a car park on the other side of the road for even better views, but there are no convenient paths over there so you have to return to this point.

Continue on the main track. After going downhill for 200m bear left as the path levels out. In 50m fork right in front of some gorse and continue up to the B2026. Cross the road to enter Gills Lap car park.

[8] Gills Lap car park to Pooh Sticks Bridge (2¾ km)

From an information board to the right of some trees at the back of the car park, head **N** across a grassy area and bear right onto a ridge path. In 400m you come to Gills Lap Clump⁶ and a trig point on your right.

Continue on the main track, now heading **NE**. In 150m you pass a large pit⁷ on your right. 40m later, a small gap in the trees on your left leads to a viewpoint with a bronze memorial plaque to AA Milne and EF Shepard, the author and illustrator of the Winnie-the-Pooh stories.

The stony track now starts to descend steeply. In 500m fork left in front of some trees, where the right fork leads to Wren's Warren car park. The track continues **N** and later curves left into some trees. As it approaches a house hidden in the wood it veers right and then comes to a minor road.

Cross over the road⁸ and take the right fork to meet a track 50m away running parallel to the road (the left fork also meets this track eventually). Turn left at the signpost for Pooh Bridge and follow this track for 250m through woodland and then onto a minor road by Andbell House. 50m past its entrance, **turn right onto a bridleway**. This track goes downhill through the edge of a wood, in 600m coming to Pooh Sticks Bridge⁹.

[9] Pooh Sticks Bridge to Hartfield (2 km)

Cross the bridge and continue **N** on the bridleway, which in 250m joins a farm road and then a lane. Bear left at the lane junction, then 100m later **cross a stile on the right** to enter a field. Head half-right uphill across the field on a well-defined grassy path and cross a stile into the next field. Continue up to its top right-hand corner (with fine views behind you).

Cross a stile here and turn right to go through a kissing gate and stile between two driveways. Head **E** on this path, with houses on your left and a large field on your right. In 250m **turn left at a three-armed signpost** to go through a gate and over a footbridge to head **N** on a narrow path.

In 150m go over a stile to join a track which leads down to the B2110. Turn right on the road and walk along the pavement, going left at a road junction to enter Hartfield. Pooh Corner (a nice place to have tea if you arrive before 4.30pm) is on the left in about 100m.

If you are finishing the walk here, the bus stop for East Grinstead is 200m away on the other side of the road, by the Hay Waggon pub. The stop for Tunbridge Wells is further along the High Street, just past the Anchor Inn.

If you are doing the Extended Main Walk back to Ashurst Station, go to [11].

[10] Withyham Church to Hartfield (2¼ km)

With the church up on your left, take the Private Drive heading **S**, past a signpost for the Wealdway and High Weald Landscape Trail. You pass an impressive building³ up on your left. In 300m, just after the driveway to Forstal Cottage, **cross a stile on the right** signposted as the Landscape Trail. Go across the field¹⁰, aiming just to the left of a large oak tree.

The path goes into some trees. When it emerges briefly, take the right fork. In 60m, veer left in front of a hedge to meet an earth track in 40m. **Turn right onto this track**, cross a stone bridge over a stream and follow the right-hand field edge **NW** towards Forstal Farm.

Soon after passing the farmhouse continue ahead into a small (possibly damp) grassy area, towards a gate to the left of some trees. On the other side, do not follow the obvious path up the right-hand field edge but **turn half-left** to head **W**, climbing gently towards a line of tall trees 250m away. As you get nearer you should see a footpath post in a gap between two of the trees. After passing this post, the path levels out and you continue in the same direction.

At the end of the field cross a stile and take the right fork on the other side to go along the right-hand field edge. In 200m cross a stile and a concrete slab over a ditch into the next field. Follow the right-hand field edge up to the corner, turn right to cross a stile and go down a few steps to a lane opposite Hartfield church.

Turn left along the lane which soon becomes Church Street. The Anchor Inn is on your right just before the main road, the Hay Waggon 50m along the High Street to your left. Pooh Corner (a tea place) is about 200m past the Hay Waggon, on the other side of the road.

[11] Hartfield to Summerford Farm (2¾ km)

From Pooh Corner, head N along the High Street towards the centre of the village. 50m after passing the Hay Waggon, **turn right** into Church Street, passing the Anchor Inn. At the end of the tarmac surface, **turn left into the churchyard** (passing under part of Lych Gate Cottage). Go along the left-hand side of the churchyard, exiting down steps onto a tarmac path past a school. Go along this drive and then continue ahead through a gate onto a tarmac path across a green. On the other side, turn right onto the B2110 and then immediately left into Castlefields.

At a T-junction turn right into Mottefield. Ignore a cul-de-sac on the left, but 20m later **turn left onto a tarmac footpath** towards a stile. Go over this and turn right to head E through a field¹¹. In 100m cross a ditch and go up to a gap in the hedge ahead.

Cross a stile here and follow the left-hand field edge, initially heading NE and then slowly curving round to the right. 100m after crossing a stile into a second field, **go through a gap in the hedge on the left** and turn half-right to head diagonally across the field. In the far corner go through a field gate, up a bank and straight across the Forest Way via two stiles.

Cross a footbridge over the River Medway and continue with a wire fence on your left. Go over a stile and **turn right onto a wide grassy track** (ignoring a footpath into the field ahead). Go into some trees, then along the top of a field. At the far corner go through a wooden gate and take the path downhill into some trees. A footpath soon comes up from the right and you continue ahead, now with a fence on your right.

At the end of the fence go through a gap in the hedge on your left, over a stile, up a few steps and through a gate to emerge on a wide track. Turn right to go gently downhill, through a metal field gate and then over a stile to join a tarmac lane by the converted buildings of Summerford Farm. Follow this driveway out to a minor road and turn left.

If you started the walk at Ashurst and took the riverside option [2a], you may recognise this point in the walk: you arrived at the road from the footpath opposite and turned left.

[12] Summerford Farm to Ashurst Station (3¼ km)

Head NE along this minor road, climbing steadily for about 300m. Where the road levels out and curves sharply left at Summerford Cottage, **continue ahead along a bridleway**, the drive to Hale Court Farm. In 300m stay on the

drive where it curves right, soon passing a house on your left. 200m after passing a cattle grid to go downhill on a concrete track, **turn left just before a hedge** (with no signpost!) to head N alongside the hedge.

In 75m go into a field and continue down the right-hand field edge. In the bottom corner cross a stile and a plank bridge to go along a grassy path through a plantation. In 75m go over a path crossing towards a gap in the trees and cross a stream on a wooden bridge.

On the other side **turn right** to go between a wire fence and the right-hand field edge all the way round to the opposite corner. Go through a wooden gate, turn right to cross a stile and head NE on a wide path across a meadow. On the far side bear left to go over a stile and now simply head N alongside the River Medway for 800m.

100m before reaching the A264 (which is behind a row of tall trees up ahead), **fork right onto a narrow path** to cross the river at a weir. Follow this dank path through a metal gate and under the railway. Turn right when you reach the main road. In 50m (having ignored a cul-de-sac to some houses) turn right again into the access road for Ashurst Station. Cross the footbridge for trains to London.

Lunch and tea places

There are no refreshment places on the long stretch from Withyham to Hartfield, except possibly for some ice-cream vans in the Ashdown Forest car parks. If you want a pub lunch, the only convenient option is to have an early stop at the Dorset Arms in Withyham. This serves good home-cooked food and has some outdoor seating on a small green.

If you get to Hartfield before 4.30pm, Pooh Corner is a pleasant tea place, with a garden. This is also a possibility for light refreshment on the Medway Valley walk; if you arrive at lunchtime and need something more substantial, try one of the two pubs in the village.

If you plan to finish at Ashurst, note that there are no refreshment options near the station; a pub marked on old OS maps closed a long time ago. It is worth carefully timing your departure from Hartfield in order to catch one of the hourly trains.

Withyham

Dorset Arms High Street, 01892-770278

Hartfield

Pooh Corner (tea room; last orders 4.30pm) High Street, 01892-770456

Hay Waggon High Street, 01892-770252

Anchor Inn Church Street, 01892-770424

¹ The "Forest Way Country Park" is the rather grand name for the trackbed of the branch line which ran from Three Bridges to Tunbridge Wells via East Grinstead. It closed in 1966 and is now a popular cycle route.

² Most of the medieval Church of St Michael and All Angels was rebuilt after a fire in 1663. Near the entrance hang full-size photographic reproductions of four 14thc paintings of scenes from Christ's Passion by the Florentine artist, Niccolo Gerini. The Sackville Chapel contains impressive monuments of the Earls of Dorset and their descendants, the Earls De La Warr. The central monument of Thomas Sackville and his parents by Caius Gabriel Cibber was described by Pevsner as having "a directness of feeling and expression unprecedented in England".

³ The handsome building with the Georgian façade is the Rectory. On its right is the Monk's house; the curious "sawn-off" aspect of its north-west corner is down to one 19thc Rector who wanted to see Old Buckhurst, the home of his ancestors, from the Rectory.

⁴ "Hundred Aker Wood" in the Winnie-the-Pooh stories.

⁵ "Eeyore's Sad and Gloomy Place" in the stories.

⁶ Christopher Robin called the clump "The Enchanted Place" because nobody had ever been able to count whether there were sixty-three or sixty-four trees in the circle. Looking **NW** from Gills Lap you can see the "Lone Pine"; if you wander off in this direction, be careful not to fall into the "Heffalump Trap" beneath the tree.

⁷ "Roo's Sandy Pit" in the stories.

⁸ A notice here asks Horses to give way to Walkers, as indeed they should. Nice to see that the animals in this part of the world are expected to be able to read!

⁹ Judging by the dual-language signposts, you may have to queue with Japanese tourists to play this deceptively simple game (which should not be attempted without a thorough study of the Official Rules, available from the Pooh Corner shop in Hartfield). A rather stern information panel asks visitors to bring their own sticks, though there is no obvious evidence of deforestation just yet.

¹⁰ The tower up ahead on the left is the stone gatehouse of Old Buckhurst, all that remains of the Sackville's original family seat. In its time it was one of the largest houses in England, similar in size to Knole (later granted to them by Elizabeth I).

¹¹ As the road names indicate, the raised ground on your left when you enter the field behind the houses is evidence of an old Motte and Bailey fortification.