



Lewes Circular via Swanborough and Black Cap Walk

Lewes Priory, Swanborough, the South Downs Way, Black Cap (hilltop) and Lewes Old Racecourse. Undulating.

Length 23.3 kms, 14 1/2 miles

Toughness 6 out of 10

Maps OS Landranger Map: 198. OS Explorer Map: OL11 (formerly 122). Lewes, map reference TQ416098, is in East Sussex.

Features If you thought you knew Lewes and the surrounding South Downs, this walk may surprise you. It follows a Book 2 alternative walk as far as Swanborough, then climbs up to the Downs by a track called Breach Road. It follows the South Downs Way (SDW), more North than West, as far as Black Cap. Be warned that on a windy day there is little shelter – the descent to Housedean Farm offers some respite, but not for your ears, as you have to cross over the A27. A late lunch is possible by descending again to Plumpton, an optional loop which is included in the distance. The approach to Lewes is via the old racecourse, using a bridleway which is still popular with horses today.

Walk options From Housedean Farm on the A27 you can catch a bus 28/29 (the Regency Route) which runs regularly seven days a week between Brighton, Lewes and Tunbridge Wells (so you could do the walk in two shorter stages).

After lunch you could catch a train from Plumpton. For this option, which reduces the distance by 5.7 kms, refer to the final section (Alternative ending at Plumpton).

Alternative starts and endings are possible by referring to other SWC walks. In particular you could use the main route of walk [CW2.24](#) Lewes to Saltdean, which takes you to the SDW via Kingston near Lewes, joining this walk where noted in the text early in section 3. Another option would be to leave this walk at Black Cap, and follow the descent to Lewes via Offham, referring to Walk [CW1.29](#) Hassocks to Lewes.

Section 5 is an optional loop, with significant height loss and gain, from Black Cap to and from the Half Moon pub at Plumpton. If you take a picnic lunch you can ignore this section and save 3 kms.

Travel

Twice hourly trains run between London Victoria and Lewes (journey time: 1 hour 5 minutes). From London Bridge and other Thameslink stations, you can change at East Croydon for the train from Victoria.

Lunch

Lunch options are few and far between on this walk. Note that the Newmarket Inn on the A27 closed in early 2023; it re-opened as a Starbucks franchise. There is also an Esso station next door where you could buy sandwiches and a Costa coffee. As explained near the end of section 3, you cannot cross the A27 here (despite the tempting path opposite), you must re-trace your steps to the previous path junction.

Once over the A27 at Housedean Farm you could turn left, following the A27 (there is a pavement) for 1.5 kms to the Swan Inn at Falmer, but this cannot be recommended. You may also find burger vans etc here.

The suggested (late) lunch option is the Half Moon at Plumpton (Tel: [01273 890253](tel:01273890253)), which involves a detour (see section 5) and is reached after 15.7 kms. It welcomes walkers and serves food from midday to 2.30pm Monday to Friday, from midday to 3.00pm on Saturday, and midday to 4.00pm on Sunday; groups of 6 or more people should phone to book. The pub has pleasant internal and outside dining areas. The menu (2021) consists of starter plates, main plates, daily specials, ploughmans, sandwiches, plus a good selection of puddings.

Picnickers will also find few options, especially on a windy day. There is a seat in section 3 as you descend from the Downs. Early in section 4 the walk enters woods, which again offers some shelter.

Tea

Tea options in Lewes are much more plentiful, those mentioned here are closest to the route.

Caffe Nero, 61/62 High Street

Patisserie Lewes, 74/75 High Street

Cote Brasserie, 82 High Street

Rights of Man, 179 High Street

White Hart Hotel, 55 High Street. Closed for refurbishment in early 2024.

Ask Italian restaurant, 186 High Street

Royal Oak, 3 Station Street. Open 12 to 9 Wednesday to Saturday and 12 to 6 on Sunday.

Garden Lewes, 5 Station Street

Fork restaurant, 14 Station Street. Open lunch time to 2.30 Wednesday to Sunday and evenings from 6 Tuesday to Saturday.

Carafe Coffee Roasters, 29 Station Street

Lansdown Arms, 36 Lansdown Place

Depot Cinema Kitchen and Bar, Pinwell Road. Open from 10 (possibly later on Sundays) to 9, depending on film times.

Points of interest

Priory ruins

The interpretation panels illustrate life in the Priory of St Pancras, created around 1077-80 by William de Warenne and his wife Gundrada (and populated by monks from Cluny in France). The Priory dominated the town physically, economically and spiritually; the church was larger than Chichester Cathedral. It was demolished during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries (1537). Some of the Normandy limestone was reused in the building of Southover Grange nearby. Only ruins of the priory remain.

Lewes Racecourse

Horse racing took place here on the Downs for many years until the closure of the course in 1964. The houses you pass occupy the site of the grandstand and booths. They have become stables; race horses are still trained here.

Battle of Lewes

This took place in 1264, near the prison and Spital Road (passed on this walk). There is a viewpoint panel near the castle. The rebel earl, Simon de Montfort, with an army of Londoners and 5,000 barons, defeated Henry III, who had two horses killed under him and was forced to seek refuge in Lewes Priory. The Mise of Lewes was signed next day and led to England's first parliamentary meeting at Westminster in 1265.

Baxter's Field

A grassy space with free access and fine views of the castle (passed near the end of the walk).

Lewes Castle

Lewes Castle, and the Barbican House Museum nearby, are open to visitors, daily, 10am to 4pm, November to February, and 10am to 5.30pm, March to October, with last admissions 30 mins before closing. Admission (2021) £8.80. The castle was built soon after the Norman invasion of 1066 on a man-made hill by William de Warenne, who fought alongside William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings. Its towers were added about the time of the Battle of Lewes. The castle gives a far-reaching view over the town to the coast at Newhaven. The outer Barbican Gate was added in the 1300s. Barbican House Museum houses the town model and items of Sussex history. The bowling green, probably the former jousting ground in the bailey, is thought to be the oldest in the country.

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By Car **Start**

Help National Rail: 03457 48 49 50 • Traveline (bus times): 0871 200 22 33 (12p/min) • TFL (London) : 0343 222 1234

Version Apr-25 [Mike Powell](#)

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Walk Directions

1 Lewes to Swanborough (3.3 kms)

1. Note that the first section of the walk is the reverse of Book 2, Walk 24a, Lewes Circular via Northease Manor, to just beyond point A3 of that walk.
2. Turn left from the station exit on Station Road, then in 150 metres left at the mini-roundabout on to Mountfield Road, which takes you over the railway line. Cross the road and in 50 metres, just before Lewes Football Club, turn right (South) on a tarmac path signed to Lewes Priory (there is a fine view of Lewes Castle behind you here). The football ground is known as The Dripping Pan, apparently because the Priory monks used to pan for salt on the site and it is believed that the spoil from their labours was used to build The Mount, an artificial hill which you will see very shortly on your right. In 120 metres turn right (West) on a tarmac path with sports fields to your left (this is Convent Field). Follow the tarmac to the left by a flint wall in 70 metres and the right in 20 metres, then in 7 metres go through a 1.5 metre

wide gap in a brick wall, following signs to the left for the Greenwich Meridian Trail (GMT). In 50 metres turn right by the knight's helmet shaped monument (on your right) 'to mark the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Lewes fought on the 14th May 1264 unveiled by the Duke of Norfolk'. In 30 metres you have the walls of the ruined Priory of St Pancras on both sides. In 30 metres the tarmac turns right but you continue ahead across the lawn (255 degrees), leaving the ruins behind (alternatively, for a closer look at the ruins, follow the tarmac to the right and left, which will lead you to the same exit). In 100 metres you return to the tarmac and in 70 metres turn left on Cockshut Road, leaving Priory Park and following another GMT logo, with Southdown Sports Club on your left and a rail bridge behind you.

3. In 20 metres the signed public footpath makes a (rather superfluous) turn to the right, through a car park, but it is easier to stay on the tarmac, which turns right. In 65 metres you enter a (probably windy) subway under the A27, emerging from it in 35 metres. Turn right when the tarmac divides, then in 10 metres go through a wooden kissing gate to the left with a yellow arrow footpath sign, ignoring the more obvious tarmac path ahead.
4. Continue ahead (200°) with rugby fields visible to your right (note that the path ahead is sometimes closed for maintenance work, in which case you should turn right and left to keep to the left edge of the sports fields; just after a small play enclosure you will find a footbridge to the left, between the second gate and the mini-pylons below). In 60 metres go through a wooden kissing gate (to the right of a metal field gate). Keep right here (West at first), signed for the GMT again, on a probably muddy raised path with a watercourse (Cockshut Stream) immediately to your right. The path turns left in 180 metres, with a cricket field then more rugby fields to the right across the water. In 50 take a wooden bridge over a water channel, then in 250 metres take another wooden bridge. In 50 metres go through a wooden gate and continue past a footbridge (see above) and through a possibly overgrown section. In 160 metres go under some mini-pylon cables (250°). In 40 metres just after another GMT marker post turn half left away from the ditch, ignoring the right turn to the Kingston Road.
5. Cross a field (200°) to go through a wooden kissing gate with a yellow arrow in 120 metres and cross a large arable field on a usually well-cleared path. In 320 metres at a 3 armed signpost ignore the right turn and continue slightly left, signed to Swanborough and Iford $\frac{3}{4}$ miles, on a gravel cycle path with another GMT logo. In 310 metres, after passing sewage works on your left, go through a wooden barrier and turn right briefly (240°) on concrete at a wooden signpost reading $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to Swanborough. Behind you is the Swanborough Lakes fishing complex. (!) In just 20 metres turn left on a signposted public footpath and in 15 metres in close succession go up some steps, through a gate, across a drive under mini-pylon cables and through a second gate to enter a field. In 350 metres the usually well-cleared footpath divides as marked by a wooden footpath post (there is also a

circular drain set in concrete here). Walk 2/24a and the GMT both turn left here but you turn right (perhaps after turning round for good views of Lewes).

6. In 200 metres go through a gate, cross the road by a bus stop and continue ahead, signed as a No Through Road to Swanborough. In 80 metres you pass Swanborough Manor on your right and in 80 metres you pass to the left of a footpath post and a grass triangle with a seat (a good spot for a break).

2 Swanborough to South Downs Way (Breach Road) (1.6 kms)

1. Continue on a concrete road passing the last in a row of houses in 200 metres. In 250 metres you pass West Drove Lodge on your right. In 100 metres you pass the last houses and enter woods, now on a private road. In 120 metres the road divides at a 3 armed wooden signpost; to the left (according to the map) is Dencher Road and ahead is Breach Road. Take Breach Road (in reality a track). In 120 metres go through a gate by a field gate. Continue steadily uphill with a wire fence on your right, now on the open hillside. In 320 metres (just after a right turn) the path curves to the left, away from the fence and climbs more steeply. Ashcombe Windmill, probably familiar from other Lewes walks, is visible to the right, as it is for much of the walk, between Kingston in the foreground and Lewes in the distance.
2. In 500 metres ignore an unmarked path descending towards Kingston on the right. In 40 metres turn right on the South Downs Way (SDW), before a 4 armed wooden signpost and cattle grid. You now follow the South Downs Way all the way to Black Cap at the end of Section 4!

3 South Downs Way (Breach Road) to Housedean Farm (4.7 kms)

1. In 120 metres go through a wooden gate by a field-gate. In 80 metres ignore a path to the right at a wooden signpost (this is the path taken to the Downs by Walk 2/24, Lewes to Saltdean). In 320 metres you pass a fenced enclosure on your right. In 320 metres the path turns to the left at a path junction and post, with a wire fence on your right. In 40 metres go through a wooden gate. The AMEX stadium, home of high flying (in 2023) Brighton and Hove Albion FC, is visible ahead to the right. In 100 metres pass another South Downs Way post. Avoid straying towards the fence above you on the left. In one kilometre along a path named on the map as Jugg's Road, go through a wooden gate by a field gate and turn right with the SDW on a track. In 30 metres you fork right again (310 degrees) by a three armed signpost, then in 60 metres the grassy path curves further to the right with a wire fence on its right and goes steadily downhill. In 80 metres you go through a gate, now with a wire fence to your left; to the right is a long valley (Cold Coombes on the map) and Lewes in the distance.

2. In 280 metres you go through another gate by a field-gate and in 20 metres the path turns right with the SDW at a 3 armed wooden signpost. In 650 metres go through another gate, with a wire fence and a rough hedgerow on your left, continuing on a farm track, with an arable field to your right. Just beyond the gate is a seat in a tree trunk, which would offer a sheltered spot for a picnic before you get drowned out by the A27, though capacity is limited. In 400 metres at a three armed wooden signpost you have a choice: fork left for the main walk (for this, skip the next paragraph), or right for Littledown Cottages and limited lunch options (in which case continue immediately below).

3. *For Littledown Cottages*, take the public bridleway to the right (50°) with a hedge on your left and a large (seemingly infinite) field to your right. In 350 metres go through a metal field-gate (or the space where once was a walkers' gate). In 100 metres you pass the houses of Littledown Cottages to your left and right. In 55 metres go under a rail bridge. In 100 metres you arrive at the A27. To your right is the former Newmarket Inn, which is expected to re-open as a coffee shop in the future. To your left is an Esso garage which includes a Costa counter. Note that to resume the walk you must return to the previous path junction and continue below (although there is a path opposite, you cannot cross the dual carriageway here).

4. *For the main walk*, fork left with the SDW at the signpost. In 60 metres you enter woods and continue downhill. In 70 metres the path turns right and you continue with a field on your left. In 220 metres turn left at an SDW post and in 70 metres right at another SDW post. In 15 metres you go under the rail line and turn left in 20 metres, parallel with the rail line and the A27 below on your right. In 450 metres go through a wooden gate by an SDW signpost and continue on tarmac. In 150 metres turn right on tarmac on to a footbridge over the A27. In 50 metres, after the bridge, the main route turns right, but you have the option of turning left for the Swan Inn at Falmer (*if going this way, you may need ear plugs as you will be walking alongside the A27 for 1.5kms to the pub, then back again*). In 40 metres keep right again at a road junction and in 100 metres you pass the entrance to Housedean Farm campsite. There is usually a burger van in the layby ahead.

4 Housedean Farm to Black Cap (4.4 kms)

1. In 100 metres turn left with the SDW at a 3 armed wooden signpost (5 miles to Ditchling Beacon) and up some steps. In 25 metres go through a wooden gate and continue up the left edge of a field. Look behind you on the climb for rewarding views back to Seaford Head and Newhaven. In 520 metres the ground levels out and you enter woods by a wooden gate (Bunkershill Plantation) and continue downhill (you may be able to find a sheltered spot for a picnic here). In 400 metres, after a steep descent, you leave the woods. Continue between wire fences and uphill again (70°). In 520 metres go through a wooden gate, then left at a 3 armed wooden signpost, still uphill, with a wire fence on your left.

2. In 1.15 kilometres go through a gate by a field-gate, ignoring a bridleway to your right. In 20 metres continue ahead at a 3 armed wooden signpost, ignoring the bridleway to your left, still uphill with a wire fence to your left. In 420 metres you pass under power lines, then in 150 metres turn right with the SDW at a 3 armed wooden signpost. In 120 metres go through a wooden gate by a field-gate and continue (20°) with a rough hedgerow on your right.
3. In 700 metres you reach the corner of woods on your left and continue on a stony path. In 300 metres you reach a FIVE armed wooden signpost, which in 2023 was in need of some TLC, variously being spotted horizontal and lurching at an angle! For a pub lunch at Plumpton, turn left here and continue in the next section; otherwise take the public bridleway through the gate on your right, signed Lewes 3 miles and skip the next section (leaving the SDW).

5 Black Cap to Plumpton and back (optional lunch loop) (3 kms)

Circuit to and from a pub in Plumpton

1. Turn left (West) at the 5 armed signpost, still on the South Downs Way (Ditchling Beacon, 2½ miles), on a wide track with wire fences on both sides (a gate gives access to the grass to your right, so you could walk parallel to the hard track). In 550 metres the wire fence on your left ends. In 80 metres take the grassy bridleway through a wooden gate on your right, half left (290°) at a wooden signpost. The ground slopes away increasingly steeply to your right, then the path narrows. In 200m you reach the steep scarp slope and follow the narrow path cutting down it. In another 300 metres go down steep steps and through a wooden gate.
2. Turn right and downhill on a concrete track, now following Walk 1/29 (Hassocks to Lewes) [!] warning: this road can be slippery in the wet. In 45 metres there is a path on your left with a three way signpost; ignore this and all other ways off. In 400 metres you come to the B2116 road and turn left. The suggested lunch stop, 50 metres away on the other side of the road, is the Half Moon pub in Plumpton. If you cannot face climbing back to the Downs after lunch, you have the option of finishing at Plumpton (refer to the Alternative Ending directions below)
3. Coming out of the pub after lunch, go left on the B2116 road and ignore the bridleway on which you came down before lunch. In another 80 metres veer right to pick up the path parallel to the road. In 100 metres pass by a redundant stile and come out into an open field. Here turn half-right on a clear path, your direction 140°, heading towards the Downs. In 200 metres go over a ladder stile and bear half-left over a field and in 65 metres go over another ladder stile to enter a wood. In 15 metres you come to a larger path T-junction where you turn right uphill, your direction 140°. After 65 metres ignore a fork to your right and continue almost directly ahead. Soon you are in a shallow woodland cutting. In 150 metres as you go up on the edge of the wood, enjoy the view at the opening to your left and carry on

up. After another 150 metres, ignore the footpath marked with a yellow arrow to your left. In 170 metres go through a wooden gate and on upwards. In 135 metres, having left the woods, you turn right (leaving Walk 1/29 which continues ahead) on a chalk road by a bridleway marker. In 180 metres, near the top of the climb and just before the 5 armed signpost (which may or may not still be standing), turn half left in the field, in the direction of the finger post.

6 Black Cap to Lewes (6.3 kms)

The main route continues

1. From the 5 armed signpost, take the bridleway signed Lewes 3 miles and go through the gate in to National Trust land (*if you are coming from the pub, ignore the gate, which is to your right*). Head East, keeping to the high ground, making for the right edge of woods ahead. Contrast the wide views of the flatlands of the Low Weald to your left with the hilly terrain to your right! In 380 metres you reach the triangulation column on Black Cap.
2. Fork right from Black Cap on a grassy path (110°). It is downhill all the way to Lewes! In 500 metres you pass a bridleway post, below the top of Mount Harry. In 700 metres go through a wooden gate by a pylon and field-gate with a 2 armed wooden signpost reading Public Bridleway to Lewes. In 80 metres ignore a bridleway to your right. In 150 metres you have the fence for the old racecourse to your right.
3. In 800 metres turn right at a gap in the racecourse fence, passing an information board for the old racecourse, then turn left on a surfaced road (gravel, then tarmac). In 100 metres you pass to the left of a row of houses and stables. In 200 metres the road bends left but you take the public bridleway ahead at a 2 armed wooden signpost and go through (or past) a gate in 10 metres, to the left of a hedge. This is not a bridleway in name only, it is widely used by horses, so expect mud outside the summer. In 300 metres ignore a minor turning to the right. In 100 metres you may find it easier to walk on the grass to the left of the path, but be mindful of the warning notices in case there are galloping thoroughbreds around! Avoid straying away from the bridleway. In 300 metres there is a blue bridleway post – be sure to rejoin the official path here. The path enters woods lower down.
4. In 600 metres keep left at a path junction, then in 45 metres left again at a 3 armed wooden signpost on to a wider track, still following the public bridleway arrows. You have the walls of Lewes prison to your right. In 120 metres go through a gate with another blue public bridleway sign. You are now on Spital Road and close to the site of the Battle of Lewes. In 200 metres cross the busy A275 (Nevill Road) and fork left (by a seat) on De Montfort Road.
5. In 200 metres you pass St Pancras School on your left and in 220 metres cross Bradford Road to Paddock Lane. To your left is a gate to the left which leads down steps to Baxter's Field, an extensive green space which is worth a quick look if you have the legs (there are good views of Lewes Castle, but it is a long way down and

up again, with no other exits). Continuing on Paddock Lane, in 200 metres you pass the Paddock Art Studios.

6. In 25 metres take the right of two tarmac paths with railings to your right, uphill (I lied about the downhill). In 80 metres cross New Road/Westgate Street. Ignore the steps ahead and turn left and right, still uphill on a cycle path (Castle Lane). At the top of the climb in 130 metres, detour to the left for a viewpoint and information panel for the Battle of Lewes, but to continue the walk turn sharp right on Castle Precincts, opposite an ancient Bowling Green, formerly the Castle Tilting Ground. In 100 metres you pass through the Barbican Gate and then go past the entrance to Lewes Castle on your right and Barbican House Museum on your left. 10 metres beyond these you come to the High Street and turn left (to the right are Patisserie Lewes and Cote Brasserie). In 100 metres you pass the Rights of Man pub, in 30 metres you come to the White Hart Hotel on the right-hand side of the road and in another 20 metres you pass Ask Italian restaurant. At the traffic lights by the (very helpful and well-stocked) Tourist Information Centre, turn right on Station Street. This road, which passes the Royal Oak and Fork Restaurant (formerly Garden Room Cafe), leads straight downhill to cross Southover Road in 150 metres (with the Landsdown Arms on the left). Pass the approach to Depot Cinema Kitchen and Bar (on your left) to reach Lewes Station in another 120 metres (platform 2 for trains to London).

Alternative ending at Plumpton (4 kms)

1. From the B2116 facing the Half Moon, leave the road immediately to the left of the pub building to enter the car park. Alternatively, from the pub, go up the steps from the garden and in to the car park. Either way, cross the car park to the top left and in 30 metres pass to the left of an 'overflow parking' sign and continue ahead on grass.
2. In 160 metres at the far end, turn left on a crossing public footpath and pass between trees. In 20 metres go over a stile with a footpath signpost just beyond and head West across another grassy area, parallel with the road. In 260 metres, just after a signpost on your left, you go through a gate to your right and resume your former direction. In 120 metres turn right on a drive. Take the left fork (Plumpton College), ignoring the private drive to the right.
3. In 110 metres ignore a turning to the College buildings on your left. In 100 metres you have a wooden gate on your right. The easiest, most direct and driest option, is to stay on the drive (due North) to the point indicated at the end of the following paragraph. For something more interesting, turn right through the gate and continue on a clear path which soon turns left through well-maintained grounds with a neat hedge to your right. Enjoy it, because it's about to get a whole lot muddier.
4. In 260 metres the path divides at two yellow arrows on a tree. Take the left fork (110 degrees) on a grassy path. In 120 metres take a footbridge over a ditch, then a stile and continue on grass. Halfway through the field you pass under wires and in 220

metres there are buildings visible to your right (Drews Farm on the map), but you go through a gap in to the next field, then make for the far left corner (due North; the right of way follows the right edge of the field then turns left, which is a long way to trudge and no better underfoot). In 110 metres go over a stile and footbridge, then half right (North West) in the next field. In 140 metres go through a gap in a hedge and over another wooden footbridge. The path turns right, then you keep to the left edge of a large grassy area. In 220 metres at a wooden signpost, turn left in a field (due West). In 120 metres turn right (North) on a dirt track. This is the drive you left earlier.

5. In 180 metres the track turns left, but you continue ahead, on the left side of a hedge. In 350 metres go over a wooden footbridge in to woods, then over a second footbridge and in 50 metres over a stile. In 100 metres continue ahead at a 3 armed wooden signpost with houses ahead. In 180 metres turn right at The Orchard (Ashurst on the map) by a public footpath signpost. In 80 metres turn left at the next signpost.
6. You soon have Plumpton racecourse on your right. In 130 metres fork right, still alongside the racecourse (not left to Jenner's Farm). In 450 metres you enter a large car park and in 320 metres you reach the station footbridge. Cross the bridge for trains to the South; trains for London go from this side.

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