

Last checked			
17 August 2024			
	Document last updated: 25 September 2024		
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Sandling to Folkestone

Gentle countryside, a downland ridge, then down to the sea

Length	Main walk:	11.2km (7 miles)
	a) With extension to Folkestone harbour	13.4km (8.3 miles)
	b) Folkestone figure of nine walk	21.7km (13.5 miles) or 22.7km (14.1miles)

Toughness 5 out of 10: two steep hill climbs: otherwise flat or gentle gradients

Maps OS Landranger 179, OS Explorer 138

Features

This walk was designed as a swimming walk – that is, to give you a pleasant morning walk of 7.8km (4.8 miles), and then get you to the beach for an afternoon sea swim (the sea is warm enough from July to September). However, it also makes a pleasant short outing at any time of the year - for example as a brisk winter walk. There are one or two bluebell woods near the start of the walk in late April or early May.

The walk starts along the track of an old branch line. There is then is a pleasant section of orchards and fields which brings you to the village of Saltwood, with its church and castle (the former home of Alan Clarke MP, a minister in Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s who published famously racy diaries), before you suddenly find yourself on a fine section of open downland. The first steep (but not very long) hill climb is here, which takes you up to a ridge with fine views of the sea.

After an **awkward (but also very short) road section** (see paragraphs 23-24 on page 4 for details), you pass by Sene Farm and over more downland territory, before descending into the Seabrook Valley and on up the second steep hill, which brings you out by a military cemetery with even better sea views. Finally, there is an unexpected descent down through luxury houses to the coast at Sandgate for a pub lunch and a swim. The walk ends with a pleasant 1.7km (1.1 mile) stroll along the traffic-free seafront promenade into Folkestone, and then it is another 1.7km up through the Leas cliff gardens to Folkestone station.

Walk options

a) Extension to Folkestone harbour. This recommended **2.2km (1.4 mile)** extension takes you to Folkestone's refurbished harbour area, with more refreshment options, and then back through the old streets of the town and along its attractive clifftop esplanade. Directions for this are on page 7.

b) Folkestone figure of nine walk. This links this walk with option **c) Folkestone Circular** of the **Folkestone to Dover walk**, also on this website, to give you a grand tour of the coast on either side of Folkestone. Depending on which of the two versions of the Folkestone Circular you choose to do, this gives a total walk (from Sandling) of **21.7km (13.5 miles)** or **22.7km (14.1 miles)**. To do this option follow the main walk and then the **Extension to Folkestone harbour** and you will be told when and how to switch to the Folkestone to Dover directions.

Transport

The walk starts at **Sandling** station, which is a minor stop between Ashford and Folkestone, served hourly out of **Charing Cross** and **London Bridge**, journey time 1hr 30 mins. You can also get to the station in an hour via the Southeastern high speed line out **St Pancras**, changing at Ashford, for which a small supplement is payable: this reduces the journey time to 1 hour 10 minutes. **Buy a day return to Folkestone Central.** Catch a train that arrives at Sandling about 11.00 to get to lunch in time.

Return trains from Folkestone are hourly to both Charing Cross (1hr 49 minutes) and St Pancras (56 minutes): as you can see, in this direction there is a much bigger time advantage to the St Pancras trains.

Swimming notes

The beach at Sandgate is a very picturesque place for swimming in summer - on a sunny day it can seem almost Mediterranean. It is a shingle beach, so some form of plastic sandals, diving shoes or flip flops are useful. As with most places along the English Channel coast it has a noticeable current either up or down Channel, depending on the tides. In the author's experience this always runs parallel to the shore, but even confident swimmers should ascertain its direction and strength before swimming too far out.

Protection from the current (and waves) is provided by the Mermaids Beach in Folkestone, just below the Mermaids Cafe Bar, which has curved boulder breakwaters. It has a fairly gentle shingle slope and a sandy(ish) bottom at low tide.

Finally, just beyond Folkestone harbour, there is "Sunny Sands", a flat sandy beach that is well sheltered from westerly winds and which has in the past received top marks from the Marine Conservation Society for cleanliness. It is inevitably very popular with families with children.

Lunch and tea

The **Earl of Clarendon** (01303 248 684) in Sandgate, 7km (4.3 miles) into the walk, is a pub situated up a steep side alley tantalisingly close to the sea, and in summer puts some tables in the alley giving it the air of a Greek taverna. It serves basic meals all afternoon daily and walkers have good reports of the food. It has difficulty coping with groups, however.

The **Famous Ship Inn** (01303 906 365) in Sandgate High Street (essentially on the seafront promenade), 7.8km (4.9 miles) into the walk, has an upstairs open air deck with a fine view of the sea, as well as a table service restaurant downstairs, also with sea views. There is also a traditional bar area. The food quality is good, with a range of seafood dishes. Food is served all afternoon Wednesdays to Saturdays and to 5pm on Sundays: on Mondays and Tuesdays the pub is only open for drinks.

Just before the Famous Ship on the seafront is the **Boat House** cafe kiosk, which has some tables right on the promenade and serves some hot snacks and sandwiches. Other cafes and pubs can be found in **Sandgate High Street**, just inland of the promenade.

The **Mermaids Cafe Bar** on the sea front near Folkestone is a beachfront cafe run by pub chain Shepherd Neame, which means it also has a small bar, though this is not always open. The cafe part does seem to be open year round, however. Food served includes sandwiches, paninis and jacket potatoes as well as cakes.

An even more informal tea option is the **HatHats Coffee** kiosk in the Leas Gardens just behind the Mermaids Beach, at the base of the zigzag path. Serving cakes, hot drinks and ice cream, it is open till 6pm from late March to late October, and 4pm otherwise.

On option **a) Extension to Folkestone Harbour** there are a lot more tea options. The Harbour area has various pubs, and the newly refurbished **Harbour Arm** (the former ferry port) has lots of pop-up bars and eateries, particularly at weekends. In the Old High Street on the walk back to the station there is the **Steep Street Coffee House**, open to 6pm Monday to Saturday and 5pm on Sunday.

WALK DIRECTIONS

Sandling station to Saltwood Castle (2km/1.2 miles)

1. From platform 2, the platform you disembark on if coming from London, cross the footbridge and go through the gate to the right onto the old branch line platform. *(If the station is staffed, this gate is locked: at such times exit through the station building.)*

This **branch line** ran from Sandling to Hythe and Sandgate. It opened in 1874 and was intended to provide a more direct route for boat trains to Folkestone Harbour (which had to climb a steep gradient and then reverse onto the mainline at Folkestone). But the planned tunnel beyond Sandgate was never built.

The branch was never busy. Even though Sandgate was quite a popular resort in Victorian times it was always easier to get to the town via **Shorncliffe Camp** station on the mainline (now **Folkestone West**). Services to Sandgate ceased in 1931 and when the line reopened in 1945 after a wartime closure it had just two trains a day to Hythe. It closed completely in 1951.

2. Turn left along the platform, passing in 20 metres through a gate in a low metal fence and carrying on along a part-overgrown footpath (*if **TOO overgrown**, see the alternative in the bullet point below*). In 50 metres, where the platform ends, follow the path for another 60 metres to merge with a car-wide path (the trackbed of the branch line).
 - An **alternative way** to reach the branch line trackbed is to exit into the car park on this side of the station and turn left to its far end. Here go

through a car-wide gap in a green metal fence onto a track, the old branch line. Continue with the directions below.

3. Follow the old trackbed for 300 metres until you see an old tunnel up ahead (not very visible in summer). 80 metres before the tunnel veer left up steps.
4. At the top of the steps follow a gravel path which in 30 metres merges with an earth track coming from a gate to the left.
5. In 30 metres more ignore a path to the right that goes uphill, but in 10 metres more, at T-junction, turn right onto a **car-wide** path (some **bluebells** here in late April/early May).
6. Keep on this path as it curves left downhill in 70 metres and then comes out alongside an orchard to your right in 100 metres more.
7. Ignore ways off (including a fieldgate into the orchard) as the path descends into a dip and then climbs up over a hill, still with the orchard fence to your right.
8. In 300 metres the path turns right, with houses now to your left.
9. In another 200 metres the path merges with a tarmac lane. Keep straight on down this.
10. In 250 metres you come to a church on your left. Enter the churchyard through a black metal gate, passing under its lychgate in 40 metres more, and carrying on to the right of the church.
11. In 70 metres exit the churchyard through a metal gate. Veer right diagonally across the field beyond, aiming for the right-hand end of two barns ahead.

12. As you cross the field you should see a wooden kissing gate on the right-hand edge of the field, about 25 metres before the barns. Go through this and down a fenced-in path towards houses.
13. In 50 metres you come to a road and go left. In 70 metres ignore a road to the right and bend left with the road you are on.
14. In 60 metres, in front of "The Lodge", a quaint old stone house with pointed windows, turn right, taking the leftmost of two tracks (the other is marked private in any case)
15. You are now passing **Saltwood Castle** to the right.

Saltwood Castle has a long history. The first known structure on this site was in 488, when a fortification was built by Aese, son of the King of Kent. In those days sea tides still flowed to the foot of the hill on which the castle stands. The current structure (which is not open to the public) dates from the Norman Conquest. It is said that the murder of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 was planned here.

In modern times the castle was the home of Alan Clark, a Conservative minister in Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s, whose racy diaries caused a great stir. He used to swim in the moat once a year.

Saltwood Castle to Horn Street (3.6km/2.3 miles)

16. In 100 metres **there is a track to the left**, sometimes closed off by a fieldgate. **Turn left** on this, leaving the main track, and crossing the course of the old branch line. Beyond, pass through a fieldgate and keep straight on along the left-hand edge of the large field.
17. In 200 metres you go over the crest of a hill and down the far side.
18. In another 450 metres, at the far end of the field, pass through a black metal gate and beyond this climb steeply up the escarpment on a path between scrub and bracken.
19. The footpath route is straight uphill, a steep climb through gorse bushes. *(Now and then it gets blocked and a different route emerges: in such cases, **take whatever path** leads you up onto the top of the escarpment in front of you.)*
20. However you have got there, at the top of the ridge turn right just before a wire fence. Increasing amounts of gorse growing here in recent years now stop you from walking along the summit of the ridge, but keep as close to it as you can, with the gorse bushes to your left. *There is a fine view to the right down onto Romney Marsh.*
21. In 500 metres, 250 metres before the end of the ridge, **go left across an easily-missed stile** (*hidden by gorse bushes, but as of November 2021 a path had been cut through them that led to it.*) Beyond, turn right along the fence (*with a fine view of the North Downs ridge behind you and to your left*).
22. In 150 metres cross another stile and then carry on for 80 metres to yet another stile and the main road.
23. **Take immense care on this road**, which is narrow and has quite fast moving traffic in both directions – **traffic which will not have much time to see you as it will have just come round a blind bend or up a steep hill.** You need to follow it to the left for 180 metres but there is only a very very narrow verge here and you need to **keep an eye on traffic coming up from behind you** to be sure they give you enough room on this narrow section of road. *(It is tempting to use the verge of the golf club on the opposite side of the road, but where this ends in a wood you have to make an awkward descent of an embankment to the road and there is insufficient room to walk down this side of the road so the only alternative is to re-cross the road.)*
24. In 90 metres the road starts to descend into a gully. **In another 90 metres, you have to cross the road on a blind bend**, to turn right up the driveway to Sene Farmhouse: **this needs great care**, as traffic coming from the left will not see you at all - though there is at least a broad grassy verge here where you can plan your crossing.
25. Having safely gained the driveway to Sene Farmhouse, carry on down it, passing houses on your left, and then on down a gravel track between tall poplar trees.
26. At the end of the track, you come to a T-junction with a path. Turn left on this, downhill.
27. In 80 metres go past a redundant stile and on along a path into a wood.

28. In 350 metres, at the end of the wood, pass through a gate with army notices on it warning you to keep to the path. There is a fine view of the downs ahead. Here ignore a bridleway going straight ahead, and instead go **right** along the fence with the wood to the right (a route that should be indicated by a footpath arrow on the gate).
29. In 120 metres, at the corner of the wood, keep **straight on** across the field (this is a right of way), ignoring a grassy path forking right to a car-wide opening 70 metres to the right.
30. Keep about 70 metres to the left of the tree boundary, curving gently left with it, until in 500 metres you come to a gravel track coming from the left. Turn right on this.
31. In 100-180 metres, depending on where you joined the track, pass through a metal kissing gate into a wood (with **bluebells** in season) and keep straight on along a clear path
32. The path goes gently downhill at first and then in 70 metres descends slightly more steeply.
33. In another 70 metres, at a fork, **ignore** the path that in 5 metres curves sharply to the right, but instead take the **left-hand fork** directly downhill towards a stile in another 80 metres.
34. Cross the stile to keep downhill on a path just inside the wood, with a field to your left.
35. In 250 metres cross ignore paths left and right (the right-hand one leading to houses) and carry on downhill on an initially rather overgrown path with a house garden to your left.
36. In another 120 metres you come down to a road. Turn right on this for 20 metres and then left over a stile, a signposted footpath.

Horn Street to Sandgate **(2.2km/1.4 miles)**

37. Follow a path that climbs shallow steps into the woods, with a fence to the right.
38. At the top of the steps keep straight on for 400 metres, all the way to the top of the hill, at first up a fairly gentle slope, then on a final steep climb.
39. At the top of the hill there is a footpath sign to Folkestone. Turn around here for a **fine view** back towards the downs

(which is slowly getting obscured by trees...).

40. Follow the footpath sign to the left for 50 metres to a road.

*Across the road is **Shorncliffe Camp**, the base of the Gurkhas, the Nepalese regiment of the British army, though much of it has now been sold for redevelopment, as you can see. (The Gurkhas are still there, but in a part not visible from this point). The camp was a major staging post for troops in the First World War. 40 metres to the right when you get to the road is the entrance to **Shorncliffe Military Cemetery** on the right. It is worth going (respectfully) a little way into this for a fine view over the sea and Romney Marsh.*

41. **Your onward route**, however, is to go **straight on** along the road, with the camp (or whatever is replacing it) to your left. There is initially no pavement, but there is a green verge on the right-hand side, with an area of scrub beyond (possibly also due to be redeveloped...).
42. In 130 metres curve right with the road. There is now a pavement on its left-hand side.
43. In another 130 metres curve right again with the road, now going downhill. In 50 metres more pass a **Martello Tower** (a Napoleonic era circular fort) turned into a house.
44. Just beyond the Martello Tower, **ignore** "Upper Corniche", a road to the left, but **in another 50 metres** turn left down "The Corniche".
45. Keep on down this road, with fine sea views to the right. On a very clear day you see the white cliffs of the French side of the Channel, half right ahead.
46. In 300 metres, at the end of the road, keep straight on up a tarmac footpath to the left of the brick wall of number 11 (ie, not up its driveway, but to the left of it).
47. In 40 metres, just after metal barriers, turn right directly downhill towards the sea, with a brick wall to your right.
48. In 90 metres cross over a tarmac driveway and keep on downhill. In 50 metres more, the **Earl of Clarendon** pub, a possible lunch stop, is on your right.
49. In another 90 metres cross the main seafront road and turn left on its far

side. See **swimming notes** on page 2 if planning to swim here.

Sandgate has only existed since 1773 when navy ships were built on the shingle beach here and a community grew up around the activity. It was further boosted by the establishment of Shorncliffe Camp as an army base in 1794. In the nineteenth century it was quite a fashionable resort - William Wilberforce, the anti-slavery campaigner used to holiday here, and the writer HG Wells lived here for 12 years.

The one building that predates all this is **Sandgate Castle**, which you pass on the seafront about 100 metres beyond Folkestone Rowing Club. It was built in 1539 to guard against French invasion and is therefore more than two centuries older than the Martello Tower you saw a bit earlier in the walk.

A modern kind of castle is the large glass building on the hill behind the town. This is the headquarters of Saga, the holiday company for older people, which has provided quite an economic boost to the town since it moved here from Folkestone a few years ago.

50. After 200 metres walking along the seafront, just before a line of houses starts on the right-hand side with a blue wood-sided house, **veer right onto the seafront promenade** (which is not immediately obvious from the road).
51. In 350 metres, you pass the **Boat House** cafe kiosk and just beyond it the **Ship Inn**, another possible lunch stop, on your left. If you turn left inland here you come to **Sandgate High Street** and other lunch options (see **Lunch and tea** on page 2).

Sandgate to Mermaids Cafe **(1.7km/1.1 miles)**

52. After lunch carry on along the traffic-free seafront promenade.
53. In 1.3 kilometres, just before you round the headland at the end of the bay, the promenade becomes tarmac with bathing huts to the left.
54. In 400 metres the huts end and just as you round another slight headland you can see the buildings of the port of Folkestone about 1km ahead. 30 metres beyond this the **Mermaids Cafe Bar** is on the left, a possible tea stop. A good

swimming beach (see **Swimming Notes** on page 2) is to your right.

55. Beyond Mermaids Cafe, you have a choice:
- **To go direct to Folkestone station**, via the zigzag path and the Leas clifftop esplanade, continue with the directions in the next section.
 - For option **a) Extension to Folkestone Harbour**, adding **2.2km (1.4 miles)** to the walk, continue with paragraph 64 overleaf. This is also the route for option **b) the Folkestone figure of nine walk** (for which you also need the directions for the **Folkestone Circular** option of the **Folkestone to Dover** walk, also on this website).

Mermaids Cafe to Folkestone station direct (1.7km/1.1 mi)

56. 40 metres beyond the Mermaid Cafe Bar **fork left off the esplanade** up a sloping car-wide tarmac path.
57. In 40 metres, at the top of this path, merge with a level pathway and keep on past an adventure playground (seen through trees to the left and so possibly less visible in summer).
58. In 60 metres take the broader fork left, ignoring a narrower path straight on. In another 15 metres, at a T-junction, turn right towards a semi-circular structure, passing the **HatHats Coffee** kiosk (and **public toilets**) on your left.
59. In 20 metres more, at a crosspaths just beyond the kiosk, turn left uphill. You are now on a tarmac path uphill, with a grassy space and a semi-circular pillar structure (a stage?) to your right.
60. In 25 metres keep on uphill towards the cliff, ignoring a fork to the right. In another 20 metres ignore steps ahead to a grotto and curve right with the path, with a blue metal railing to your right.
61. Follow this **zigzag path** all the way up the cliff, emerging at the top on The Leas, the clifftop promenade of Folkestone. Here, go right.
62. In 130 metres, just before a green roofed building turn left up a broad avenue.
63. Follow this the broad avenue inland for 500 metres until it ends at a major road junction (the **third** roundabout you come to). Here, go straight across and curve right with the road to reach the

railway bridge in 110 metres. Just beyond this, **Folkestone station** is on your left.

To Folkestone station via the harbour (3.9km/2.4 mi)

*This is also the link to the **Folkestone figure of nine** walk, for which you also need the **Folkestone Circular** directions of the **Folkestone to Dover** walk, also on this website.*

64. Staying on the seafront after the Mermaids Cafe, in 600 metres follow the broadwalk onto the beach, passing in front of a new development of seafront apartments.
65. In 500 metres you come to the **Folkestone Harbour Arm**, the refurbished former ferry port. Turning right here takes you out onto the stone jetty with bars and restaurants, and a nice walk back along the top of its parapet (or vice versa). But the onward route is to turn left, passing through the former **Folkestone Harbour station**, now a walkway.
66. In 130 metres this brings you to the harbour: carry on across this on the former railway viaduct, now a walkway.
67. In 150 metres on the far side of the walkway, turn left down the steps onto the harbourside.
 - For the **Folkestone figure of nine walk**, pass through the arches under the former railway line you have just left (ie heading east, away from the town), to come to the edge of Folkestone Harbour in another 40 metres. Now refer to paragraph 15 of the directions on page 4 of the pdf version of the **Folkestone to Dover walk**, also on this website. Follow the **main walk route**. In paragraph 32 there is a **choice of routes**, turning right being the longer and left the shorter. In either case, once on the clifftop follow the **Folkestone Circular option** in the directions.
68. Otherwise you can explore the harbour area by passing through the railway arch: refreshment options here include **The Ship Inn**. Beyond the harbour is the **Sunny Sands** beach.
69. To return to the station pass back through the railway arch. Veer right across the plaza beyond and on its far side take the steep narrow street going uphill, Old High Street.
70. In 150 metres the **Steep Street Coffee House**, a possible tea stop, is on your left
71. In another 120 metres, at a T-junction at the top of the Old High Street, turn left into Bayle Lane.
72. In 60 metres turn right before the Guildhall pub up a broad road, The Bayle.
73. In 100 metres, outside the British Lion pub, the road curves right and in 50 metres enters a churchyard.
74. Keep on for 60 metres to pass the church. Turn left on the path beyond it.
75. In 80 metres leave the churchyard and turn right onto a tarmac path.
76. In 120 metres you emerge at a road junction with a roundabout. Go straight across this onto the broad clifftop pedestrian esplanade, **The Leas**, passing under a **memorial arch to First World War soldiers** in 70 metres.
77. Keep along the esplanade for 400 metres until you come to a pavillion in mid esplanade - the entrance to the **Leas Cliff Hall**. Opposite it is a wide platform with views of the sea.
78. Just beyond the Leas Cliff Hall turn right up a broad avenue leading inland away from the sea.
79. Follow this the broad avenue inland for 500 metres until it ends at a major road junction (the **third** roundabout you come to). Here, go straight across and curve right with the road to reach the railway bridge in 110 metres. Just beyond this, **Folkestone station** is on your left.