# the Blean Canterbury and Swale's ancient woodlands





A 25 mile (40 km) waymarked route through one of the largest and most distinctive ancient woodlands in England.

Un sentier de randonnée balisé de 40km à la découverte d'une des plus vaste forêt ancienne d'Angleterre chargée d'histoire.

## THE BLEAN & THE BIG BLEAN WALK

Covering over 11 square miles (3000 hectares), the Blean is one of the largest and most distinctive areas of ancient woodland in England, important nationally for both its wildlife and history.

The Big Blean Walk can be done as one very long circular walk or in stages. Bus routes provide links to the towns and train stations. The recommended starting point is Selling Railway Station but the Walk has been waymarked in both directions. You can make use of the Great Stour Way, North Downs Way or the Crab and Winkle Way to join or leave the Walk. Volunteers from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership and Kent Wildlife Trust installed over 60 waymarker posts in 2011.

Most of the Blean is on heavy clay so can get wet and very muddy, especially in the winter months, so it is recommended to do the Walk in drier months. The route is on public rights of way, permissive paths and roads. Take care on roads and at road crossings.

Today we can enjoy and treasure the Blean for three main reasons. Most of the woodland is on heavy





Volunteers installing waymarkers.

acidic clay soils and the effort to clear trees for farming was just not worth it. Nearly all of the Blean Woods today are protected, as it is recognised that the woodland is important for wildlife, landscape quality and recreation. Finally, and possibly most importantly, the woodland, through varying uses, has provided a valuable economic resource over thousands of years.

The Blean Woods are unusual compared to many other woods. In 1189 Richard I gave Church Wood to the Cathedral Priory, probably to repay funds received for his third crusade. With other woods already being owned by the church, this resulted in most of the Blean woods falling under religious ownership until the mid 20th century.

> Great spotted woodpeckers

Explore a world of history and nature

#### THE ECONOMIC WOODLAND



A charcoal oven in the woods.

Timber has been felled and coppice cut in the Blean ever since man developed the tools to do this. Coppicing is when trees are cut down almost to ground level but new multiple stems are allowed to grow from the stump. Historically the two most useful trees would have been oak and hazel. Oak was favoured for its usefulness as a building material and hazel was ideal for making hurdles and laths for wattle and daub walling. Oak bark was used in the tannery industry in Canterbury until 1953 and even oak sawdust had a use in curing fish.

The gunpowder works at Oare, near Faversham, was operational from the mid 16th century to 1934. It had a ready supply of charcoal from the Blean, usually made from alder, hazel, willow and alder buckthorn. Beech wood was used to make potash, also important in the gunpowder process. Another local industry, that existed until 1835, the copperas works at Tankerton, required lots of faggots (bundles of twigs), and oak posts to build defensive walls on the shore. The eventual product from the nodules of copperas or iron pyrites found in London Clay was green ferrous sulphate crystals that the weavers of Canterbury used as a mordant to bind vegetable dyes to their fabric.

There were lots of other uses for the trees from the Blean including supplying wheelwrights, boat builders, mines, coopers, sea defenders and coffin makers. From the 18th century sweet chestnut was widely planted (see The Trees of the Blean) and in the 20th century conifers or softwoods, were planted, often with generous grants, as they are fast growing and it was thought, would have better economic returns.

After the woodland economy hit pretty much rock bottom in the 1990s and 2000s, there now appears to be a brighter future with an improving market for firewood and a renewed interest in making use of a local renewable resource for fencing and other products.



Timber in Cheyney's Wood Yard, Herne, 1938. (From the collection of Joan Cheyney.)

## WOODBANKS & DITCHES

Along the Big Blean Walk you will see ancient woodbanks often with ditches next to them. These were created to stop livestock from entering the woods and eating coppice regrowth. The ditches would have been much deeper than seen today and the banks taller. It demonstrates the value of the coppice that such investment was made in moving earth. Ditches and banks were also used to mark out landownership. Well defined wood banks can be seen on the Big Blean Walk leaving Clowes Wood at Gypsy Corner and in East Blean Wood.



#### A woodbank in the Blean. (Liz Humpage.)

#### THE BLEAN LANDSCAPE

Kent has been referred to as the Garden of England for over 400 years. It gains this title because it has long been important for producing fruit and hops. The Blean is no exception and you will often see orchards or fields of strawberries and blackcurrants, especially in the north west of the Blean on the more fertile soils. Most of the hop gardens have now gone but you can still see the old oast houses where the hops were dried.





#### THE TREES OF THE BLEAN

The naturally occurring and abundant tree of the Blean is the oak, mainly sessile oak but also pedunculate or English oak, and hybrids of the two species. The sessile oak can grow on the acidic clay soil. It tends to produce a low quality timber with twists and shorter lengths. Most of Blean's oaks are relatively young, at around 100-140 years old. When it comes to biodiversity, the oak is a remarkable tree. It can live for many centuries, and over its lifetime, and even after it has fallen, it supports a staggering amount of life. It provides a home and food for many birds, small mammals, mosses, lichens, fungi and at least 350 species of insects including our largest beetle – the stag beetle.



Stag beetle – their larvae like to feed underground on rotting oak.

Another abundant tree of the Blean. but this time introduced by man, is the sweet chestnut. Sweet chestnut probably came over to Britain with the Romans but it was not until the 18th century that it was widely planted to provide the poles for growing hops on. It tends to be seen as coppice. When the hop industry started to decline at the end of the 19th century, there was an increasing demand for chestnut spile fencing. This is split chestnut stakes with wire attached to form a fence at a relatively low cost. There is still a small demand for chestnut fencing

but most coppice is now used for firewood. Some conservation bodies have been actively removing chestnut from their woods in order to replace with native species of trees which are better for wildlife or to leave open spaces to attract other wildlife such as butterflies.

Other trees and shrubs which can cope with the acidic clay soils are silver birch, hazel, holly, rowan, guelder rose and Corsican pine. Hornbeam, beech and ash are also common.





Sweet chestnut flowers.

# THE HEATH FRITILLARY BUTTERFLY & COMMON COW-WHEAT

The heath fritillary is one of Britain's rarest and perhaps the Blean's greatest conservation success story. Close to extinction in the late 1970s, the heath fritillary colonies in the Blean are now some of the country's largest. This butterfly has been brought back from the brink by reintroducing regular coppicing and creating and maintaining linked wide rides (tracks) and open spaces. This woodland management in the Blean creates the right conditions for cow-wheat, the caterpillars' food plant, and it helps the butterfly move through the woods. On the Big Blean Walk the best chances of seeing the heath fritillary are on BB north in East Blean Wood, on New Road in West Blean and Thornden Woods and BB south in Church Wood (RSPB), although ongoing management could result in the butterfly being more widespread in the future.

Heath fritillary on common cow-wheat, its larval food plant. *(Dan Binfield.)* 

### WILD FLOWERS ALONG THE WALK

Spring is the best time to see most flowers in woods because the trees have not closed their canopy of leaves, so reducing the light coming to the woodland floor. In spring look out for attractive flowers such as celandine, wood anemone, yellow archangel, cuckoo flower, dog violet, greater stitchwort, wood sorrel and bluebell. Along the grassier rides are species favouring slightly more open conditions and these can be seen from late spring onwards - birds foot-trefoil, St John's wort, black knapweed, agrimony and red bartsia. Some of the wetter rides will have an abundance of pendulous sedge, fleabane and hemp agrimony. The more acidic paths will have flowers such as common centaury,

cinquefoil, wood sage, tormentil and wood spurge. Conservation bodies are trying to put back some of the lost heathland in Kent and with its acidic soils, the Blean is a good place to do this. Heathland can be made up of plants such as heather, gorse and broom. The sweet smelling honeysuckle is common in the Blean and look out for the unusual looking butchers broom.



Butchers broom. (Mike Enfield.)

Beech.

### **A FEW SPECIAL BIRDS OF THE BLEAN**

One of the greatest joys of a spring walk in the Blean is listening to the full and varied song of a nightingale. This nationally declining summer visitor from Africa still has a stronghold in the Blean Woods, where it favours dense re-growth about four to eight years after coppicing. The rapid disappearance of traditional coppicing throughout the UK in the 20th century has been largely responsible for the nightingale's retreat, and Kent is one of the few counties where coppicing and nightingales are both still reasonably common.

Another bird that is no longer familiar to most people is the nightjar, which favours large open areas within woodland. Its evocative, mechanical churring call on balmy summer evenings is usually preceded by equally curious grunting sounds of woodcocks flying in great circuits as they search for mates, and you may also hear the squeaky calls of young tawny owls demanding to be fed. Look and listen for woodpeckers, all three species can be found in the Blean.



Nightjar.

Timing is of the essence: birdsong peaks in April and early May, and the woods can seem surprisingly quiet in the mid-summer heat.

### THE SOUTHERN WOOD ANT

One creature which you are almost guaranteed to see in the Blean is the southern wood ant Formica rufa. The nest can get to one metre tall and is inhabited all year round. The ants regulate the temperature inside by ensuring that the slope of the nest is angled to get the most sun, and by opening and closing numerous holes around the nest to ventilate or keep the heat in. They can also bring heat into the nest by sunbathing in large numbers and bringing this stored body heat into the nest. The colony is made up of soldiers, workers, nurses and guards. Contrary to popular understanding, wood ants don't sting, although it may feel like it. In fact they spray a concentration of formic acid, which is used to kill prey and as a defence mechanism. Wood ants are a vital part of the woodland ecosystem feeding on small insects and larvae and in turn being food for other wildlife such as woodpeckers.



A southern wood ant worker. (Robin Williams.)





Blean www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk **2** 01622 662012

Encourage people to visit the Blean,

to experience and enjoy its heritage

Manage Blean Woods NNR www.rspb.org.uk O1227 455972





Help to manage the wider countryside, working with community groups and landowners. www.kentishstour.org.uk O1233 813307

and wildlife 🖀 01227 372519

### WOODLAND NAMES

Nobody knows where the name Blean comes from but we do know the origins of many of the woodland names. There are two main themes seen in the names of these woods. The first is linked to the church ownership of many of the Blean woods – Church Wood, Brotherhood Wood, South Bishops Den, North Bishopden Wood etc. The second is the link to pigs in the Blean with the suffix or prefix 'den', the Saxon term for pig pasture – Denstead Wood, Ellenden Wood, Thornden Wood.

### **WOODLAND MANAGEMENT TODAY**



Highland cow. (Mike Enfield.)

Conservation organisations working in the Blean today are returning the Blean to its former glory by removing some of the trees that don't naturally belong here. The Woodland Trust has also established a major new woodland with native species such as oak and hazel. More open areas of heath and butterfly rich meadow are being created in the woods. In the south-east of England, it is largely agreed that woods such as the Blean, although hopefully still important for our future economy, offer a huge amount to local people and visitors as a

guiet recreational resource, and for wildlife. Removing dark conifer plantations and a small proportion of the abundant sweet chestnut improves the woodland aesthetically and it benefits wildlife. In order to manage more open areas hardy livestock are being put back into the wood. So look out for Highland cattle and wild breeds of pony, goats and sheep.

#### **KEY ORGANISATIONS WORKING IN THE BLEAN**



Manage Clowes Wood www.forestry.gov.uk



Manage Victory Wood www.woodlandtrust.org.uk



Responsible for maintaining Public Rights Of Way www.kent.gov.uk **2** 0845 345 0210

Natural England, Parish and District Councils, and the County Council all work to protect and promote the Blean.

### THE BLEAN INITIATIVE

The Blean Initiative is a partnership of landowners, local authorities, parish councils, conservation bodies and community groups working together to look after this unique landscape, its wildlife and its heritage for all those who live, work or visit the Blean. For further information about the Blean including circular walks visit www.theblean.co.uk

### WHERE IS THE BLEAN?



#### PLEASE FOLLOW THE COUNTRYSIDE CODE AT ALL TIMES

#### RESPECT, PROTECT, ENJOY

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under control
- Consider other people
- Inform others where you are going

Most of the Blean has national and international designations for its wildlife and many areas are sensitive to disturbance. Please remember that most of the Big Blean Walk is a walkers-only route and **cycling and horse riding are permitted only on certain routes such as bridleways and public roads.** 

It is especially important to keep dogs under close control in the spring and summer when ground-nesting birds are very vulnerable.

#### VISITOR INFORMATION & ACCOMMODATION

Canterbury Visitor Information Centre www.canterbury.co.uk 🖀 01227 378100

www.traveline.org.uk 2 0871 200 2233

Kent Police can be contacted on

www.nationalrail.co.uk 🖀 0845 748 4950

**Buses and Trains** 

01622 690690

Faversham Tourist Information Centrewww.faversham.org 201795 534542

For information on walking in Kent : www.kent.gov.uk/explorekent

For more information on the Blean: www.theblean.co.uk



The Big Blean Walk has been made possible by:









Produced by Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership December 2011. Images: Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership unless stated. Front cover: weasel - Jill Batchelor.

Designed by Clarity Interpretation www.clarity-consultancy.co.uk 2 01303 249501



1. Selling Station would have been a hive of activity in olden days in the hop season when pickers travelled here, mainly from London, and hop pockets were sent away. From here you can take the permissive path by the side of the railway or walk through Neames Forstal.

2. To the south there are fine views of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Selling Railway Tunnel is practically under your feet! In the woodland is an old chalk pit and in late April, a fine display of bluebells.

3. A fine view east to Bigbury Camp and the top of the Bell Harry Tower of Canterbury Cathedral.

#### North route

4. The Battle of Bossenden 1838 – the last armed uprising on English soil. In the era of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, when workers' conditions were worsening, rural unrest was widespread. Here in Bossenden Wood a group of disaffected labourers, led by a madman who called himself Sir William Courtenay, fought with militia from Canterbury. Courtenay, who believed himself to be the Messiah and therefore immortal, died along with eight of his supporters. Courtenay's body was laid out for all to see at the Red Lion.

5. Unlike the other small streams passed so far Denstroude Brook does not flow to the River Stour but out to the sea at Long Rock, Swalecliffe, between Whitstable and Herne Bay. Along this path, after the oak coppice, you will find hornbeam coppice.

6. The Woodland Trust purchased 133 ha (328 acres) of arable land in 2004 after the previous owner was refused planning permission for a landfill site. It has since linked woods up on either side by planting and allowing natural regeneration of trees. Until the early to mid 20th century the woods were connected but trees were felled to create poor quality arable land. It named the wood Victory Wood after its Trafalgar Woods Project of 2005 to commemorate the bicentenary of The Battle of Trafalgar (1805).

7. The grill and hatch you will walk past is a relic of the cold war! Between 1958 and 1968 a total of 1563 nuclear underground monitoring posts were built, approximately 8 miles apart throughout the UK. Fortunately they did not get too much use!

8. From this view point you can see across the Swale Estuary to the Isle of Sheppey and, to your right, the outskirts of Whitstable. Look and listen for skylarks, especially from February to June, as they spiral upwards, hover, and then spiral down, singing all the time.

9. Red Lion House, just to the north of the meadow, a Public House from the 17th century but also the former home of Oliver Postgate, who, along with Peter Firmin, created many children's TV programmes from the 1950s to the 1980s. In a 1999 BBC poll, Bagpuss was voted the most popular children's television programme of all time.

10. Clowes Wood is owned by the Forestry Commission who, with help from KSCP, has been widening rides (tracks) by cutting down trees to allow more light into the wood to benefit wildflowers, butterflies and birds. The Winding Pond is a good place for a picnic and is on the route of the Crab and Winkle Way, a popular cycle route which follows some of the old Crab and Winkle Railway Line. In 1830 the Crab and Winkle Line was the first regular steam

passenger railway in the world! The pond was used to provide the water to drive the fixed steam engine that hauled the Invicta locomotive and its carriages up the slope it could not manage.

11. West Blean and Thornden Woods were purchased by the Kent Wildlife Trust in 2003. KWT then restarted an annual chestnut coppice rotation, which has benefited heath fritillary populations and nesting birds such as nightingales and warblers. In 2009, with the help of a large Heritage Lottery Fund grant, the Trust started major restoration work to restore native woodland habitats by clearing and thinning the extensive conifer plantations covering more than 35% of the reserve. Parts of the cleared areas have been fenced and are being grazed by Konik ponies and Highland cattle to maintain open heathy rides and glades.

12. On New Road, the main track through the reserve, near the car parks and cottages on Thornden Wood Road, is the starting point for three woodland trails for visitors on foot. One, about a mile long, is a loop suitable for people in wheelchairs, set out as a "Wildart Trail", with wood sculptures, carvings and woven figures. The Radfall that runs north-south through the reserve can be seen very clearly along the eastern side of the trail.

13. Bleangate is situated on the highest ground locally and it could have been the location of the Hundred Court Leet, which dealt with disputes and levied taxes on behalf of the king. From Braggs Lane there are views out to the mouth of the Thames Estuary and Essex.

14. East Blean Wood is a National Nature Reserve and although relatively small is particularly rich in the variety of species found there. It is a very good place to see wild service tree, periwinkle, cow-wheat and heath fritillary. It has a small car park and is a good place to start either the north or south sections of the Big Blean Walk or a day's walk around the eastern circuit, including the Crab and Winkle Way.



A dramatic depiction of the 'Battle of Bossenden' by an artist of the time. (Courtesy the Director, National Army Museum, London.)







The locomotive Invicta hauls a train from Whitstable on the opening day of the Canterbury & Whitstable Railway on 3rd May 1830. (*Lithograph by Thomas Baynes, Canterbury Museums.*)

#### South Route

4. The North Downs Way is one of 19 National Trails in the UK. It runs from Guildford to Dover and in Kent follows much of the old Pilgrims' Way.

5. No Man's Orchard is a community orchard purchased by two Parish Councils in 1996. It is a special place as so few old orchards now exist in Kent, a county that produces 50% of English apples. It was designated as a Local Nature Reserve in 2002. Enjoy a picnic on the serpent seat!

6. Bigbury Camp is an Iron Age hill fort and scheduled ancient monument. It is considered by many to be the scene of Caesar's first battle and victory over native forces opposing the Roman invasion in 54BC. Bigbury was possibly the hilltop stronghold of one of the kings or leaders of the Cantii, the pre-Roman tribe of Kent, and a centre of farming, industry and a place of safety for the local population and their livestock. Remains indicate that it would have been defended by steep slopes to the south and banks and ditches to the north, one of which can be seen alongside the path. Kent Wildlife Trust purchased the woodland in 2004 and 2005 and has cleared many trees from the slopes of the hill fort so that it can be appreciated by visitors and walkers on the North Downs Way and Big Blean Walk. Grazing and browsing animals are kept here to maintain the open landscape.

7. This hop garden is the only one that you walk through on the Big Blean Walk. In 1878 hop gardens covered 31,000 hectares (76,600 acres) of Kent, and hop growing was the biggest industry in Kent. There were many hop gardens around the Blean evidenced today by the numerous oast houses and to some extent by remnant shelterbelt trees, also used for orchards.

8. Willows Wood has a good variety of trees alongside the path including some uncommon today in the Blean – wild cherry, small leaved lime, wild service and, at the top of the hill, alder buckthorn. There are attractive carpets of wood anemone in April.

9. You are now entering Blean Woods National Nature Reserve, 509 ha (1257 acres) managed by the RSPB for its wildlife, including nightingales and the rare heath fritillary butterfly.

10. This Kent College land is managed as a farm, look out for the sheep, cattle and pigs. The beech hedge was laid many years ago. Laying a hedge is the process of partially cutting through stems and bending them over to form a live barrier to livestock.

11. The Sarre Penn stream starts its journey near Forester's Lodge Farm on the Big Blean North route and eventually flows into the river Stour at Sarre. In this location it has a more local name of the Fishbourne.

12. Tyler Hill, as the saying goes, once did what it says on the tin, a medieval tile industry thrived. It grew out of an existing pottery, which was thought to have begun with kilns dating back to around the 9th century. Tile making occurred here because there was a supply of clay and firewood, a market in Canterbury and a wind from the south to work the fires. By the 14th century this small hamlet was supplying most of East Kent with roof tiles, chimney pots and other clay ware.

13. Along this path in Great Hall Wood you can see an ancient droveway called The Radfall. Droveways, which date back to at least the 5th century, were used to move pigs to pannage and

livestock, especially sheep, from north-east Kent to the Stour Valley west of Canterbury and back again at different times of the year. The Radfall is very obvious here with earth banks, to stop the livestock eating coppice re-growth, enclosing the 15-20 metre droveway.

14. Along this path is an example of coppice with standards. Henry VIII introduced an Act in 1543 stating that when a wood is cut, 12 tillers per acre must be left to grow for timber. Following the depletion of woods to supply charcoal for the expanding iron industry Henry made 'coppice with standards' law.

15. The large house to the south you can see on leaving the woodland, in the distance, is Alcroft Grange. This house was built by Thomas Sidney Cooper in the 1880s. Probably Canterbury's most famous artist, Cooper is renowned for his paintings of sheep and cattle.

16. The local water company purchased much of this valley in the 1960s and 70s with the intention of building a reservoir. Since then, various plans for a reservoir have so far not been accepted, mainly due to environmental concerns. Most of the land is still being farmed and the woodland continues to provide a valuable refuge for wildlife.

17. Blaxland Farm is a Medieval Hall House, built about 1480, on the site of an older settlement.

18. These fields have lots of hawthorn berries in the autumn that flocks of thrushes, including redwings and fieldfares, feed on. On Hicks Forstall road are two ancient oak pollard boundary markers. A pollard is a tree cut at around head height to prevent livestock from eating the re-growth or to mark a boundary. The parish boundaries of Hoath, Sturry and Herne and Broomfield meet here.



















1. Dunkirk Farm Shop, London Road ME13 9LL T 01227 751465 2. Canterbury Garden Centre at Herne CT6 7LJ 🖀 01227 375415

The organisations who manage the Blean have created walking trails in their woods. In addition, the Blean Heritage Community Group has produced circular walk leaflets around the Blean, and the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership Train Rides to Ramble includes walks to the Blean from Chartham and Sturry Railway Stations. For information on all of these visit www. theblean.co.uk or Tourist/Visitor Information Centres.

Points of interest

Take extra care crossing this road

Interpretive panel on the walk

Car park

Ρ

- Campsite/caravan site
- **Railway station**
- Access land
- 70 Pubs
- 1. The Red Lion, Dunkirk ME13 9LL
- **2** 01227 750224
- 2. The Dove, Dargate ME13 9HB
- **2** 01227 751360
- 3. Chapter Arms, Chartham Hatch CT4 7LT
- **2** 01227 738340
- 4. The Plough, Upper Harbledown CT2 9AW **2** 01227 763882
- 5. Hare & Hounds, Blean CT2 9EF
- **2** 01227 471594
- 6. The Ivy House, Tyler Hill CT2 9NE
- **2** 01227 472200
- 7. The Prince of Wales, Hoath CT3 4LN
- **2** 01227 860338
- 8. First and Last, Herne Common CT6 7LJ
- **2** 01227 364465
- 9. Dog, Rough Common CT2 9DE
- **2** 01227 464825
- 10. Royal Oak, Blean CT2 9JJ
- **2** 01227 760149
- 11. Golden Lion, Broadoak CT2 0QJ
- **2** 01227 710454





Whitstable - Canterbury (every 10 minutes daytime) Herne Bay - Canterbury (every 10 minutes daytime) Whitstable - Tyler Hill - Canterbury (every hour daytime, two hours on Sundays) Faversham - Dunkirk - Canterbury (approx. every hour daytime)