



England's dreaming

Andrew Wasley takes a walk through English history among chalk hills and ancient woods on the South Downs Way

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW WASLEY

SOUTH DOWNS WAY



[previous spread] Taking in the view of Birling Gap and Belle Tout on the Seven Sisters
[above] Hiking uphill from Amberley [right clockwise] The Cuckmere River meanders massively;
Hiking through an autumnal beechwood; Stubble field and a copse of many colours

THE RIVER CUCKMERE shimmered under broad sunlight as it swerved through grassy fields out to the English Channel. Just visible through glare from a sea as flat and bright as tin, ships drifted along the skyline under a scatter of cumulus clouds drawing grey veils of rain across the water. Ahead and to my left lay towering white cliffs, rolling hills and neat lighthouses; behind me, 90 miles of chalk downs, autumn forests and one of the finest hikes in Britain: the South Downs Way.

In all honesty, I had my doubts about the South Downs Way: it looks too easy, I thought; not as remote or challenging as 'real' hikes. The 100-mile footpath runs across the South Downs National Park from Winchester to Eastbourne – barely wild, let alone wilderness. At its highest point, below the summit of Butser Hill, the footpath reaches just 240 metres in elevation, with not a bog or fell in sight. It is signposted so well that for most of the year it can safely be hiked from start to finish with barely a glance at a map.

But I needed a multi-day hike to shake off the stress and laziness that had gone with lockdowns and running injuries, so on 10 November I set off from Winchester. I picked up the trailhead opposite the City Mill, by the surging clear waters of the Itchen

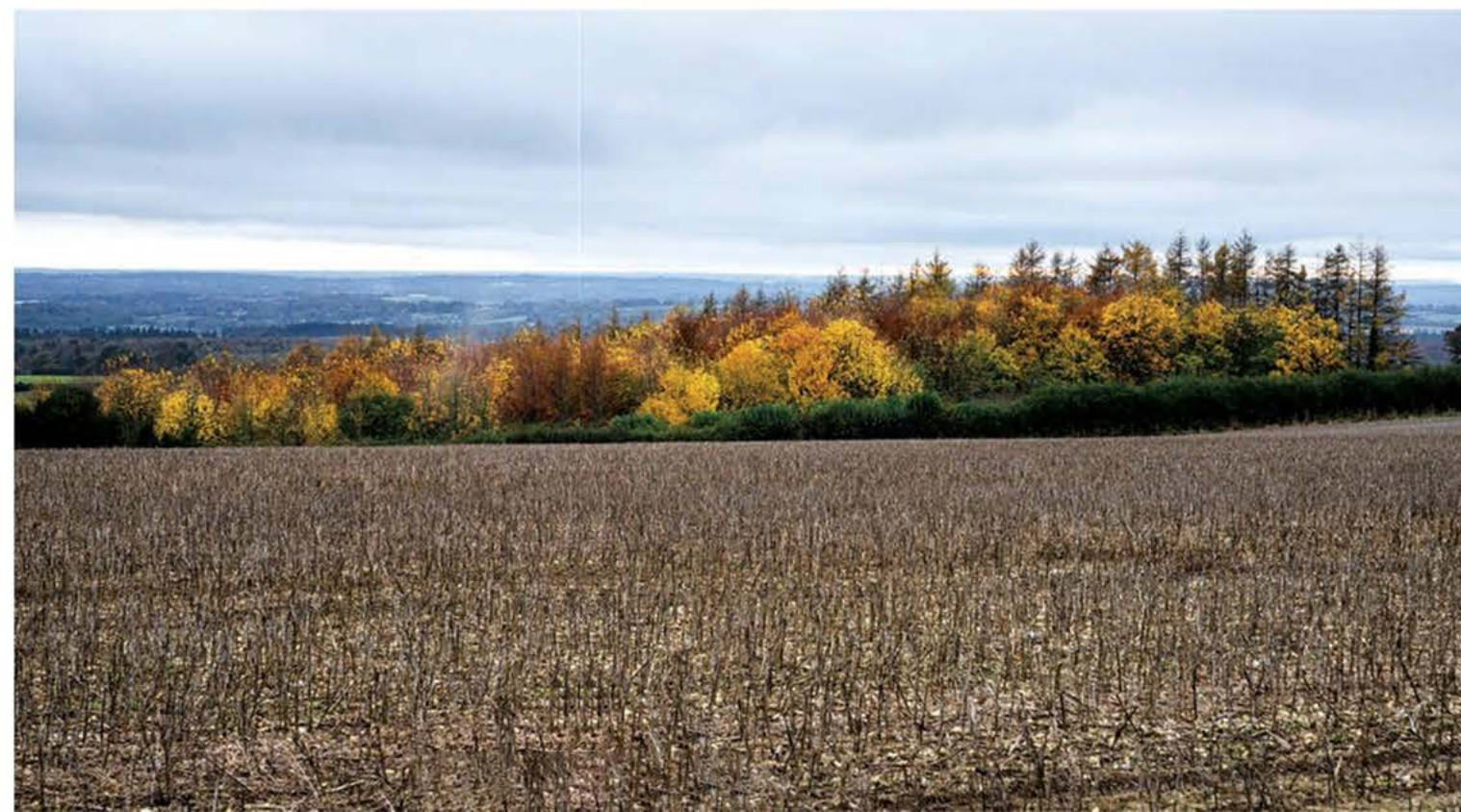
Navigation. Dead leaves twisted in the river's depths, as if blown in slow motion.

Within a hundred metres, I stopped to examine a fragment of the city's Roman wall – the first of many monuments that would come to slow my progress, as I found myself drawn close to the past. This would be a long walk through human history.

SETTING OFF

The South Downs are the English landscape in stereotype: a furrowed chain of chalk hills, crisscrossed with hedgerows and narrow lanes that separate fields like a lead lattice in a stained-glass window. Life seems to imitate art, calling to mind the modernist, romantic brush strokes of Eric Ravilious. The chalk escarpment commands spectacular views of the English Channel to the south and the Weald to the north, taking in great broadleaf forests, river valleys and bare hilltops. At their southern edge the Downs meet the Channel at the Seven Sisters, a terminal wall of chalk cliffs – England's limit, and its start.

I had chosen to hike the whole route in late autumn, when shorter days would make wild camping a viable option. I was repaid with tent porch views of low mist burning off bright grassy fields, and old cobwebs dressed with sparkling dew. Autumn hues were everywhere; in the



russet of beech, ash and maple shedding their leaves, and in the bright crimson of redcurrants strung out along hedgerows.

It came as no surprise that the trail was very busy in places – particularly at beauty spots like the Queen Elizabeth Country Park in Hampshire, a vast forest where beech leaves drifted like feathers from the towering canopy, caught here and there by bright green cedars. For a hiker used to his own company, the footpath's popularity could have been frustrating. But, actually, every encounter with other walkers added to the footpath's richly human character.

I met hikers who had used the South Downs Way as a fitness training ground for long trails in Nepal and Patagonia; some who had discovered a love of the outdoors on the footpath during lockdown; and some who had been hiking the same routes for years, because the landscape was “simply perfect”. Few, though, were hiking the full trail.

At the Devil's Dyke, a deep hillside scar near Brighton, I met a Swiss woman who had been hiking the footpath in stages. “No-one in Europe really knows about these parts of the UK,” she told me. “Everyone knows about London and Edinburgh, and hikers want to go to Scotland and the Lake District. But no-one writes about the south so much.”

“I love Cornwall and the Cotswolds, and I didn't hear about them until I moved here. Same with the South Downs. Everyone should know about these places. There are just so many places to hike here.”

“It's nothing like hiking in Switzerland,” she added. “When I've finished this walk, I won't show anyone my altitude chart because they'd just laugh and say, ‘that's just like going to the supermarket!’ But I can walk further here – thirty, forty kilometres a day – and that makes it a really different experience from Switzerland. That's what I love about it. You get to see so much.”

The same sentiment was repeated by the only other wayfarers I met – Richard and Sunil, hiking the full route in the opposite direction to me. We spoke on a broad green hillside overlooking Pyecombe, on my fourth day and their second. They were already gripped by the ever-changing scenery, and fired up for the rest of their hike.

A HIKE THROUGH HISTORY

There is much to love in the South Downs Way's frequent proximity to ancient monuments, evidence of the bustling economy that once existed on these hills. Traces of human history are visible along the whole footpath, varying from modern wartime infrastructure to Iron Age hillforts and Neolithic burial mounds.

Some burial mounds in the South Downs date back to around 3000 BCE. They were already ancient when Roman armies marched past them in the first

century CE; more ancient still when a Norman army conquered England a thousand years later. Each tumulus is a concentration of antiquity, where the depth of time seems fit to induce vertigo.

Modern history is on show, too. World War Two was an especially busy time for the South Downs, as much of the landscape was converted to a military training area and encampment. Pillboxes and other fortifications still stand guard amongst tilled fields and still woods, offering commanding views out of military necessity, rather than appreciation.

Matterley Bowl, a natural amphitheatre near Cheesefoot Head – a few metres from the South Downs Way outside Winchester – was home to thousands of American soldiers in the run-up to D-Day. I paused there to imagine the men who had crowded around the steep rim to listen to Eisenhower rally them for Normandy. Many

never returned. As I gazed down into the punchbowl's depths, crackling gunfire from a modern Army range rattled through the mist, echoing my remembrance.

Emotion caught me by surprise at some of the Downs' invisible monuments too. OS maps show the sites of ancient villages, now all but erased from the landscape: names like Lomer, Perching and Exceat, bare places on windy hillsides or in empty fields.

Some of these settlements vanished because of the Black Death, others because of poverty or enclosure. For lovers of ‘wilderness’, these long-dead settlements are sobering reminders of the sometimes scant difference between wild landscapes and depopulated ones.

NIGHT SCENES

In attempting to hike up to 40km a day in November, I was prepared for a good deal of night walking, and had planned my trip to



“The English landscape in stereotype: a furrowed chain of chalk hills, crisscrossed with hedgerows and narrow lanes”



A view of Lewes from Beddingham Hill
[inset] Beech and cedar in Queen Elizabeth Country Park

SOUTH DOWNS WAY

coincide with a waxing and nearly full moon. This tactic paid off every day, as I hiked through sunset and deep into the night. Without my head torch, I was just able to make my way through fields and dark copses glowing with silvery light, chased into the gloom by my moonlight shadow.

Foxes, badgers and owls made for strange nocturnal company: sometimes furtive, as low shadows barrelled across the footpath; sometime shrill, as entire parliaments of tawny owls tore the night's silence apart with shrieks. Few hikes have ever offered me experiences as magical as watching the moon slip through a crisp dark sky, framed by Venus, Saturn and Jupiter, as the broad white form of a barn owl moved silently overhead.

For my final day, though, I wanted to arrive in Eastbourne by daylight, hoping to take a dip in the sea. I set off from the YHA's excellent Southease hostel at 0500, and reached Firl Beacon in time to see dawn pouring gold into the Weald. Then on to Exceat, the site of one of those long-vanished villages, to see the river Cuckmere snaking out to the Channel under dramatic skies.

Fellow walkers congratulated me during clifftop chats as I reached the Seven Sisters and paused to look out at the glimmering sea. I had hiked nearly 100 miles, and every step had taken its toll: sore feet and breathtaking sea views slowed me down, and I reached Beachy Head after the moon had risen, casting a white-gold glow on the Channel.

Too late for a dip, I strolled on into Eastbourne and stopped by the South Downs Way end marker. A runner stopped there too, as I dropped my rucksack. "Have you walked far?" she asked. "I've just finished the South Downs Way," I replied. "Wow – that's tough. It's been on my to-do-list for years. Did you enjoy it?"

I thought back on a hike that had challenged me and changed me in unexpected ways. I felt alert, now, to the layers of history that accrete on busy landscapes; alert, too, to the beauty and weirdness of night hikes, and to the passion invested in the South Downs Way by countless hikers before me. What had looked like an easy route had forced me to confront my prejudices and rethink what I look for in multi-day hikes. "It's very special," I said. "One of the best." 📍



[above] Bright colours amongst the autumn leaves [right] The Devil's Dyke [below] A glowing Queen Elizabeth Country Park



THE ROUTE: Read up on the South Downs Way

START Winchester City Mill
FINISH Eastbourne
Distance: 160km/100 miles
Ascent: 4000m/13,100ft
Duration: Andy hiked the whole route in five days, but it can be tackled over more days or in several visits

Maps: Harvey offers a 1:40,000 map of the full route, number XT40. The Ordnance Survey sheets needed are: OS 1:25,000 Explorer sheets OL32 Winchester, OL03 Meon Valley, OL08 Chichester, OL10 Arundel & Pulborough, OL11 Brighton & Hove and OL25 Eastbourne & Beachy Head.

Getting there: National rail services run to and from Winchester and Eastbourne from central London via Clapham Junction. The return rail journey to either trailhead takes around 2.5 hours. Long-stay car parking around Clapham Junction can be booked through justpark.com

Accommodation: Accommodation options include YHA hostels at Truleigh Hill and Southease. The Sustainability Centre at East Meon sits within a few minutes' walk of the footpath, and offers vegan food and hostel accommodation. Wild camping is feasible, but it can be challenging to find a discreet pitch. Other options, including numerous campsites and B&Bs, are listed at southdownsway.org/staying/

More information: For food and drink guides, other activities and planning advice, visit the official website at southdownsway.org

Water: The South Downs Way is well served by free water taps. A full list can be found at tinyurl.com/SDW-taps