

# Weald Forest Ridge

## Landscape Partnership Scheme Summary



### The Weald Forest Ridge Area

Just thirty miles south of London, it is possible to step back 600 years to a medieval landscape of rolling hills, abundant woodland, scattered farmsteads, small, irregular-shaped fields and ancient routeways. Its national value is recognised in its designation as the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

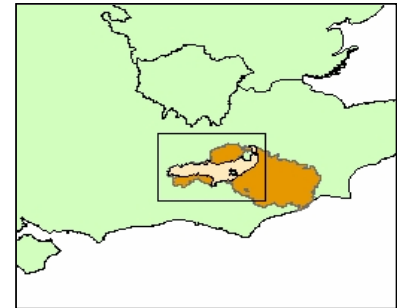
Set within it is the Weald Forest Ridge. Running east to west, in an almost unbroken line from Tonbridge to Horsham and covering an area of 328km<sup>2</sup>, it reaches a height of 241m above sea level at Crowborough Beacon. As the AONB's highest ridge, it has its own distinctive character.

Along its length are the remnants of four ancient, medieval forests. Once the playground of Kings, they are now accessible countryside sites for local residents and visitors to the Weald Forest Ridge. Referred to as the Four Maidens of the Weald in the monumental 1611 *Polyolbion* poem, they include the breezy, treeless heights of Ashdown Forest – internationally renowned for its rare heathland and home of Winnie the Pooh; St Leonard's Forest – where the carpets of lily of the valley are said to mark the dropped blood of St Leonard after his fights with the area's dragon; and the intimate but less famous forests of Waterdown (Broadwater) and Worth (Tilgate). These remnants cover 40% of the Forest Ridge and contain a significant amount of the Nation's ancient woodland.

As the industrial heartland for the Roman and Tudor iron industry – not once but twice the UK's centre for iron working – the area is littered with a rich, and still largely undiscovered, archaeological legacy. The smoky air, red glow of the furnaces, and noises of the hammers has gone, but hidden within woodlands are minepits, sawpits, charcoal burning sites, and ponds built to power the furnace bellows and the hammers that pounded the iron.

Victorians valued the area's sandy and iron-rich soils for their horticultural, rather than mineral, properties and the area is home to magnificent parks and gardens. Centred around iron master's houses – and using the warm, damp microclimate of the area's steep-sided gills – exotic acid loving plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas are grown, complementing the area's natural beauty. As popular visitor attractions, they 'showcase' the Weald Forest Ridge in miniature.

Jutting from the earth are the South East's only sandrock outcrops. Once shelters for Mesolithic hunters, they were considered natural wonders of the World by the Victorians. Now, they are valued by rock climbers as a place to test their skills, and by naturalists for the rare ferns and liverworts that survive on their shady faces.



#### 'The Four Maidens of the Weald'

"Fower stately Wood Nymphs stand  
on the Sussexian ground,  
Great Andredsweld's sometime: who,  
when she did abound,  
In circuit and in growth, all other  
quite suppress:  
But in her wane of pride, as she in  
strength decaest,  
Her Nymphs assum'd them names,  
each one to her delight.  
As Water-downe, so call'd of her  
depressed site:  
And Ash-Downe, of those Trees that  
most in her do growe,  
Set higher to the Downes, as  
th'other standeth lowe.  
Saint Leonards, of the seat by which  
she next is plac't,  
And Whord that with the like  
delighteth to be grac't.  
These Forrests as I say, the  
daughters of the Weald"

*(Michael Drayton, 1611,  
Polyolbion)*

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The church spires of the settlements, which grew up on the old trade routes across the hilltops, dot the skyline. The majority of the present day population live in these ridge-top villages; with their Wealden timber framed, weather-boarded or tile-clad houses and sandstone walls. From these settlements, and the Ridge's other heights, there are far-ranging and much valued views to the North and South Downs: across a landscape shaped by human activity that retains its medieval majesty and magnificence.



### The Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme

The Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership has been formed to resurrect the once well-known Weald Forest Ridge name and celebrate the area's local distinctiveness; both of which have become overshadowed by the wider High Weald AONB designation in recent years. The Partnership is working together to widen access to the area's special features, and also reduce the threats to these; by involving people in the area's integrated management.



The Ridge's people and their skills have shaped the landscape over time. The Partnership wants to reconnect the 325,000 people living within the Ridge and its eight neighbouring urban towns (Horsham, Crawley, Haywards Heath, East Grinstead, Crowborough, Uckfield, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge), to enable them to positively influence the area's future.



#### The Partnership's Vision:

*"In 10 years, the Weald Forest Ridge will be an area where both local people and visitors experience a strong sense of place. The area's rich natural and cultural heritage will be valued in its own right and as an asset that supports people's economic, social and cultural wellbeing.*

*It will be a place that has enriched its natural beauty through conserving its distinctive features, and is able to offer a variety of habitats, wildlife, cultural heritage and activities that are accessible to residents, people living in neighbouring towns, and visitors. It will be a welcoming place that enhances peoples' quality of life through their participation and celebration of its unique landscape and culture.*

*Above all, it will be a treasured place where local people, working alongside specialist organisations, have the knowledge and skills to enjoy and care for the Weald Forest Ridge, in a way that brings long-term benefits to all."*



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To deliver the Vision, the Partnership's has developed four strategic aims:

- To encourage more people to get involved in caring for the Weald Forest Ridge's unique landscape heritage.
- To conserve and enhance the distinctive natural and built features that make the Weald Forest Ridge a special place.
- To provide opportunities for people to learn about, access, celebrate and benefit from the Weald Forest Ridge's landscape heritage.
- To give people the knowledge and skills to protect the Weald Forest Ridge landscape for future generations to enjoy.

Five programmes of work will deliver the strategic aims; by involving people in almost 30 projects that will develop the Weald Forest Ridge's sense of place:

1. **The Landscape Scale Connectivity programme** focuses on landscape enhancement and management to address habitat fragmentation, as well as enhancing access to, and knowledge of, key sites. This programme includes the largest habitat restoration project in the South East: the return of Broadwater Forest to its former heathland/woodland glory, through the creation of Broadwater Warren – a significant, new open access site owned by the RSPB on the outskirts of Tunbridge Wells.
2. **The Archaeology and Special Features programme** includes archaeological engagement and awareness, and built heritage projects. One challenging project will use state of the art aerial survey techniques (known as LiDAR) to identify the archaeological legacy hidden within the area's woodlands. The information generated will bring the Weald Forest Ridge's hidden heritage to life for local people, visitors and historians alike.
3. **The Learning and Celebrating Heritage programme** involves a range of engagement activities, walks, talks, poetry, storytelling, and schools' education projects: to generate a renewed sense of place amongst local people and enable them to learn about and celebrate the Ridge's unique heritage. Two specific projects will focus on Ashdown Forest, the largest of the four medieval forests, both to enhance the site's interpretation for visitors and develop resources for schools' visits.
4. **The Reconnecting People and Place programme** includes skills creation and training, as well as volunteer development. Within this, one woodland networking project will provide training and support to help landowners sustainably manage their ancient woodland in the Weald Forest Ridge area.
5. **The Scheme Management programme** will ensure the effective promotion and delivery of the entire Weald Forest Ridge Scheme.



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Plumpton College



The four ancient, medieval forests featured in Michael Drayton's Polyolbion set the branding context for the Scheme; by revealing the Weald Forest Ridge's most distinctive heritage features, which both local people and visitors to the Ridge can easily connect and engage with through their cultural associations.

The Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership is committed to delivering a three year Scheme, from 2009 to 2011, supported through the Heritage Lottery Fund's Landscape Partnership Scheme programme. The HLF operates a two-stage bid process, and the following reports have accompanied the bids:

- Location Plan
- Landscape Character Study
- Access and Audience Development Plan
- Accessible Natural Greenspace Report
- Landscape Strategy
- Training Plan
- Implementation Plan.

The Partnership has committed over £1.3million to the Scheme, in both financial and in-kind contributions, and is seeking a £2 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to enable implementation costs of some £3.3million to be met.

The Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership is led by the High Weald AONB Unit. Eighteen partners will deliver project work within the Scheme, managed by the High Weald Unit and supported by a wider range of other organisations with statutory, community, business and heritage interests. The 18 Delivery Partners are:

*BTCV, the Conservators of Ashdown Forest, East Sussex Archaeology and Museums Partnership, East Sussex County Council, ESUS Forestry & Woodlands Ltd, FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group), the Forestry Commission, Gatwick Greenspace Partnership, Highbrook Village Hall Committee, Horsham District Council, Kent High Weald Project, Plumpton College, RSPB, Sussex Police, Sussex Wildlife Trust, THE SOUTH, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, and the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum.*

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