HIGHDOWN TRAIL

Highdown is not really that high – 81m (266 feet), but its unique position as the only hill on the Sussex coastal plain, gives it commanding views along the coast, from Beachy Head in the east, to the Isle of Wight in the west.

Geologically, Highdown is unique in being the sole survivor of a series of chalk hills that once ran to the south of the South Downs. A combination of glacial and inter-glacial periods, with rising and falling sea levels, have eroded away all the other hills in this range, leaving Highdown in glorious isolation.

Whereas all the hills of the South Downs have a gentle 'dip' slope on their south face and a steeper 'scarp' slope on their north face, at Highdown the alignment is reversed, and it is the steeper slope that faces southwards towards the sea.

The ancient boundary between the parishes of Goring and Ferring runs north/south and to the east of the summit of Highdown, dividing the modern local government districts of Worthing Borough and Arun.

Although there is little to substantiate the charming claim that Highdown was 'once the traditional burial ground of the kings of Sussex,' it is a very important archaeological site and one steeped in local folklore.

The Hillfort is in the ownership of the National trust

Directions

Approach on the A259 from the Worthing direction. It is necessary to drive to Angmering on the A259 and use the roundabout to return towards Worthing on the eastbound carriageway. The turning to Highdown Towers is on the left. There is a sign but motorists should approach at a moderate speed to ensure they indicate in sufficient time.

Duration: 2km, allow one and a half hours.

Terrain: mainly grass, occasional flint and chalk footpath. Moderate climb to the summit and hard going for wheelchair users and pushchairs. Please wear appropriate footwear – boots or shoes with strong grip. Ground may be wet and slippery.

Highdown Gardens

The Miller's Tomb

The Highdown Hillfort

Highdown Gardens

Highdown Towers

The entrance to Highdown Rise and (inset) a Lodge House

1 The Lodge Houses The two dwellings on either side of Highdown Rise entrance are the original lodge houses of Highdown Towers. In 1907 two farm labourers sheltering from a storm here were killed by lightning (see Heritage Trail 8, Goring). For nearly 70 years, the west lodge was the home of Florence Holden, who spent her whole working life as a gardener at Highdown Chalk Gardens. She moved into west lodge with her parents in 1913. Her father was a farm labourer who rented the lodge house from Sir Frederick Stern.

2 Highdown Towers Highdown Towers was built in the 1830s as 'The Dower House' and then formed part of the estate of the Lyon family resident at Northbrook and later Goring Hall (see Heritage Trail 8, Goring). It was shortly afterwards renamed Highdown Towers and in 1909 became the home of Sir Frederick Stern, who continued living in the house until his death in 1967. On the death of Sir Frederick's widow, Lady Sybil, in 1972, the house and its contents were bequeathed to the Borough of Worthing.

Over the next seven years various unsuccessful attempts were made to find a use for the house. The Institute of Choreology, a school specialising in the teaching of dance was the first tenant. Then it became a private sixth form college run by the Study Centre Language School, but that too failed to pay its way. Suggestions of turning the house into a rest home, a museum, a theatre, arts centre or a hotel came to nothing. Finally, in 1979, Richard Garratt took over the property with plans to turn it into a 'country club.' It actually became 'Sterns' nightclub. A number of high profile police drug raids in the 1980s, made the house notorious across the south coast. What, people wondered, would Sir Frederick and Lady Sybil think of their house being put to such a use?

Today Highdown Towers is a carvery and hotel and very respectable.

3 Highdown Gardens Highdown Gardens has been described as Worthing's best kept secret. In 1909 Frederick Stern planned to build a tennis court in the disused chalk quarry on his land and thought it would be a pleasant idea to surround the steep banks with flowering plants. Leading horticulturalists of the day told him that he would never be able to grow anything of beauty on chalk. However, undaunted, Stern called in such specialist collectors as Reginald Farrer and Ernest Wilson, who sent him specimens from around the world, chiefly China and the Himalayas, many of which were able to thrive in the alkaline chalk soil at Highdown. Stern also benefitted from his dedicated team of gardeners, led from 1912–1948 by his head gardener, James Buckman. When Buckman was forced to retire after losing his leg in an accident, his role was taken over by John Bassindale, who remained head gardener for another thirty years.

In 1956 Stern was knighted for his services to horticulture. In the 1930s he had entertained royalty at Highdown, including The Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) and his mother, Queen Mary who, in 1937, planted a Chinese Hornbeam in the gardens.

After Sir Frederick's death in 1967, aged 83, Lady Sybil bequeathed the gardens to Worthing Council for the enjoyment of local people and visitors in perpetuity. John Bassindale was kept on as head gardener, and with him Florence Holden who had worked at Highdown since 1913. After her retirement she continued to visit the gardens every day. In 1979 she told a local newspaper that she would walk the gardens every evening mentally criticising or praising the work done during the day.

"Highdown," she said, "belongs to me in my mind." Florence, John, James, and Sir Frederick himself formed a remarkably close-knit and dedicated team that created, over a fifty year period, the beautiful gardens we can all enjoy today.

More information about the gardens, their history and opening times can be found in a leaflet 'Highdown Gardens' which is available from information points in the gardens. See also www.highdowngardens.co.uk

Sir Frederick Stern

Frederick Stern was born into a wealthy banking family, originating in Germany. He attended Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. In his youth he earned a reputation as a big game hunter and a successful amateur jockey. During the First World War he served with the London Yeomanry (Westminster Dragoons) and saw action in Gallipoli and Palestine. He was twice mentioned in despatches and received the Military Cross in 1917. He rose to the rank of colonel. In the Second World he commanded the Worthing Home Guard and went on to be Group Commander of the West Sussex Home Guard.

Stern was a lifelong Liberal and once harboured aspirations to stand as a parliamentary candidate. He attended the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 as a private secretary to the prime minster, David Lloyd George.

Apart from his love for horticulture, Sir Frederick should also be remembered for his work for the disadvantaged members of the Jewish community in England. Every year from 1920 until his death, a group of boys from the Bernhard Baron St George's Jewish Settlement Club, Stepney, would be invited by Sir Frederick to camp on his land during the summer months.

Lady Sybil Stern

Sybil Stern was the daughter of the portrait painter, Sir Arthur Lucas. She married Frederick Stern in 1919 and together they shared a mutual passion to create the gardens at Highdown. In 1936 she was appointed a Worthing magistrate and remained in post of the next 33 years. She recalled one of her first responsibilities was to inspect the toilet facilities at local pubs. Her first visit was to the "pub with a sinister name" – the Nelson Shades (see Heritage Trail 9, Town Centre Pub Trail). She recalled that in those days the chairman and vice-chairman were two respected local landowners, both well into their 80s, who were "rather out of touch with everyday life."

Lady Sybil was a great promoter of the National Gardens Scheme. Both she and Sir Frederick regularly opened their gardens to the public. Before her death in 1972, aged 77, she ensured that both the gardens and the house were covenanted to the people of Worthing.

In 1966 Lady Sybil gave a talk to the Goring Parish Fellowship in which she recalled life at Highdown in the early years of the twentieth century. Today, when Highdown Hill is surrounded by busy roads and modern

Highdown c.1910
(West Sussex County Council Library Service – www.westsussexpast.org.uk)

housing estates sprawl to the east, south and west, it is astonishing to read her account of those days –

'When Sir Frederick Stern first went to live at Highdown in 1909, there was not a house to be seen from the terrace [of Highdown Towers]. Two miles of green fields stretched away to the sea, crossed from east to west by the railway and bordered on the south by the avenue of ilex trees. The Littlehampton Road [A 259] at the foot of Highdown Hill was a narrow lane sunk between high hedges and planted with ancient elms. There was no footpath and you walked to the pillar-box at the end of Ferring Lane at your peril. Goring-by-Sea was then a small village, three miles west of Worthing, with a population of about 500.....

Make your way up Highdown Hill, heading towards the summit. The small spinney of trees and bushes on the right is the remains of an underground bunker built during the Second World War.

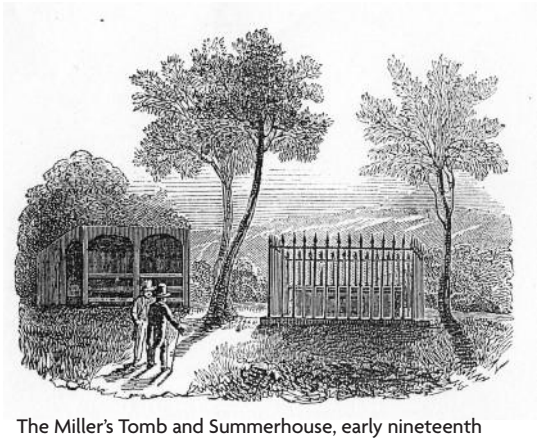
4 The Miller's Tomb Carry on up and you will see, bearing to your right a single table-topped tomb, the last resting place of Highdown miller and reputed smuggler, John Olliver. Born in Lancing in 1709, Olliver may have worked for the Customs Service as a young man, if so it was a good apprenticeship for his later smuggling activities. John took over as miller of Highdown on the death of his father in 1750, who had been miller before him. The mill stood on the top of the hill just to the west of the present clump of trees. It was a post mill and is believed to have stood on that spot for centuries. It was blown down in a storm in 1826.

Legend states that Miller Oliver used the sails of the windmill to signal to smuggling vessels out at sea. There was probably no windmill on the coast of southern England more visible than Highdown Mill. Although Olliver lived in a humble cottage on the northern slope of Highdown (long since ruined), the canny miller amassed a number of properties in the Worthing area, including The Hollies in Tarring High Street (Heritage Trail 7, Tarring). Olliver rented out these properties, which added to his growing income.

On his cottage he erected a wrought iron weather vane which depicted an Excise man with a drawn cutlass chasing a smuggler, while the Excise man in his turn was being pursued by an old lady with a raised broom. Most ingeniously of all, when the wind blew, hinges on the weather vane caused the old woman's broom to crash down on the head of the Excise man.

The tomb you are looking at was erected over thirty years before the eccentric miller's demise. To build his tomb, Olliver would have needed the permission of the landowner, Westbrooke Richardson of Findon Place, and the vicar of Goring, the Rev Penfold, himself an important landowner. Olliver clearly had friends in high places, which may explain why no questions were ever asked about his own considerable wealth.

A local newspaper account stated that 2000 people attended Olliver's funeral in 1793. He had lived to the grand age of 84 and it seems the entire local population from all the surrounding villages turned out to bid him farewell. Six young women dressed in white carried his coffin, while one of his grand-daughters read the funeral service. The miller had left plenty of money for the mourners to drink and eat their fill. Indeed the day seems to have ended in a riotous manner.



The Miller's Tomb and Summerhouse, early nineteenth century

The inscriptions on the tomb were all written by Olliver himself, and focused around his mediations on death and redemption. Once verse refers to the skeletal designs on the tomb –

Why start you at the skeleton,
'Tis your own picture that you shun;
Alive it did resemble thee,
And thou, when dead, like that shall be.

Legend states that if you run around the tomb seven times, the miller's ghost will jump out at you.

5 The Highdown Hillfort Walk through the gate in the flint wall to your left. This wall marks the ancient boundary between Goring and Ferring parishes. In the nineteenth century this was also the border between land owned by the Lyon family at Goring Hall and the Hentys at Ferring Grange.

Walk up the rising ground in front of you for about 400 metres until you come to the circular earthwork and tree clump on top of the hill. The ditch and embankment was first cut sometime in the late Bronze Age (about 1000 BC) and then re-cut at a later date before the Roman occupation in 43 AD. The question still remains as to whether this was a fortified enclosure, a ritual site, or simply a pound for livestock. It may, of course, have been all three!

The real interest of Highdown from an archaeological point of view lies in the Saxon cemetery discovered by Mr Henty's workmen in the 1890s. In common with many nineteenth century landowners, Henty wished to ape the fashion – begun by Charles Goring of Wiston at Chanctonbury – to plant circular clumps of trees on prominent hilltops in their ownership. It was while digging holes to plant the saplings at Highdown, that human remains were found, complete with spears, shields, jewellery and other burial goods. Later examination of the remains revealed 86 burials all dating from the fifth century, making it one of the largest early Saxon cemeteries ever discovered in the country.

Archaeologists digging at Highdown in 1937

Were these men and women, newly arrived from land that today is part of modern Germany, invaders who had seized this land by force of arms, or were they a hired force, brought in to protect the old order? It seems likely that it may have been the latter. Excavations at Northbrook College, a mile away to the east of Highdown, in 1988, revealed the existence of a Romano-British villa that was still functioning at the time the Saxon burials were taking place. Perhaps the villa owner paid these people for protection? As the years or decades passed could there have been intermarriage between the two communities? It is impossible to know. But neither the burials at Highdown nor the occupation of the villa at Northbrook continued into the following century.

A beautiful late Roman period goblet, complete with running hare motif was discovered in one burial. Was this a gift? Had it been stolen or traded? Whatever the truth, archaeologists believe it originated in the Middle East, possibly Alexandria. It is now on show, along with other remains from the cemetery, in Worthing Museum.

Courtesy of Worthing Museum

In 1937 a Roman bath house was discovered on the western slope of Highdown. Plans for a further dig were halted when vandals destroyed some of the archaeology. It was believed that there may have been a villa here. The war intervened and the dig at this spot was never recommenced.

Curiously, the findings of a dig at Highdown, carried out in 1988, following the Great Storm, have never been published.

Ritual and Riot.

Without written evidence, it is very easy to speculate that Highdown was an important ritual site for generations of local people, but not so easy to prove. However some tantalising local newspaper stories from the early nineteenth century suggests that even at that comparatively late date, local people viewed this hill as symbolically important.

As late as 1830 a Midsummer Bonfire was being lit on Highdown. In the south of England, it was Midsummer's eve and not Hallowe'en that was regarded as the auspicious time to commune with the spirit world (see 'Midsummer Tree', Heritage Trail 5, Broadwater) and keeping a bonfire burning throughout that shortest night of the year was seen as a powerful act of communing with the unseen forces.

In 1834, during a time of much economic distress, rural labourers gathered on Highdown to protest their grievances and call out fellow labourers from as far away as Yapton (some ten miles to the west). This is reminiscent of the 'hue and cry' gatherings used to ferment medieval peasant rebellions. It strongly suggests that Highdown had a powerful hold over local people and may have been linked to old ideas of magic. The labourers were forcibly dispersed by the local yeomanry, and one of their leaders, George Ede, was arrested and sent to the House of Correction at Petworth for six weeks.

In Victorian times an annual cricket match was held on Highdown at Midsummer.

In recent years Sompting Village Morris have gathered here on the eve of the Summer Solstice, to dance and light a symbolic bonfire. In point of fact the solstice-eve, 21st June, is not the same as Midsummer's Eve, which falls on 23rd June. Just to add to the confusion 'Old Midsummer', based on the pre-1752 Julian Calendar (which was eleven days behind our current, Gregorian calendar) fell on July 5th, which was still being observed in remote Sussex locations until the early nineteenth century.

In Sussex, it was said that the 'little people', or 'pharisees', as they were known, could be seen dancing on the top of Sussex hills at Midsummer. Such beliefs certainly dated back to Saxon times or even earlier.

The Worthing Heritage Trail leaflets provide information and visual images relating to local history: those using the leaflets and the website should ensure that they take due care and attention when following the trails.
Please note that this trail may not always follow formal pedestrian routes and there may be some roads to cross.

The Worthing Heritage Trails are created by the Worthing Heritage Alliance (**www.worthingheritagealliance.org.uk**) and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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For details of local train and bus timetables and routes see **www.westsussex.gov.uk/travelinfo**

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More information about Worthing can be found at **www.visitworthing.co.uk**
www.worthingarch.co.uk
www.worthingsociety.org.uk

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WORTHING HERITAGE TRAILS 12

HIGHDOWN TRAIL

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