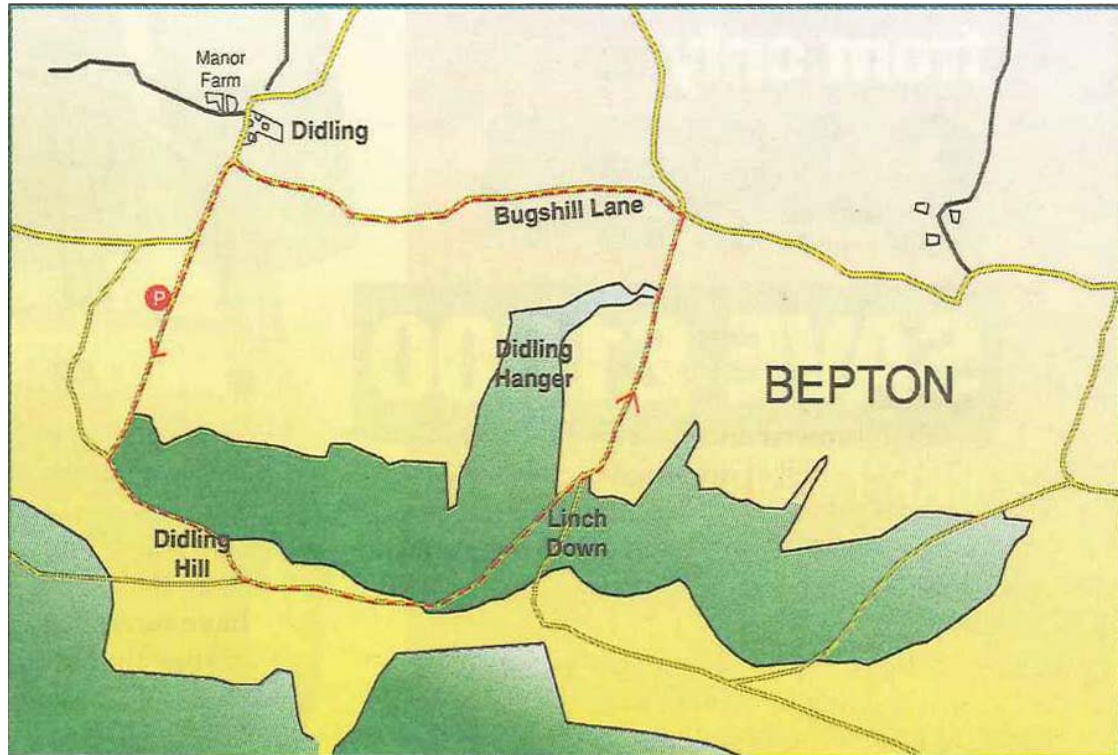


Didling Downs



Start this downland walk at Didling church, off the road between South Harting and Cocking. Limited, careful, parking which must leave room for tractors to the fields. St. Andrews 13th century Shepherds' Church has embroidered sheep over the altar, while the sounds of them singing in the field outside can be heard inside this tiny chalk-white grotto. The pews are 800 years old and black as a sheep's face. The oak pulpit appears to have the image of a Green Man putting out his tongue while the scrolls are almost African face masks.

Note the male yew outside with its throat cut and a giant box tree hiding tomb-robbing rabbits. Walk past the church straight uphill into the pastures and then the climb through the yew and ash woods. These are classic series or stages of calcareous woodlands and like many others in Sussex mark the end of the sheep industry which once made England rich in centuries past. They roughly coincide with WWI when shepherds went to see the Somme downland for a change.

Left onto diagonal sunken track near old quarry workings. Orchids like twayblade, spotted, early purple, and fly, grow in the wood edge. The steep scarp slope ahead has recently been cleared and you can see sheep galleries crossing on the contours. If you go this week you will see lots of common dog violets and some cowslips as you climb, and the snuff-match heads of carnations sedge. As you breast the hill Chichester cathedral appears briefly in the horizon's declivity. Also note Chilgrove valley and the two bell barrows on Bow Hill. Stupendous views of Weald into Surrey the other side.

Left along South Downs Way for quarter mile then left again diagonally down to Linch and Didling Hanger along old drove way. More reclamation of downland to left on very steep slope. The greensand near bottom has washed away to form grey gully in which I found one clump of ransomes.

Cavernous and grottoed monoliths of ancient coppice, olde, olde as the pews in Didling church, are in last stages of life and some of beech form hobbit-dwelling places for lost shepherds of long ago. It is a strange underworld, a Grimm's fairy tale wood if you are that way inclined, as some are. There are lots of wrens, of course, living in this troglodyte habitat, as well as woodpeckers, rooks, buzzards and nuthatches.

At Linch Farm left back along country road and fine old hedges of hazel and field pale with view of the downs to the left and flowers of the verge like stitchwort, speedwell, and dead nettle.

Who knows the old Morris might last as long as a Boniface. Total distance 2 miles (four and one-thirds kms).

Don't forget there is free entry to the West Dean Gardens shop, WC's and restaurant, which serves hot meals and snacks from 12pm until 2pm and afternoon tea and cakes throughout the day.

Open daily: November – February 10.30am until 4.00pm & March – October 10.30am until 5.00pm (Closed January 2011).

Written by Richard Williamson