

COMMONS WALK A

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMON

This walk on the Common begins and ends at the Pantiles but is mainly a circuit of the old disused race course. The soil of the Common, lying over sandstone tends to drain quickly but in a few places can be muddy after rain.

- 1** Starting at the Pantiles mount the steps between The Swan Hotel and 'Tracks and Trimmings' turning right at the top and crossing by zebra crossing to the Common. Take the asphalt path bearing left (there is a wooden finger post incised 'Groombridge and Speldhurst'). After 50 or 60 paces the path is crossed by another asphalt path which you take, turning right. This path runs roughly parallel to the busy Major York's Road, but before proceeding note York Cottage on the other side of the road, one of the oldest buildings on the Common. The path runs uphill through woodland - mainly birch, beech and oak. It is not an arduous ascent but there are seats at several points along the way, a reminder of the past popularity of Royal Tunbridge Wells as a place for convalescents to recuperate. The air of the Common has long been considered as invigorating and restorative. The first seat on the left bears a plaque;
- 2**

THIS SEAT DATING FROM VICTORIAN TIMES WAS DISCOVERED IN THE UNDERGROWTH WHICH FORMERLY COVERED THIS AREA WAS REPAIRED AND RENOVATED BY THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS APRIL 1995

- 3** 60 paces further on there is another seat on the right and the asphalt path is crossed by a broad grassy glade. This is the old 18th century race track. It was laid out at a time when Tunbridge Wells was one of the most fashionable places in the country with 'Society'. One of the things which this society enjoyed hugely was gambling - on the Pantiles, where Beau Nash ran the gaming tables, and at the races held here on the Common. Turn right along the racecourse which curves gently away to the left.

As it bears left the course rises slightly. It is wooded on both sides and crossed by a number of paths, but follow the course round to a point where the bend tightens and you come to a double avenue of trees on the left.

- 4** This is the Royal Victoria Grove, planted in 1835 to commemorate the visits of Princess Victoria and her mother the Duchess of Kent. Victoria Grove was planned as a double avenue of sycamore, limes and elms. The elms succumbed to disease in 1972 and in 1992 the 3rd row was replanted to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's accession. The Grove is reputedly haunted on summer evenings by the grey figure of a woman in Victorian garb.

Continue past the end of the Victoria Grove passing also a small area of heather scrub on your left, but still bearing gently left until you meet an asphalt path. At this point there is an open area with Victoria Grove on the left, the cricket pitch in front of you and to the right an outcrop of rocks. Take the asphalt path right towards the rocks. These are known today as Wellington Rocks and in the 18th century they must have made a natural grandstand to the start and finish of the horse races. The tallest of the rocks was nicknamed 'the pulpit' by the Victorians. Other 19th century inhabitants sought 'diamonds' in the sand around the rocks. These were quartz crystals which could be polished up and used for costume jewellery. The rocks with their clefts and crevices have been a magnet for children of countless generations (Ruskin said they were his childhood Switzerland).

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At this point the race track has been overlaid by the construction in the 19th century of the cricket pitch - in fact, the upper cricket pitch, there being two pitches on the Common. The upper pitch has been, in its day, the scene of important matches and Dr W G Grace played here in 1875 and 1882. Nowadays County Cricket is played at the Nevill Ground about a mile away.

- 6** Walk up the asphalt path to a point just past Wellington Rocks (to your right in the trees is a pavilion with public toilets) and then take the newly surfaced track left round the top edge of the cricket pitch. If a game is in progress there are plenty of benches from which to enjoy the match. Continue across the road (Fir Tree Road) to a small car park. On the left you will see a litter bin near a small oak tree.
- 7** Walk toward this and you will see an unpaved track on your right curving downhill - this is a resumption of the race track. At the end of the glade the track is crossed by another small path, carry straight on towards Major York's Road. Major York built this now busy road across the common to connect the Pantiles with his house at the top of Bishops Down. His house, much enlarged is now the Spa Hotel.

- 8** At the road, take the footpath left for a few paces to a break in the grass verge and cross the road to a row of short wooden posts. These posts straddle the width of the course along which we proceed. This straight section is crossed by a private road marked by more posts. Continue across this road along the race course. The woods on each side have been left largely as they were after the hurricane adding to the variety of wildlife habitat on the common.

- 9** When the race course turns again to the left it is crossed by another road marked by more posts. This is Hungershall Park Road which we cross. Following the track we come to a clearing on the left, skirted in the main by a birch wood, which has been opened up to encourage heather to grow and butterflies to proliferate. Continuing along the race track we come to Major York's Road again. Cross, and complete the circuit of the race course, returning to the Pantiles by the asphalt path on the right which brings you back to the start of the walk.
- 10**

Approximate length of walk - 1¼ miles
Allow about 45 minutes

Tunbridge Wells Common

