

COMMONS WALK C

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMON

Tunbridge Wells Common is about 160 acres in extent, irregular in shape, but wide to the west and tapering to a point to the northwest. Our walk begins at Thackeray's House which is situated close to the sharp end of the Common. The walk is about two miles long and gives a good idea of the extent and varied character of the Common.

1 Before stepping out look at Thackeray's House dating from the late 17th century, it served as a boarding house for fashionable visitors in the 18th century and today is a restaurant. In the 19th century it was a private house and the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray stayed there. In his essay, 'Tunbridge Toys' he recounts how as a child he looked from its windows at the houses on the Common - a view surprisingly little changed since that time. Several houses nestle picturesquely on the rocky outcrops at this part of the Common, the first being Belleville which we will pass as well as others near the start of our walk.

Cross London Road, via the small traffic island, to the asphalt path with seats halfway up on either side, and at the pavement of Mt. Ephraim (the busy road at the top of the path) bear left. Across the road on your right you will soon see the colourful facade of the Royal Wells Inn (but stay on this side of Mt. Ephraim). Past St Helena the ground falls away on the left to give wide views over the town. Carry on along Mt. Ephraim for 200-300 yards.

2 Just beyond the rocks at the white cottage called Gibraltar Cottage an asphalt path descends left. Take this path crossing Church Road until it runs up to the pavement of Castle Road. Across the road is a sandy gravel drive keeping to the right of Mt. Edgcumbe Hotel,

3 take this path. It is worth pausing here to look at the rocks on your right. This sandstone cliff is part of a geological fault which runs along this part of the town, out to Rusthall, and way beyond. In the 19th century there was a pond at the foot of the cliffs to provide water for the sheep and cattle which were abundant.

Continue the walk up past Mt. Edgcumbe with its attractive group of houses and hotel. Cross the service road and follow the path to a seat by the side of Mt. Ephraim facing the Wellington Hotel opposite. At this point turn left with the hotel behind you and soon you come to a rocky outcrop known as Wellington Rocks - a favourite playground of families with

children for countless generations. From the seats above the rocks you will see a stand of trees across the grassy clearing. This is Victoria Grove which we will pass along on the home leg of our walk. To the right is the Upper Cricket Ground.

5 Walk down along the asphalt path with the cricket pitch on your right until your way is crossed by an unpaved track which you should follow turning right, keeping to the right hand path to take you past the back of the cricket pavilion. Cross Fir Tree Road and take the path in front of you. Almost at once you come to an open area, with two seats set back on your left. Leave the sandy path and bear left into trees at a point about 15 paces in front of the seats where you pick up a path descending through undergrowth and trees. To ease the descent, steps have been cut and reinforced with wood. In the clearing at the bottom is Fir Tree Pond one of the old 'lost' parts of the Common recently opened up again.

8 A path wanders, with diversions, through largely birch woodland, to emerge at the lower end of the glade (if it has rained heavily, this section from the steps may be very muddy, in which case you may wish to ascend the steps and rejoin the sandy track to the bottom of the glade). Here the track comes to a crossing of tracks and you should take the wide way on your left to Major York's Road.

9 At this busy road cross to a set of wooden posts. Ignore the wide track beyond the posts, a part of the old race track, and take the sidewalk to the gates of Nevill Park. Just before you reach the gates you will see a path marked as part of the Wealden Link Route running off to the left. Take this to the cottages and a pond which is fed, like Fir Tree Pond, by chalybeate springs so numerous in this area. This is the western limit of the Common. Take the gravelly road on your left. This leads up to a double row of posts where the road crosses the old race course

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11 which we will take turning right. This race track was laid out in the 18th century when the Common was more of an open heath, a circuit of about a mile beginning and ending at what we now call Wellington Rocks. Follow its course crossing a small road and continue round until you re-cross Major York's Road and continue along the straight stretch and take the first asphalt path on the left. The path rising gently runs between the trees until it emerges at the open area below Wellington Rocks. On the right is a triple row of trees (two mature and one more recently planted to replace the ravages of the 1987 hurricane).

12

13 This is the Victoria Grove laid out in 1835 in honour of Victoria who as a princess was a frequent visitor to the town. Turn right here and walk along the Grove (there are plenty of seats if you wish to linger). Shortly after crossing the asphalt path you will reach the end of the Grove, turn left and pick up a gravel track that drops away to the right between the trees. This emerges at the junction of Castle Road and Mount Edgcumbe Road (known locally as Donkey Drive, a reminder of the days last century when donkeys could be hired out from this place). Cross the junction of these roads to the corner of the Lower Cricket Pitch and walk to the far corner, or follow the path round to the right, skirting the trees, when you come to the junction of London Road and Church Road, use the traffic lights to cross London Road.

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16 Walk to a house beside Church Road with wooden pillars supporting overhanging upper storeys. This is Jordan House, one of the old factories where Tunbridge ware was made in the 19th century. If this delightful and intriguing form of decorative woodware is of interest to you, Tunbridge Wells Museum (part of the Library and Town Hall complex at the top of Mount Pleasant) has a noted collection on permanent display.

Cross Church Road taking the pavement running in front of the houses facing the Common. We are now near the end of the walk, but enjoy the attractive aspect of the houses sitting on the rocks. Across the way at the foot of the last of the outcrops and within the grounds of the house known as St. Helena is the entrance to a series of caves. When they were dug is a matter of some debate, but the word 'smugglers' always enters

into the discussion. They would have been a convenient staging warehouse between London and the coast in the 18th century where smuggling was a way of life for many in this area. The caves were fitted out with tables and seats in the 1939/1945 war to act as an air raid shelter.

Continue up the slope crossing a number of minor roads and picking up the footpath when the pavement runs out. When we reach Thackeray's House look back, and you will understand why Tunbridge Wells Common, together with Rusthall Common, are spoken of as the town's lungs.

Approximate length of walk - 2 miles
Allow about 1 hour 15 minutes

Tunbridge Wells Common

