

SHEEPLEAS



Visitor Guide and Self-guided Trails



SURREY
COUNTY COUNCIL

Sheepleas

The Sheepleas is an interesting mix of woodland, scrub and open grassland, situated on the chalk of the North Downs. This diversity of habitats is home to a number of rare and unusual species, which has brought the site its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is also situated within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

It is the natural history of the site for which The Sheepleas is best known and loved. Widely accepted as one of the best woodland areas before the storms of 1987, the beech woodlands were all but destroyed by this natural event. The passing years have seen the spread of naturally regenerated ash in place of beech and the increase of grassland areas. This change has been of great benefit to many rare and beautiful insects, especially butterflies, which can be seen throughout the site during spring and summer.

Evidence of mankind's use of the area can be found throughout the site. The open meadows are the 'Leas' from which the site gets its name; sheep would have grazed these once. Other areas were once tended by prisoners of war during World War II. Look closely for old boundary banks and ditches in the woodlands, even the trees themselves can give clues to the past, such as those to be found on the woodland trail at Yew and Box Walk.

Part of The Sheepleas was bought by Surrey County Council (SCC) in 1936 to protect the area from development, and this was added to in the 1950s. Today the site covers 270 acres (110 hectares) and is managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust on behalf of SCC. The northern and middle sections were once part of the West Horsley Place Estate, while the southern section was part of the Lovelace Estate, which contained the Horsley Towers.

Self-guided Circular Trails

The site offers two different trails, one passing through the downland areas, one passing through the woodland.

Grassland Trail

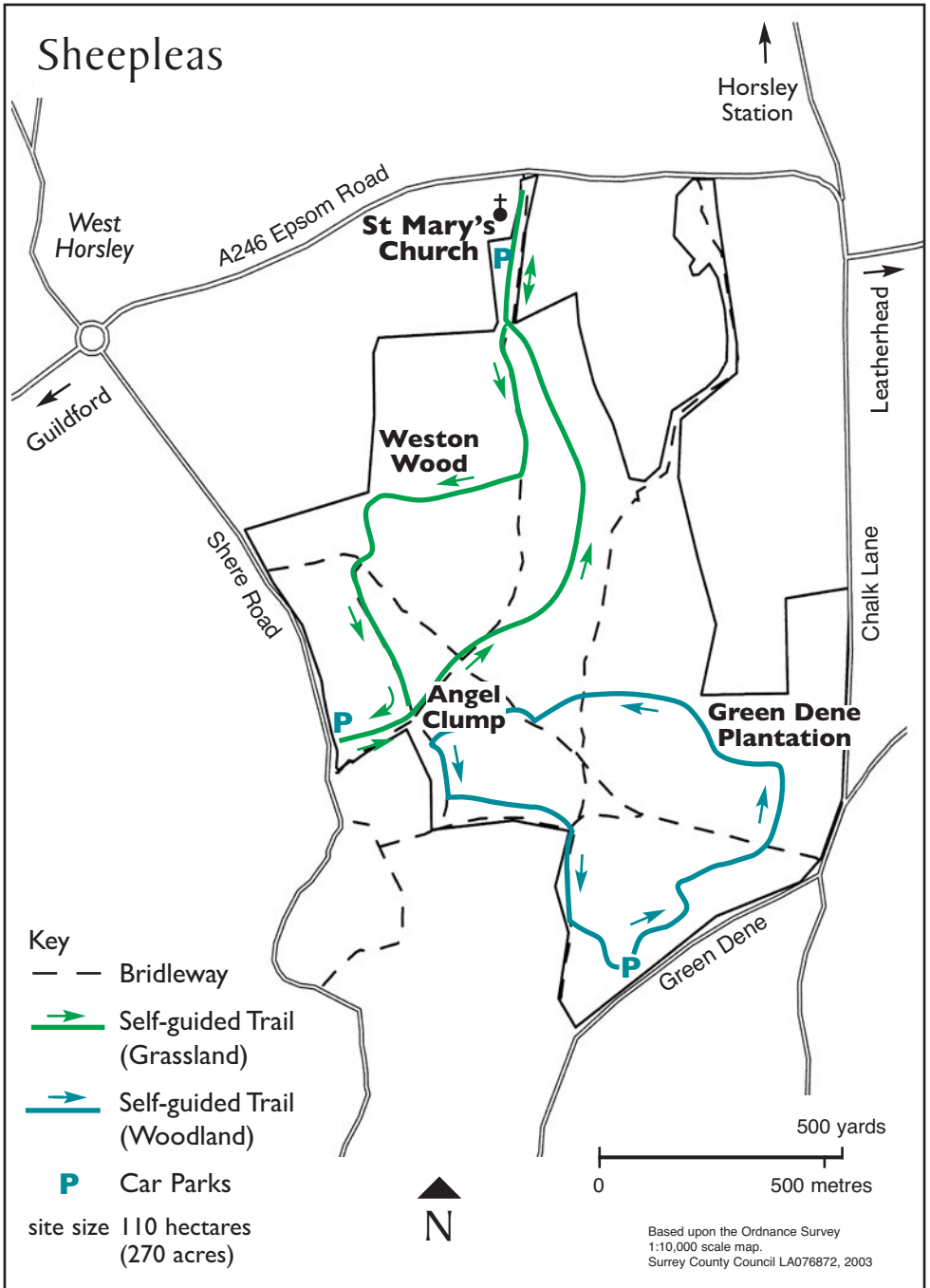
Start from either Shere Road car park or St Mary's car park (height restriction at entrances). The trail provides easy walking with some gentle slopes, no kissing gates or stiles, and will take about 1½ hours. The route is waymarked by green arrows.

Starting from Shere Road car park...

- Walking past the information board you will see newly planted beech and yew protected against rabbit damage by mesh guards. After crossing the junction of bridleways you pass into the picnic area, also known as 'the cricket pitch'; here there are some interesting clumps of mature beech and yew trees.
- From here enter the 'valley' past the Millennium Viewpoint, erected in 2000 by Horsley Parish Council to commemorate the new millennium. This area of the valley was once beech woodland. The removal of tree stumps, regular grazing and mowing has created a grassland area.
- The next meadow is known as Summerhouse Meadow due to the building that once stood behind the bench. All that now remains is the step and the brick hardcore that makes the surface of the nearby track and the remains of an 'ice hole'. This meadow was ploughed during World War II and German prisoners of war tended the potatoes that were grown here.
- Following the trail ahead will lead you into Cowslip Meadow and, as the name implies, this meadow has a fine display during the spring months. In fact, all the grassland areas have fine floral displays during the spring and summer with many orchid species present.
- At the end of the meadow you come to a '180°' gate, designed to open easily in both directions, to aid access by wheelchairs and powered disabled buggies/scooters and to close automatically.
- At this point you can continue on the trail by turning left and following the green waymarkers. Alternatively go straight ahead through the gate to visit St Mary's Church before returning to continue along the trail.

(If starting from St Mary's – join the bridleway below via the short path from car park)

- Follow the bridleway for about 400 metres, then turn right onto a 'permissive horseride'. As you walk up the hill, on either side of the trail you can see young ash saplings and much dead wood. The latter is vitally important to a healthy woodland ecosystem as it provides shelter, food and nutrients to many species.
- The trail turns left and you walk through an open area that has been managed as grassland since the 1987 storm. The number of stumps indicates how many trees used to grow here.
- From here you pass along a wide ride and on either side you can see the replanting that has taken place following the storm; young beech trees are in guards to protect them from browsing rabbits and deer. Buddleia is gradually creeping into this area and is an excellent nectar provider for butterflies.



For details of public transport in Surrey call Traveline 0870 608 2608 www.traveline.org.uk

OS Explorer map 145 covers this area.

- At the cross tracks, turn right to take you back to Shere Road car park or turn left to go into the picnic site and continue on the trail back to St Mary's car park.

Woodland Trail

Start from Green Dene car park (height restriction at entrance). The trail provides easy walking with some slopes and some narrow tracks, no kissing gates or stiles, and will take about 1 1/4 hours. The route is waymarked by white arrows.

- Take the right-hand access point from the car park and walk through an area that was once a softwood plantation; all that remains today is a few larch trees and two spectacular Corsican pine trees 70ft (21m) tall.
- Uphill from here is Yew Walk. Planted during the early part of the 19th century, this avenue of yew trees was part of the Lovelace Estate and the old Lord Lieutenant would ride and walk through here. This path leads over a bridleway and into Box Walk. This area is important for the amount of naturally regenerating box, a nationally scarce plant. This is another remnant of the Lovelace Estate.

Locally, in Mountain Wood, some architecturally interesting bridges can be found, which are part of the Lovelace Bridges Project.

- After a slight climb you pass through a wood of Norway maple; this looks spectacular in autumn when the leaves provide vivid autumnal colours. As you leave this woodland, look for the large beech on your left. This tree and its neighbour mark an old boundary; sadly the tree is now showing signs of age. Follow the bridleway past the open meadow on your left and into an area of young ash.
- This is part of a large area of naturally regenerated ash that has grown in the areas, which prior to 1987 were dominated by beech. In the normal order of things the ash would dominate, while young beech growing beneath the canopy matured and then eventually dominated the ash. The dense canopy of the beech suppresses most competition. However, the large numbers of squirrels and deer have done serious damage to the young beech. In most areas these trees have been ring barked and have either died or their growth has been stunted. Therefore we are managing the ash by thinning out the large numbers of trees. We aim to encourage ash coppice at the trackside and high forest trees deeper within the site.
- As the trail climbs slightly, you enter an area that has been planted with beech, wild cherry and oak since the 1987 storm. Now turn left into a wide ride with standing and fallen dead wood on the right. This little area is an

important habitat for many plants and insects. The width of the ride allows a lot of sunlight and warmth into the area.

- As the trail forks to the left, you can see rows of trees (predominately beech) planted since the storm; planting in rows aids tractor weeding. On the left you pass an area of thinned ash; from here turn right into another wide grass ride. This is a good spot to look for fast flying, silver-washed, fritillary butterflies.
- As you follow the trail into the woods on your left, you enter an area of neglected hazel coppice. This dense woodland area is a haven for mammals and rare fungi. The geology of this part of the site changes from the alkalinity of the chalk, found under much of the site, to neutral through to acidic of the Greensand and pebbles. The remains of an ancient river can be found here and is part of a special geological area. This soil type supports differing vegetation from the rest of the site and sweet chestnut, hornbeam, strong oak trees and honeysuckle can all be found here. During the spring this area has fine displays of bluebells. You are now just a short distance from your starting point.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit. If you have any comments, the Countryside Ranger for this site can be contacted on 07968 832501.

Surrey Wildlife Trust's mission is to protect and regenerate Surrey's wildlife.

The Trust is a registered charity (No: 208123). In partnership with Surrey County Council we currently manage 80 sites covering over 4,000 hectares of land, for nature conservation and public enjoyment. This includes the Trust's own nature reserves, SCC's countryside estate and land managed under access agreements with private landowners. A further 3,200 hectares are managed under a grazing contract with the MOD, making Surrey Wildlife Trust, in terms of land managed, the largest Wildlife Trust in England.

Surrey Wildlife Trust

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