

Your walk begins opposite the parish church in Birling and continues in an anti-clockwise direction.

Set foot on this meadow and woodland trail by taking the footpath on the opposite side of the road from the church. Steps lead to the top of the short path which opens into a sunny grassland by a kissing gate.

In summer, crickets 'sing' in the thick belts of wild grasses and flowers bordering fields which also provide a habitat for meadow brown butterflies.

Follow the track along the field edge towards the foot of the wooded escarpment. After passing an old farm on your left (Birling Lodge Farm), go through a kissing gate entering a field. Trace the path along the field edge in the direction of Birling Place – a large red brick house and home of the Nevill family – which rises on the slope ahead.

Ignore the small footbridge on your left and continue on the same path following the hedge line to a track crossing in a dip. Continue straight ahead passing under the boughs of old oak, thorn and ash trees and begin ascending towards Birling Place. After passing a metal farm gate on your right, you'll come to a paved track.

The Nevill family's ties to Birling go back nearly 600 years, hence all the references to the Nevills in and around the village, particularly in the church. The family home, Birling Place, stands prominently beneath the Downs escarpment with views all around of the wider estate. There has been a substantial dwelling here for several hundred years, which was at one time a fortified medieval house. Records show that Queen Elizabeth I paid a visit in 1573.

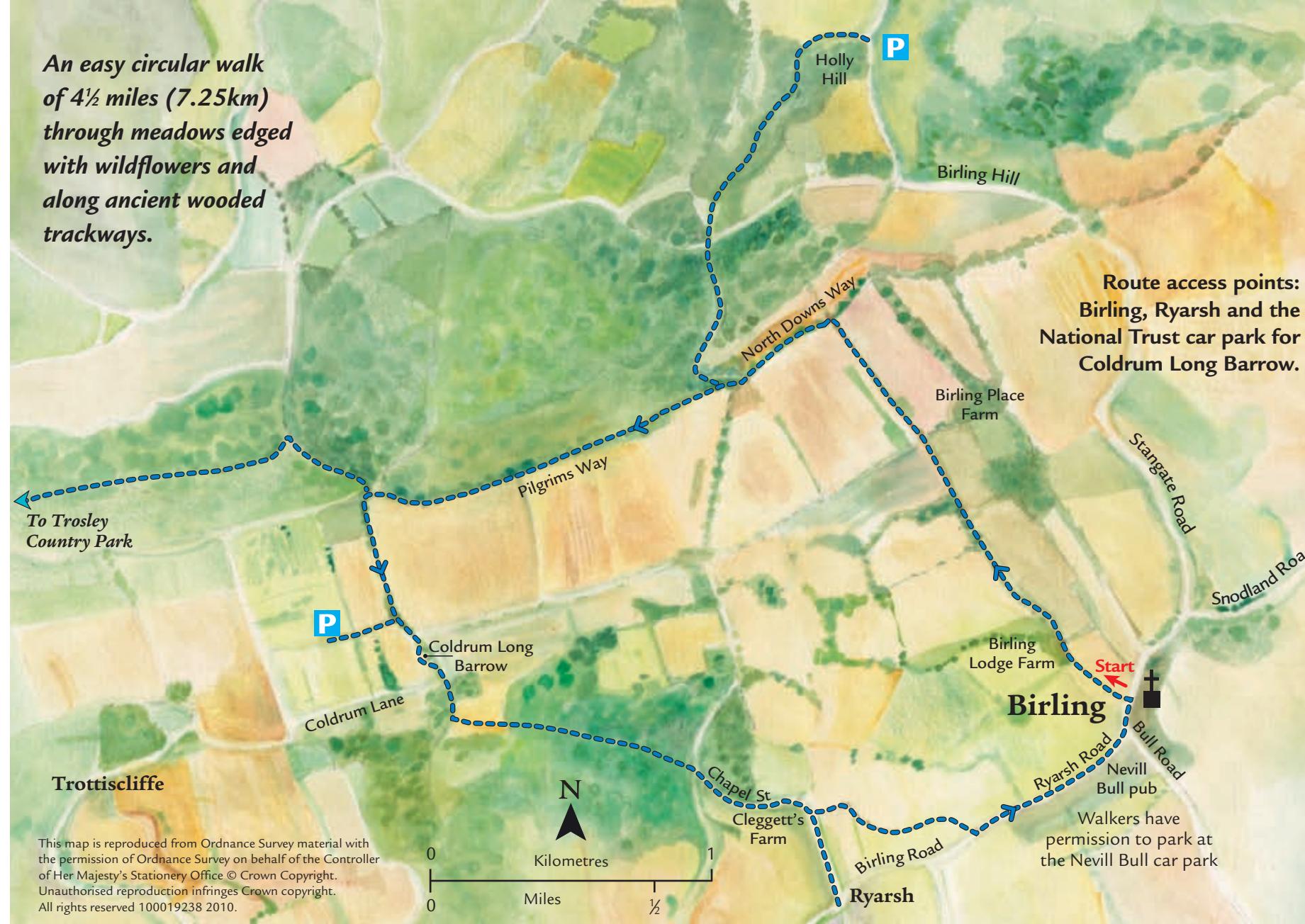
Cross the concrete road and continue towards the escarpment by walking along the field edge.

The hedgerow to your right has been restored by planting young trees where there are gaps. In time, these stems will be laid in the traditional way and will eventually form a dense habitat for birds and small mammals. Look out for yellowhammers and whitethroats singing from the mature thorn bushes, and bumblebees and butterflies gorging under the hedgerow on the nectar of clovers, knapweed and devil's-bit scabious.

The top of the field is reached at a crossing of two paths near a signpost and a kissing gate. Turn left and walk between two hedgerows in a westerly direction along the lower edge of the escarpment. You are now on the Pilgrim's Way which extends for 120 miles from Winchester to Canterbury. Listen out for green woodpeckers 'laughing' in surrounding pastures and buzzards calling as they circle above the treetops. The trackway becomes increasingly wooded by the time you reach a T-junction where you turn right.

At the junction of two paths by a disused building, continue ahead through a line of posts. By now you will have noticed the trail is deep and tunnel-like, having been worn away over hundreds of years by hooves, feet and carriage wheels.

An easy circular walk of 4½ miles (7.25km) through meadows edged with wildflowers and along ancient wooded trackways.



Route access points: Birling, Ryarsh and the National Trust car park for Coldrum Long Barrow.

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Field margin poppies



Hazel coppice stools

Chestnut coppice dominates this ancient wooded landscape with the odd ash, oak, beech and yew tree. For centuries coppiced trees (cut low to the ground to encourage the growth of lots of stems) have produced long poles ideal for charcoal production and for growing hops.

The Pilgrim's Way continues on its sinuous route through woods offering glimpses of fields fringed with poppies. The trail eventually opens at a junction with a paved lane where there are a couple of houses.

Ahead, take the bridleway off to the left signed for Coldrum Long Barrow. Keep the hedgerow to your right, following the trail downhill and eventually into another thicket. At a triangular green, follow the signs for Coldrum Long Barrow which soon appears on your right.

This astonishingly well-preserved Neolithic burial chamber was thought to be constructed 6,000 years ago and is the most complete and arresting of all the megalithic monuments in the Medway Valley.

Follow the path around the burial chamber. On your exit, turn right onto a concrete track. After a hundred yards, where the track bends to the right, turn left downhill on a grassy path flanked by hedgerows. At the T-junction, bear left. Two farm gates are 30 metres ahead. Go through the one on the left by way of a kissing gate and enter a wide grassy track with horse paddocks either side.

At the end of the paddocks enter woods by a kissing gate. The muddy track snakes through trees on a wide trail for half a mile. There are various tracks to either side but you should stay on the main track and press on ahead.

Exit the woods by a kissing gate facing a white cottage. Turn right then immediately left onto Chapel Street, walking past a red brick cottage on your left.

After 350 metres you'll come to a bend in the road where a footpath enters a field on your left. Ignore this signed path and instead continue downhill until the road straightens out. Opposite Cleggett's Farmhouse gate, take the signed footpath off to the left. After 10 metres at a fork in the track, turn left walking alongside a garden. You soon come to another junction of grassy tracks. Go straight on, entering an open field and keeping the hedgerow on your right.

At the end of the field, the path veers right around an old ash tree and over a watery ditch. After a few metres there will be a kissing gate. Take a diagonal path through the field aiming for the corner of a hedgerow jutting into the field. Keep the hedgerow on your left and follow it to a stile which takes you into another meadow which you cross diagonally aiming for a house. At the corner of the field, go through a wooden kissing gate and cross the next small meadow in the direction of a black gate (by Charlton House).

Leave the open countryside by two large wooden posts at the side of the main road into Birling. Turn left and follow the paved footpath all the way into the village, passing the Nevill Bull pub where a friendly welcome and hearty lunch await.

Birling Community Heritage Trail



Green woodpecker



Common spotted orchid



Gatekeeper



Common buzzard



Grizzled skipper



Pyramidal orchid

Introduction

This gentle route beneath the North Downs escarpment offers glimpses of an ancient landscape that, though continuously shaped by humans ever since the first farmers settled in the Medway Valley, still retains features that have persisted for hundreds if not thousands of years. They include the ancient Pilgrim's Way trackway, coppice woods and arguably the most intact megalithic monument in the valley: Coldrum Long Barrow. The trail also passes through Birling, an old village admired for its houses built of Kentish ragstone and quirky pub, the Nevill Bull, which serves locally-produced drinks and food.



Birling escarpment



Birling church

Birling

Surrounded by undulating meadows, paddocks and arable fields is this traditional Kent village with a historic church and pub.

The oldest parts of All Saints go back to the 13th century, though the churchyard is considerably older and at one time enclosed an Anglo Saxon church. It protects a yew tree to the rear which is probably at least as ancient as the oldest masonry. The stained glass panels above the altar depicting the four apostles were put into storage during the Second World War for safekeeping but when they were re-inserted into the windows, the order was muddled and they now hang: John, Mark, Luke and Matthew.

John Miller johnmillerphotography.com

Rowland Hilder

Renowned landscape artist, Rowland Hilder, has strong ties to Birling, this being the birthplace of his mother and where he spent many summers as a child. His memorial stone stands in the churchyard to the right of the path. The surrounding countryside provided inspiration for some of Hilder's nostalgic paintings of rolling downlands, farmhouses and old villages – all of which are encountered on this walk. Welcome to Hilder Country.

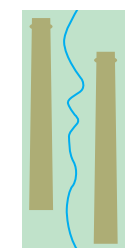
'...Clearly Birling had a deciding influence on myself. The whole flavour of the countryside of years ago and onwards is still vivid in my mind. It was all so beautiful to me...'

Rowland Hilder quoted in **Birling: a backward glance** by Margaret Collins.



With kind permission of Srodland Historical Society

Birling from the Church Tower



This trail is part of the Valley of Visions Community Trails project, encouraging people to enjoy, explore and learn about their local area and surrounding countryside. Why not explore one of the other community trails in the Medway Gap? Visit www.valleyofvisions.org.uk for further information.

You can find out more about the wildlife and nature reserves of the area at www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk

Refreshments are available at:

Nevill Bull, Birling
www.nevillbull.co.uk
01732 843193

Duke of Wellington, Ryarsh
www.dukeofwellingtonryarsh.com
01732 842318

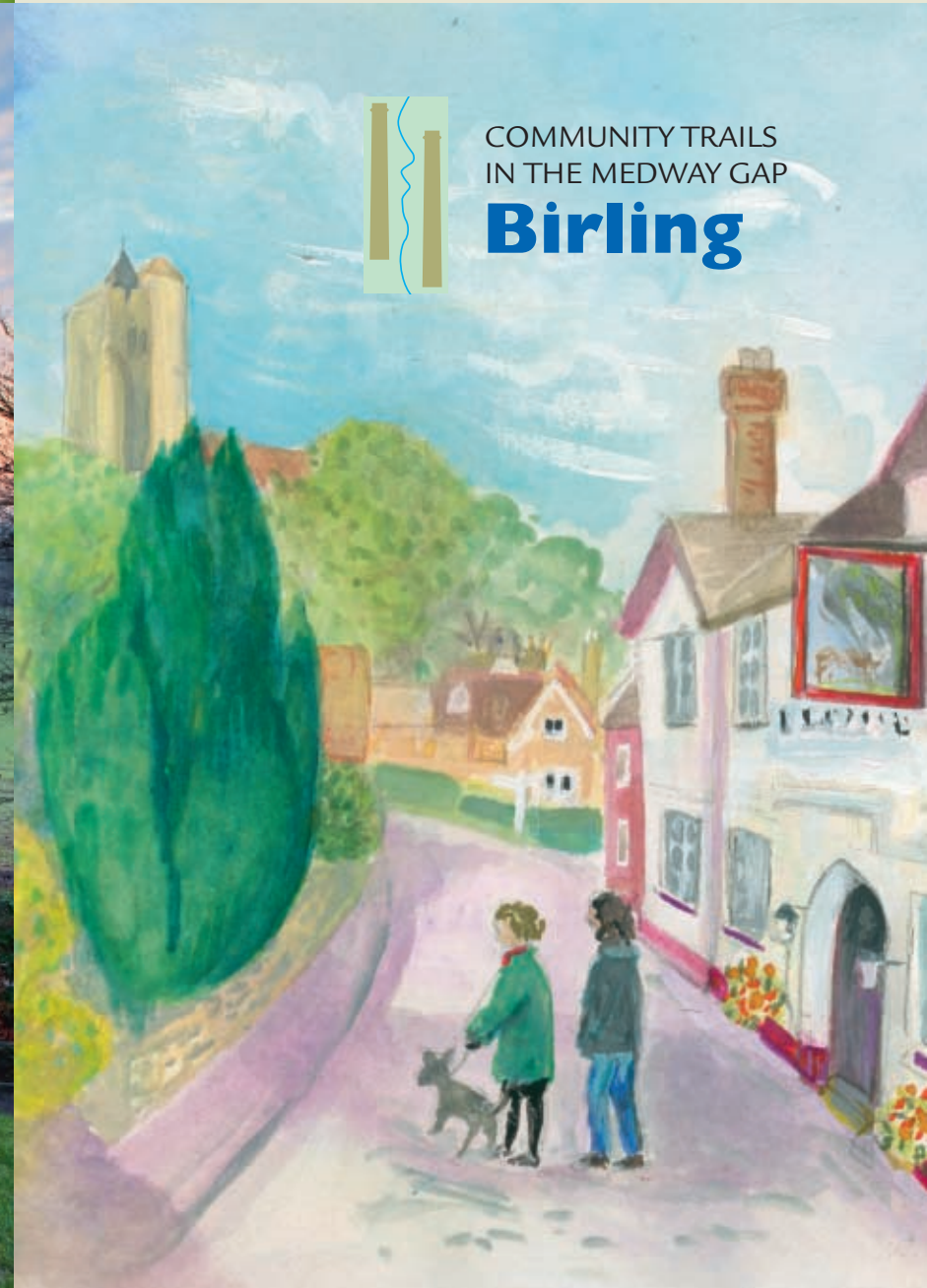
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Words by Gemma Hall with thanks to contributions from Birling residents.

Coldrum Long Barrow by John Miller johnmillerphotography.com

Coldrum Long Barrow

Every year, on the 1st May at dawn, morris dancers from Hartley, a nearby village, visit the stones to 'sing up the sun'. This consists of performing a number of dances within the stones on top of the barrow, followed by a song usually performed at the base of the stones.



COMMUNITY TRAILS
IN THE MEDWAY GAP
Birling