

FIRLE BEACON

A WALK IN THE PARK

Roger Wheeler explores some Sussex sights

Christmas means too much food and drink and so it should, but we all know that there's no such thing as a free lunch. So whilst we acknowledge that we really should do some exercise, do we actually need to join a gym when all we need to do is to walk more? The gym culture has taken quite a strong hold on us, which is fine if you want a ripped six pack, but many of us don't so let's get out and walk off some of that excess food. It seems very odd that just by walking you can burn an average of 150 calories an hour and walking on a regular basis will result in generally improving your health. Enough of the commercial, it's obvious that exercise is a good thing and walking is one of the easiest and cheapest ways.

Sussex has some of the loveliest walks in the country and is dead easy to get to with the added advantage of many decent pubs along the way. Boxing Day is, or was, one of the most traditional days to take a walk. We have two or three favourites: **Seaford Head** to the **Golden Galleon** in the **Cuckmere Valley**, **High and Over** on the road from **Seaford** to **Alfriston**, with probably one of the most beautiful views in Sussex. Best of all, in our opinion, is **Firle Beacon**, which at 217m is one of the highest points in the county. It's part of the **South Downs Way** and now, of course, part of the **South Downs National Park**. Just four or so miles from Lewes is the 500-year-old village of **Firle**, a classic Sussex village. In the language of travel brochures Firle is nestled in the heart of the South

Downs, protected by the Beacon, with a variety of cottages, many covered in flint, a community hall and wide-range of local events and fairs. Firle is a thriving rural community in one of the most picturesque parts of the United Kingdom. The heart of this lovely village is, of course, the pub, **The Ram**.

We've been walking this stretch of the South Downs Way for many years and have always ended up at The Ram, which was once a real old fashioned pub serving some of the best local beers (Harvey's since you ask) and some good pub grub and now must be one of the



most popular gastro pubs in the area. It's packed to the hilt most weekends with good reason, simple word of mouth has ensured its success. Under new management this place has gone from strength to strength. It's now essential to book a table for lunch at weekends, that's how popular it has become. The secret of its success is, for me, the true atmosphere of an old country pub. The young and attractive staff are very friendly, and even if they haven't seen you for months greet you like an old friend.

On a glorious early autumn Sunday the place was packed; muddy wellies, wet dogs and children are everywhere. This being rural Sussex most of the cars are top of the range and the children are extremely well behaved. The food is excellent; they say it's as local as it can be, and with a large Tesco only four

miles away I'm sure it is! Wherever the food comes from the chef does an excellent job.

I suggest booking a table in the bar which is the most interesting room, although the Court Room and the Snug are very pleasant. On a good day you can eat and drink outside in the garden or the yard. I'll leave the full restaurant review to my expert colleague who needs to visit soon, though suffice to say we love The Ram and Firle itself is wonderful. We have often said that maybe it would be a great place to live, but it's just a tad out of our price range apart from the fact that properties never come on the market, and as it's all owned by the Firle Estate they probably never will.

The village owes its existence to the Gage family who arrived in 1463 and built the first **Firle Place**. Since then it has been the home of the family, and now the 8th Viscount Gage lives



FIRLE PLACE

there. The building is an imposing 18C house which in part dates from the Tudor period. It's open to the public throughout the summer and is well worth a visit. Firle also has, they say, the oldest cricket ground in the world. True or not it hardly matters, it's ancient, and the annual village fete and regular equestrian events held on the estate make it a very popular venue.

There are so many other villages dotted around Sussex it's impossible to list them all, but **Wilmington**, **Selmeston**, **Ripe**, **Alfriston**, **Fulking** and **Alciston** all deserve mention. And, of course they all have excellent hostelryes, now mostly serving the modern version of pub grub. Some are quite pricey but most will do a decent pie and pint after a bracing walk, whether it's a mile or ten, and it's always worthwhile, just think of the health benefits.

Have a great Christmas.

INFO

- <http://www.raminn.co.uk/>
- <http://www.firle.com/>
- <http://www.countryfile.com>



FIRLE STORES

VIEW OF NEWHAVEN FROM BEACON

