

A WALK ON THE NOT SO WILD SIDE

Roger Wheeler explores the Sussex countryside

CUCKMERE VALLEY



Sussex in the spring has got everything: beautiful villages, gorgeous scenic countryside, three or four country parks and nature reserves including the **Seven Sisters Country Park** and the **South Downs National Park**, miles and miles of coast, hundreds of country pubs (some even with good restaurants), and dozens of fine historic houses and towns you can visit. There's also, of course, the **South Downs Way**, a mere 100 mile walk from Winchester to Eastbourne. So why do we all fly off abroad? In one word, the climate.

THE SEVEN SISTERS



That being said, given a few hot days (yes they do exist) it's very hard to beat a walk in some of the most beautiful countryside in the country. Drive over to Seaford, go right along the seafront as far as you can and then walk up **Seaford Head** and carry on to the **Cuckmere Valley**. You can explore the seashore, so long as it's low tide, and then marvel at one of the most famous views in England, The **Seven Sisters**. So beautiful is this particular view that the Dover Tourist Authority even used it thinking that it was better than their famous White Cliffs, which aren't particularly white anyway.



This is quite a walk, probably three or four miles, but you end up at the **Golden Galleon**, a pub in the Cuckmere Valley serving good beer and reasonable food. The **River Cuckmere** has been carving its way through the Downs for centuries and has resulted in the famous meanders or ox-bow lakes. The river has been diverted into a straight channel through what is now The **Cuckmere Valley Nature Reserve Country Park**. The whole valley teems with birdlife and it's difficult to remember that this was one of the frontline defences during WW2. You can still see pill boxes, concrete gun emplacements and anti-tank concrete pillars. Today it's a peaceful and tranquil spot. The Environment Agency has decided to stop protecting this area from the inevitable erosion by the sea and let nature take its course. These plans have provoked controversy in the valley, especially among property owners. Some residents have formed a **Rescue The Cuckmere Valley** group, to try and create an alternative to proposed seasonal flooding. It will take years for any great change to take place but it does make sense; let the sea back in and the resulting salt marshes will provide a great wildlife area.

Just five miles north of Lewes lies the tiny hamlet of **Barcombe**, one of the most



ANCHOR INN BARCOMBE

picturesque places in the whole region. This place was settled in the Iron Age, then by the Romans, and it's in the *Domesday Book* from which you will gather it's pretty ancient. The village is actually called **Barcombe Cross** but it has since been shortened. It's on the **River Ouse** and there are miles of lovely footpaths along the riverbank. This is truly one of the most unspoilt spots you can find. The **Anchor** is a great pub right on the river bank, serving very good food and you can also stay the night. They rent rowing boats so you can take your beloved for a romantic boat trip (luckily the river is not deep).

This part of East Sussex is stuffed with thatched roofed chocolate box villages with ancient inns, medieval churches, Range Rovers and *Grand Design* barn conversions, gentlemen farmers in green wellies with wet dogs. But that's only half the picture, take a stroll through the centre of **Ripe** (about three miles



THE LAMB RIPE

north of the A27, just five miles from Lewes) and read the parish notices. They are a revelation of real rural life in 2013. Pop into **The Lamb**, one of the county's best gastropubs.

It's all happening in these little communities, and they are communities in the real sense of the word. They are by no means cut off in their bucolic surroundings but are as much in touch with today's world as anyone living in the centre of London. It looks idyllic and from the casual observer a perfect place to live.



RYE

We shouldn't forget **Rye**, one of the south coast's historic **Cinque Port** towns, which without doubt has one of the prettiest historic Georgian high streets in the south east.

But whether or not city folk could adapt to living in these tranquil settings is doubtful. A very good friend once said that it was lovely going to see the countryside but after a few hours it was good to get back to the city.

We live in the centre of Brighton but in a very short time we can be in the country. Wherever you actually live, take a chance and get out and take a walk, you know it makes sense.