

THE VANGUARD WAY

66 miles from Croydon to Newhaven



ANNUAL REVIEW FOR 2020

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www.vanguardway.org.uk

The Vanguard Way (VGW) was devised by the Vanguards Rambling Club and launched in 1981. It is managed by volunteers on behalf of the Club by the Vanguard Way Working Party (VWWP). Further information, including free detailed route descriptions, is available at www.vanguardway.org.uk. If you would like more information about any of the items mentioned below, please email the Honorary Route Manager, Colin Saunders, colin@vanguardway.org.uk.

Overview

As may be expected, activity on the Vanguard Way was severely restricted in 2020, but we still managed to carry out a substantial amount of work, as detailed below. But first some information about two important events, which we hope will take place in 2021.

VGW 40

2021 sees the 'ruby anniversary' of the Vanguard Way, making it surely one of the country's most senior walking routes. On 3rd May 1981, Alan Mattingly, then General Secretary of the Ramblers' Association, cut the tape at Gills Lap in the Ashdown Forest (roughly halfway along) to declare the route well and truly open. We intend to celebrate the anniversary somehow on Monday 3rd May 2021. Ideally, this would be part of a six-day crossing of the VGW from south to north, but it currently seems unlikely that this will be practical, so we shall do whatever is permitted on that date.

Vanguard Way Association

The Vanguards Rambling Club is in the process of setting up the association, to take over management of the route from our informal working party, and has drafted a constitution ready for discussion and ratification at a public meeting in Croydon, hopefully later in 2021, whenever such meetings can take place.

Coronavirus

One good thing to result from the pandemic has been the increase in the number of people walking in our fabulous countryside. But many of them have no previous experience of such activity, and there have been complaints from landowners and farmers that gates have been left open, dogs have roamed free and attacked livestock, and there has been an increase in damage and litter. However, there have been signs that people

are learning how to act responsibly in the countryside, and some local people have taken the opportunity to offer facilities that will attract walkers, such as pathside refreshments and items for sale. We hope that everyone will ultimately benefit from the experience.

The route

The following issues arose along the route in 2020, described in geographical order, north to south.



Map © Catherine Ames

Croydon section. Sadly, the comprehensive improvements that were scheduled to take place in 2020, which were agreed after undertaking an on-site survey in 2019 with Croydon's senior highway engineer, came to nought as a result of, first, the pandemic, and second, the borough declaring itself bankrupt. We shall be taking this up again when the situation improves.

The most annoying issue is a metal VGW finger at Fairfield Road, which has been misaligned for several years, and despite many reminders and being a simple repair, Croydon's highways department has so far failed to realign it.

Selsdon Wood, Croydon. A mystery surrounds an allegedly missing wooden bench along the track called Addington Border, which is mentioned in our route description, but the Friends say has never been there! The location is at the top of a very steep ascent, so an opportunity for a rest would surely be welcome, and the Friends say they will consider providing one.

Titsey Estate, Surrey. The Greenwich Meridian marker on the Oxted Downs part of the estate, which the Vanguardians jointly funded with Surrey CC, had become almost invisible from the VGW due to overgrowth, but this has now been cleared, apparently by the estate staff. It's on the short stretch that is shared by the VGW and the North Downs Way.

Whistler's Footbridge, which carries the VGW eastern link into Oxted over the M25, has still not formally reopened after damage to its fences, but continues to be used by local people anyway.

The footpath that runs parallel to the M25 on the Titsey Estate is in a poor state of repair, being rutted and uneven, as well as overgrown, so that the ruts are not apparent and present a trip hazard. This has been reported to Surrey County Council, who will arrange for the overgrowth to be cleared as a first step.

Grasshopper Inn, Moorhouse Bank, Surrey. Although the website appears to indicate that the inn, which has its own link with the VGW, has been repaired following a calamitous fire, there is currently no sign that it is likely to reopen in the near future.

Kent & Surrey Golf Course, near Edenbridge, Kent. We donated 10 wooden waymark posts to the golf club to mark the VGW route across the course. They are due to be installed this winter, lockdown permitting, with VGW discs attached. The route as prescribed by the golf club does not follow the official line of the right of way, and we have suggested that they should discuss with Kent CC how this situation can be rectified.

Cernes Farm, near Starborough, Surrey. We have agreed to jointly fund with Kent Ramblers a new, more substantial fingerpost, showing destinations, at the entrance to Cernes Farm, to mark the intersection of the VGW and the Tandridge Border Path with the start of the Eden Valley Walk – at 22 miles, this is a third of the way along the VGW. Surrey CC have agreed to instal the post, and we await the landowner's approval. We hope eventually to instal similar posts at other key locations along the route.

Wet Wood, near Hammerwood, East Sussex. The solution to a mystery that has intrigued us ever since the VGW was launched in 1981, has been provided by a local resident, who tells us that what looked like a pop-art installation near the route, consisting of miscellaneous objects such as tables, workbenches and washing-up facilities, are actually part of Hammerwood Scout Camp Site.

High Hurstwood, East Sussex. As the original route north of the village (Buxted FP 24) has been closed since 2012 due to a broken bridge and boardwalk, following a landslip, we have decided to formally transfer the VGW to the attractive official diversion via Perryman's Lane. However, should the equally attractive FP24 become available again, we shall consider offering both as alternative options.

Redbrook Lane, Buxted, East Sussex. We have objected to a proposal for residential development in this very narrow lane, which the VGW follows on the east side of Buxted, on the grounds that it will result in a considerable increase in traffic, making the lane unsafe for walkers.

Nightingales Wood, north of Berwick Station, East Sussex. Two fallen trees blocking the footpath were removed by East Sussex CC.

A27 at Berwick Village, East Sussex. Work is due to start soon on the A27 improvement works east of Lewes, but sadly this will not include a protected crossing where the VGW crosses over. Instead, walkers will be expected to use a new shared use track beside the A27 to Drusilla's Roundabout, when ready in early 2022, necessitating a 560m diversion.

Traffic in Alfriston, East Sussex. For many years, we have been concerned about the level of traffic in Alfriston, which often goes much too fast and drives over the narrow pavements, with accidents and damage resulting. Various alleviation schemes have been considered and rejected as being impractical, including traffic lights with alternate one-way working. The current situation is that East Sussex CC have put forward another package of measures for consideration, including a village-wide 20 mph limit, single yellow lines and parking restrictions.

South Downs National Park, East Sussex. The infamous flight of steps south of West Dean has been upgraded by East Sussex CC and substantially reduced in number (from 227 to 152 by our reckoning), with a handrail to one side, so that they can now be used more comfortably. The much shorter flight near Charleston Manor further north has also been upgraded.

Photo © Fiona Barltrop



England Coast Path, East Sussex. Most of the 10 km stretch of the VGW between Exceat and Newhaven will become part of the England Coast Path, when it opens in the near future. The South Downs National Park Authority and East Sussex County Council have agreed to incorporate the VGW in signage there.

Exceat Bridge, East Sussex. A project to replace the existing bridge beside the Cuckmere Inn is now in an advanced state. As well as eradicating the traffic bottleneck caused by the existing single carriageway, it would provide a footway on either side, removing the need to cross the busy A259 road twice. We tried to persuade East Sussex CC to include as part of this project both a protected pedestrian crossing on an intimidating blind bend outside the visitor centre further east, and an improvement to the equally intimidating narrow raised causeway beside the road, but it seems funds will not stretch to these at present.



Cuckmere Haven, East Sussex. Part of the embankment at the point where the VGW comes down to the beach has fallen away, but walkers can easily get round. [Note: The embankment has since collapsed further, right up to the wooden fence, requiring a longer diversion.]

Photo © John Jefkins

Newhaven Port Access Road, East Sussex. Part of the VGW beside Mill Creek west of Tidemills had to be diverted to an alternative footpath nearer the beach during the construction of the access road between February 2019 and September 2020, but this has now reopened.

Newhaven Harbour, East Sussex. The train service to Newhaven Harbour Station has been reduced to hourly peak times only Mondays to Fridays, but remains approximately half-hourly on Saturdays and Sundays. Newhaven Town Station continues to be served approximately half-hourly all week.

Those travelling by train to or from Seaford or Newhaven may have noticed the little branch line to the old Newhaven Marine Station, which took foot passengers to the old ferry terminal. This closed in 2006 and all ferry passengers now have to use the main terminal near Newhaven Town Station. Network Rail now plans to remove the Marine Station buildings altogether, subject to parliamentary approval.

Other activities: We reported broken stiles near Nore Hill Chalk Pinnacle (Surrey) and at Poundgate (East Sussex).

Signage

We were able to take advantage of lockdown to complete the signage schedules and mapping that were started by the late Graham Butler some years ago. The maps at scales of approximately 1:5,000 or 1:10,000 show the exact location of some 600 signs along the route, and the schedules show details of each sign including grid reference, type of sign (e.g metal finger, plastic disc or VGW sticker), fixing point, orientation and installation date. The exercise threw up some anomalies in the route alignment, of which we were previously unaware, mainly where it deviated from the exact line of the right of way. These have been drawn to the attention of the relevant highway authorities and appropriate action taken, where possible.

Highways officers and others with a 'need-to-know' are welcome to request copies of these documents from colin@vanguardway.org.uk.

The Vanguards have a small team of volunteers, who carry out basic maintenance, such as replacement and cleaning of waymark discs and overgrowth clearance. We were unable to do this as much as we would have liked recently, due to various lockdowns, but hope to continue apace in 2021.

Although VGW signage is over 90 percent complete, there are still gaps, where at present there is no suitable fixing point. We are gradually eliminating them, but progress is slow, and depends on the relevant authorities providing new posts. The most and longest gaps are in the **Ashdown Forest**, and we often hear of people going astray there because of the lack of signs. Despite clear instructions in our route descriptions, many walkers either don't read them correctly, or don't even have them, preferring to follow the route using only maps and signs. The Conservators adamantly refuse to allow additional posts, as they feel that this will

adversely affect the natural atmosphere of the area. We believe that it would be better to provide more public transport and signage, to encourage visitors to walk within and into the Forest, rather than drive.

Participation, website and blog



Travel restrictions during 2020 made walking the VGW more difficult for most people, but there has been a huge increase in the number of potential walkers visiting our website (see below). We encourage VGW walkers to apply for completion certificates and our amazing badges, though it's likely that only a small minority does so, and some wait months or even years before telling us

We receive many requests for advice from people who are planning to walk or run the route, often as a group, sometimes Ramblers and LDWA local groups, or just families or friends. We also hear from people who have encountered problems while walking the route, and we're most grateful to them for doing this.

Last year's completers included two who reported their journeys at length and in some style on the internet: [Adrian Young](#) on Twitter and [CJ Mickey](#) on YouTube. After walking the VGW, Patrick Webster suggested the very appropriate strapline 'Very Good Walk'. And we are most grateful to Pete Lockey, who has supplied us with several hundred photos along the route, which have been added to our photo-library.

After consulting us on the suitability of the VGW for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, a group of four such people completed the route. This was easy to answer, as one of our former members, the late Colin 'Inky' Hills, who was totally deaf, did so several times with no problem.

The VGW is one of the long-distance routes suggested by the **British Walking Federation**, the UK arm of the IVV (Internationaler Volkssport Verband, which translates as International Federation of Popular Sports). This enables its members to walk the route at any time and claim 106 km towards IVV distance awards. For an explanation see www.bwf-ivv.org.uk and click on 'The Award Scheme' (under 'The IVV').

Website. In 2020 there were 5,993 users of the Vanguard Way website, 22% up on the previous year – perhaps the result of an increased interest in walking as a result of the pandemic. These users had 8,432 sessions (12% increase) and 20,483 page views (1.6% increase). Almost 90% of users were based in the UK, 6% in the USA and 1.4% in China – little change from the previous year. Browsers used to view the website were split 54% Chrome, 19% Safari, 7% Edge and 7% Firefox. Operating systems were 34% Windows, 32% Android and 17% iOS. Of mobile users, 65% were using an Android device and 34% iOS.

During the year, we published (as .pdf documents downloadable free from our website) new versions of the 'Introduction to the Route', north to south Sections 2 and 4 and south to north Sections G and H.

There has been increased use of GPS apps, and we have responded by providing on our website .gpx files for the VGW, which can be used in either direction.

The **Vanguard Way blog** can be accessed at <https://vanguardwayblog.blogspot.com>.

Events

Sadly, the annual **Weald Challenge Races**, which normally follow parts of the VGW and Wealdway from Chiddingfold in June, fell victim to the first Covid lockdown and were unable to take place. Instead, a 'virtual' High Weald Challenge was offered, in which participants were invited to run a 50 km circular route from Groombridge into the Ashdown Forest, including part of the VGW, at a time of their own choosing during a 6-week period, then post their time on a leaderboard.

The Seventh Annual **Vanguard Way Marathon**, organised by 1m2go, was able to go ahead, despite difficult circumstances, in glorious weather on Sunday 2 August, when about 100 runners followed the 42.2 km course along the VGW from Lloyd Park to Limpsfield Chart and back. The race was won by Jack Oates of Fareham in a new record time of 3 hours 7 minutes 57 seconds, despite getting briefly lost at one point!

The **London to Brighton Trail Marathon (L2B)**, which follows the VGW for much of its route, did not take place in 2020, due to lack of a suitable start venue, and will not happen in 2021.

Publicity

During 2020 the VGW has been featured in or added to several publications and websites, including:

[*Strider*](#), the excellent thrice-yearly members' magazine of the Long Distance Walkers Association, carried in its August 2020 edition a prominent feature about the VGW 40th anniversary in 2021.

[*Cicerone Press*](#), which used to publish a guidebook by Kev Reynolds that covered both the VGW and the Wealdway, includes on its website a magazine section recommending outdoor activities that are not necessarily in its current catalogue. On 11 March, there was an excellent 16-page one about the VGW by travel writer Ali Rowsell.

TravelLogLewes.co.uk, a website that provides information about sustainable transport and tourism in East Sussex, includes an item about the VGW.

FastestKnownTime.com, a website that provides details of, unsurprisingly, fastest known times for completion by runners on numerous long distance trails, added the VGW to the list in September. (The fastest known time for the VGW is 10 hours 27 minutes by Jonny Muir in 2013 – an average speed of about 10 kph or 6.25 mph.)

WalkingEnglishman.com, which claims to be the most visited free content website for walking in Great Britain, offering files in GPS and Google Earth formats.

The Beautiful South, the official website for tourism in South East England.

We're most grateful to all the above for helping to promote the VGW. The 29 February 2020 online version of [*New European*](#) included an item entitled "Why I'm Walking to Paris" by the author Will Self, but though clearly following the VGW to Newhaven, he rather ungenerously failed to name it.

Looking forward

A gate for Graham. We had hoped to carry out surveys in 2020 to establish suitable locations for two kissing gates as a tribute to Graham Butler, our former honorary route manager, who died in November 2018. We hope to walk the Surrey stretches of the VGW this year to identify two stiles that would benefit from being replaced by a kissing gate in his memory. This is a joint project with Surrey Ramblers, who have considerable experience of doing this, and for whom Graham served as secretary for many years.

Planned dates for running events in 2021 (Covid permitting) are:

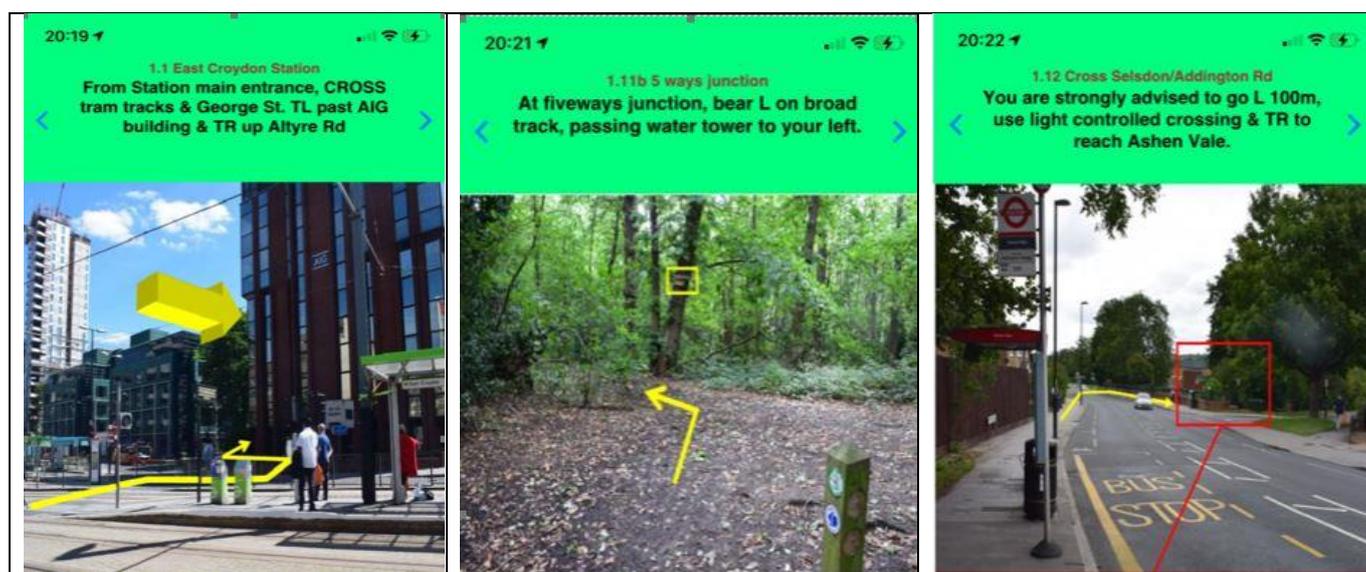
Weald Challenge Races, Sunday 13 June (www.trailrunningsussex.co.uk)

Vanguard Way Marathon, Sunday 1 August (www.1m2go.co.uk)

Vanguard Way Photoguide app

John Jefkins, who has walked all or most of the VGW 2-3 times, is currently producing an app provisionally entitled 'Vanguard Way Photoguide'. It should be available for free download on Google Play or the App Store later this year, with a preview version available in advance for comment, and we hope to link it to our website when fully operational.

As demonstrated by the examples shown below, the app will include almost 3,000 photos of key points along the route, with an arrow to show where the route goes, while the relevant excerpt from the official VGW route description will appear at the top of the screen. Maps and other information will be accessible via buttons. We are most grateful to John for suggesting this idea, and for his hard work in developing it, and we hope to link the app to our website when ready.



Photos © John Jefkins

For further information about any of the items mentioned above, please email colin@vanguardway.org.uk or phone 020 8886 8285 or 07768 453159.

Full details including free route descriptions for the Vanguard Way can be found at www.vanguardway.org.uk.

Vanguard Way Working Party
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