

MOLE GAP TRAIL
EXPERIENCE A BEAUTIFUL TRAIL
CONNECTING LEATHERHEAD AND DORKING
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Surrey Hills
NATIONAL LANDSCAPE
An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



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HM Government
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Mole Gap Trail

This trail leaflet has been designed to start at Leatherhead Station and finish at Dorking Mainline Station. However it can be enjoyed in each direction. There are waymarkers along the trail with QR codes for those wishing to find out more about this beautiful route.

1 Leatherhead Railway Station

Leatherhead Station opened on March 11, 1867 and was designed by Charles Henry Driver – an important Victorian architect, expert in the early use of decorative ornamental ironwork. Fine examples can be seen in the slender columns and ornamental brackets on the station canopy. The Leatherhead to Dorking railway and associated infrastructure is rather special as we will see later on the Trail.



Leatherhead Railway Station

2 Leatherhead Conservation Area

Leatherhead is the gateway to this walk through the Mole Gap. It sits on an ancient crossing point on the River Mole which lies close to the town centre, and near to its busy commercial heart. Here is a good place to start the Trail with a leisurely visit to one of the town's cafes. There is also a chance to browse the shops.



Arches under the town bridge

3 Bridge Street

Elegant Bridge Street has fine early 19th Century buildings. It leads to an historic fording point across the River Mole near the 15th Century 'Running Horses' inn. A plaque on the building provides some history and the comic poem about the notorious ale-wife Elinour Rumming written by John Skelton in the early 16th Century.

4 The Town Bridge

The 14 arches of the late 18th Century Town Bridge provides your first encounter with the River Mole. Stop in each of the semi-circular refuges either side of the bridge to look upstream over the channels of the river and downstream towards the modern road bridge and the ornamental railway viaduct built in 1867. As with many of the railway structures, they were designed to be attractive to look at.



5 The Shell Bridge

This stretch of the river contains remnants of an 18th Century designed landscape, possibly by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Today it is valued as a Local Nature Reserve and home to a variety of birds, invertebrates and rare plants. Remains of the more formal landscape can be seen in the flint faced Shell Bridge, decorated with a large scallop shell, connecting two of the islands. Thorncroft Manor can also be glimpsed through the trees.



The Shell Bridge

6 Thorncroft Manor and Vineyard

Thorncroft was one of the two feudal manors from Norman times and held by Merton College, Oxford until the early 20th Century. Thorncroft Manor built in 1772 by Sir Robert Taylor was designed for Henry Crabb Boulton, Lord of the Manor and MP for Worcester. Turning right onto Thorncroft Drive you have a fine view of the manor house. A contemporary mirror glass extension by Michael Manser beautifully reflects the historic building and its landscape. Remnants of the home farm can be seen along the route. A vineyard in the shallow valley produces elderflower wine.



Thorncroft Manor

7 Young Street – A246 Road

During the World War II, Canadian forces were stationed at Leatherhead. They left two contrasting legacies; two maple trees, planted in the grounds of the Manor, and the construction of Young Street, named after the commanding officer Colonel Young, now the A246. As you progress along the Trail you pass under the road bridge.



Cherkley Court (Beaverbrook) and Park Farm, Mickleham

8 Norbury Park

The Trail now skirts the edge of Norbury Park. In 1931, James Chuter Ede, then Chairman of Surrey County Council, spearheaded the purchase of 530 hectares in order to protect it. His action in securing public ownership of Norbury Park has enabled it to be enjoyed ever since. He later became Home Secretary holding this position longer than any one else in the 20th Century.

9 Railway Heritage

At this point on the Trail you walk under a railway viaduct just before the railway line goes into a tunnel. The construction of the line is an interesting story. In the mid-19th Century Thomas Grissell, owner of Norbury Park House, was concerned about the impact of the new railway on his estate and the spectacular views. Fortunately he was an engineer who knew about railway construction. The railway also needed access to his land so he was able to negotiate undergrounding of a section of line, decorative buildings structures (some now listed) and that trains stop at his request at Box Hill Station.



10 Cherkley Court

When you reach the crest of the hill look north-east across the Mole Gap towards the eclectic, stuccoed façade of Cherkley Court built in the 1870s for northern industrialist Abraham Dixon. He retired to Surrey and was a much respected local philanthropist. In 1907 the house was purchased by newspaper magnate Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook. A member of Churchill's World War II cabinet, he masterminded the production of Spitfires crucial to the Battle of Britain victory. The house was visited by numerous famous personalities. Today as 'Beaverbrook' it is a hotel, spa and restaurant.



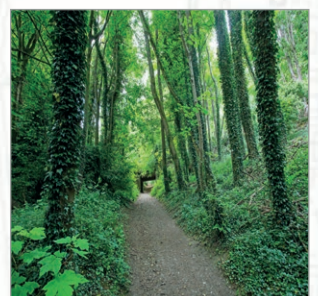
11 The Mole Gap in Art and Literature

As you climb up the hill look east towards Box Hill. In 1858 local artist John Brett, who was heavily influenced by John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite movement, painted this view. Called *The Stonebreaker* it illustrates a boy breaking flints against the backdrop of the landscape. It shows many landmarks associated with the Mole Gap including Mickleham church spire. The painting now hangs in Liverpool's Walker Gallery. Jane Austen's novel 'Emma' is set in Leatherhead and the novel's landscape descriptions are of the Mole Gap and Box Hill.



12 Druids Grove

Norbury Park forms part of a Special Areas of Conservation, an area that is of international importance for nature conservation. Rare habitats can be found along this part of the trail. On the steep slopes to your right is Druids Grove with its ancient yew trees. Ancient woodland has developed over hundreds of years to form a complex ecosystem of organisms that cannot be recreated. The yew woodland on this section of the North Downs, together with Box woodland, is a rare habitat found in very few other places and nowhere is it as extensive as here.



Woodland in Norbury Park

13 Listen

Take a rest at the picnic area and listen to the sounds around you. It is easy to see how Vaughan Williams was inspired to compose 'The Lark Ascending'.



continued overleaf



14 Lodge Farmhouse

The Trail is rich in historic buildings, many of which are listed. They vary from the grand houses such as Norbury Park House to public buildings like Leatherhead Railway station. Also included are domestic buildings such as Lodge Farmhouse, a largely 18th Century house. Buildings like this are mainly built of locally sourced materials. The diversity of local geology has provided clay bricks, tiles, timber, flint and sandstone which blend into the surrounding landscape and are easy on the eye.

15 Farming and Conservation

With the railway tunnel under your feet you have an uninterrupted view across the Mole Gap. The farm at the valley bottom close to the river is Norbury Park Farm, one of three farms on the Norbury Park Estate. The collection of farm buildings includes a listed, octagonal dairy in flint and brick dating from the mid-19th Century. Farms on the estate are managed to improve the habitats of birds and mammals. Conservation grazing by cattle, sheep and goats is designed to benefit the species-rich chalk grasslands.

16 Norbury Park House

At the footbridge, look back north in the direction from which you have come. The large, white house you see is Norbury Park House built in 1774 for William Lock, owner of Norbury Park. He was an exponent of the 18th Century 'Picturesque' movement first expounded by artist and author William Gilpin. Lock used Picturesque principles to chose the location for his house and the layout of Norbury Park. Today it is registered by Historic England as a historic park.

17 The River Mole

The River Mole rises in Sussex and flows into the Thames. You are standing on the chalk ridge that runs east-west to form the North Downs. The porous nature of chalk results in a landscape with little surface drainage. Dry valleys are cut by rainwater but usually devoid of surface streams. The River Mole, because it rises in the clay Weald and only flows over a narrow belt of chalk has been able to cut a channel on its way to the Thames. Parts of the Mole's water disappears underground into the chalk bedrock via 'swallow holes'. The river's medieval name Emlyn and the modern name Mole are likely to derive from this feature. The wooden walkway across the river provides a close up view of the slanting brickwork construction of the high railway viaduct's arches. In the adjacent field a u-shaped depression indicates a former meander in the river's alignment which was cut off to speed the flow of the Mole in order to protect the viaduct.

18 Norbury and Walnut Trees

In the late 17th Century Surrey was a leading centre of walnut production in Britain. The planting of walnuts trees was championed by John Evelyn who owned the nearby Wotton Estate. As part of a campaign to reforest the British landscape he encouraged the planting of walnut trees in Norbury Park. Unfortunately a bitter winter in 1708 decimated the walnut plantations and, although many were replanted, the subsequent felling of timber for furniture and gun stocks led to the demise of the once ubiquitous walnut at Norbury.

19 Railway Inspired Infrastructure

The Trail now exits Norbury Park into Westhumble. Here St Michael's Chapel of Ease was converted from an agricultural building, first as a rest room and then as a Christian mission for the railway workers engaged in constructing the Leatherhead to Dorking line. It is still in regular use as a place of worship.



Chapel of Ease, Westhumble

20 Camilla Lacey

Adjacent to Westhumble Chapel is a decorative entrance to Camilla Lacey. On it is placed a blue plaque to Fanny (Frances) Burney who was a popular, late 18th Century and early 19th Century novelist whose life was as interesting as the dramas she wrote. Her novels, often satires, are based on acute observations of 18th Century English life. Aged 41 she met General Alexander d'Arblay, a refugee fleeing the French Revolution who was staying at nearby Juniper Hall. They married at the Mickleham church and settled on land donated by their friend, Norbury Park Estate owner, William Lock. The house was funded from the sale her novel 'Camilla'.

21 Boxhill and Westhumble Railway Station

You may wish to make a small diversion from the trail to view Box Hill and Westhumble Railway Station by walking left down Westhumble Street. This lovely Gothic style station was designed by the eminent Victorian architect Charles Henry Driver. Since opening in 1867 it has become a popular halt for the thousands of visitors from London wishing to enjoy the countryside of the Surrey Hills. Return to the Chapel and continue along the route.



Box Hill and Westhumble Station

22 North Downs Way

The North Downs Way dissects the Trail just before the entrance to Denbies Wine Estate. The North Downs Way is one of England's long distance trails. It starts at Farnham in the east and reaches its destination 156 miles further on at Dover. It follows the chalk hills of the North Downs, dropping into the Mole Gap at this point before crossing the River Mole via a set of stepping stones and making an arduous climb up 275 steps to the top of Box Hill. But that's another adventure. Instead step forward and into the vineyard landscape of Denbies.

23 Denbies Wine Estate

The Denbies Estate consists of 254 hectares of woodland, downland and, of course, the vineyard. Its free-draining, chalky, south and west facing slopes are particularly suited to the growing of grapes. Denbies is particularly suited to the production of high quality sparkling white wines. The visitor centre and winery is a good place to stop for food and drink before travelling onward to Dorking. As well as a reputation for grape production, the estate has areas that are important habitats for a variety of plants and animals.

24 Box Hill

Before leaving the vineyard glance to the left towards the summit of Box Hill standing like a sentinel above the Mole Gap. The Gap has been important for communications, probably since prehistoric times. The rounded summit is characteristic of chalk hills and supports a community of plants that is of international importance. The cliffs below Box Hill are clothed with native box trees that can survive the harshest of conditions: thin soils, high summer heat and little moisture.

25 Radius

To your right, up the slope, is an installation entitled 'Radius' by artist James Tunnard. It is one of a series of 'Inspiring Views' installations in the Surrey Hills. It offers visitors different perspectives of the panorama around Dorking and contains inscriptions by local people and poets reflecting the impact this magnificent landscape has had on them.

26 Dorking Townscape

Meadowbank's open parkland offers the first views of Dorking town which is closely linked to the surrounding hills. Even in the heart of the town views of the hills are possible whether they are the chalk hills of the North Downs or the Greensand Hills to the south. The most, noticeable built landmark, however, is the magnificent 64 metre spire of St Martin's church. It is one of the tallest church spires in England.

27 Hills and Mills

Passing below St Martin's spire takes you across a tributary of the River Mole, the Pipp Brook, which rises in the Greensand Hills below Leith Hill, the highest point in South-East England at 294 metres. In the 19th Century the Pipp Brook powered no less than 6 grain mills through Dorking, all of which were made redundant by changes in bread-making production.

28 Historic Dorking

The origins of Dorking are most likely Saxon and the town could well have been established during Roman times. The 5-clawed 'Dorking', a breed of hen that features on the town's coat of arms, was said to have been introduced by the Romans. The distinctive elongated street layout reflects the location sandwiched between the chalk and the Greensand hills. There are many places to stop, take refreshment, browse in the shop windows and take in this lovely market town which has successfully melded modern forms of development with the distinctive character of Dorking.

29 Pippbrook House

One of the most important buildings on the Trail is Pippbrook House designed by George Gilbert Scott, an advocate of the Victorian Gothic style, and built between 1856 and 1858. It is a rare example of Gothic architecture, usually seen in ecclesiastical buildings, applied to a domestic building. Commissioned by William Henry Foreman, Scott transformed the existing classically styled building into a Gothic mansion. The exterior decoration and lavish interiors reflected the wealth of the owner and the skill of the craftsmen who built it. In 1930 the house was sold to Dorking Urban District Council and, until recently, accommodated the public library. It is now a Grade 2* listed building.

30 Dorking Mainline and Deepdene Stations

The mainline station at the end of the Trail, The Mole Gap under the shadow of Box Hill marks the end of the Trail. This station formed part of the London, South Coast Railway, opened in 1867. The station for the Reading, Guildford and Reigate Railway, serving the East-West line had already opened in 1847. The coming of the railway stimulated the growth of Dorking from the mid-19th Century and today provides rail links across the South-East.



Cattle grazing in Norbury Park



River Mole in Norbury Park



Plaque to Fanny Burney, Westhumble



Norbury Park House above Lodge Farmhouse



Denbies Wine Estate looking towards Box Hill



St Martin's Church spire