



Bostal order

Explore two invigorating climbs on the beautiful South Downs in East Sussex, starting and finishing in the historic town of Lewes

Words David Bradford Photos Rupert Fowler

Here in the south-east of England can you test your climbing and descending skills on some big hills? The answer is Sussex, home to nine of the 10 highest points on the South Downs. Fear not, you don't need to buy knobbly tyres and body armour, as several of these climbs offer a tarmac route to the top. The mission today is to bag not one, but a duo of downland summits; namely, Bopeep Bostal and Firle Bostal, each of which stands at a height of about 170m.

Our starting place is my hometown, Lewes, in East Sussex, which is famous for its bonfire celebrations, its links to the revolutionary pamphleteer Tom Paine, and lately, for the mystery figure who so dislikes the local parking regime that he/she blows up

the pay-and-display meters. This vigilante bomber is presumably acting in the spirit of the old Sussex motto "We wont be druv" a primitive version of "Am I bovvered?" Honouring this resolute line, snapper Roo and I wont be druv either. We're riding every inch of the way, and won't rest until we've conquered at least 500m of vertical ascent. Just you try and druv us!

Cobbled start

The ride begins with a short, but arrestingly steep climb up Keere Street, whose cobbled surface would give pause to a Paris-Roubaix veteran. We pop out on to the high street adjacent to one of the oldest and most ramshackle bookshops you're likely to find, the matter-of-factly named Fifteenth Century Bookshop. Cycling along the high street, we pass Bull House, where Tom Paine lived from

Above: The top

part of Firle Bostal

Below: Helpfully, signs point the way when roads are hidden by snow

1768 to 1774. A plaque on the wall of the White Hart Hotel, a little further on, confirms it was here that the great author "expounded his revolutionary politics". Nit-pickers might point out that Paine didn't get involved in revolutions (American and French) or write his most famous works for



HEADS UP

A half-day ride through some of the prettiest scenery in the South-East, much of it steeped in history



Distance: 31 miles (50km)
Big hills: 2
Challenge: ★★★★☆
Cafe stops: 1



The descent past Glyndebourne Opera House



At the start, over the cobbles up Keere Street in Lewes

31 miles

another few years, but we wunt be druv from claiming him as a Lewesian, OK?

By this point, we've also passed the medieval castle, which was the stronghold from which Prince Edward (later King Edward I) unsuccessfully commanded his cavalry against the marauding baron Simon de Montfort in the Battle of Lewes in 1264. There is so much to see in Lewes — historical attractions, quirky shops, pubs and cafes — that we don't have space to mention everything here. Suffice to say, it's worth exploring the town for a full day, so make a weekend of it.

Our first descending test is down the mildly perilous one-way system. Look out for 'Brian the Snail' at the entrance of the Cuilfail tunnel (being erudite *Cycling Active* readers, you'll instantly recognise that Brian is in fact an ammonite, not a snail). The tunnel was built in 1986, and meant that traffic bound for Brighton or the south coast could bypass the town centre. We continue north-east, making tracks towards the village of Ringmer, where we have chance to assess the recently altered skyline. The difference is a towering wind turbine, erected last year as part of a

commitment by nearby opera house Glyndebourne to power itself by carbon-neutral means.

Big throbber

The inhabitants of Ringmer weren't universally thrilled about the modification of their southward view of the Downs, some branding the turbine an eyesore. My personal favourite response was a spoof letter from a Ringmer resident to the local newspaper: "The eerie throb of the blades so scared my dog that he had an accident on the lounge carpet, and my wife can't stop talking about the biggest erection she's ever seen in the village!"

We pass the controversial throbber, crest the hill and make the fast descent past the opera house. The manor house at Glyndebourne dates from the 16th century, but the first theatre wasn't opened until 1934. Celebs, royals and cultured folk flock to the current 1,200-seater theatre, constructed in the early Nineties, as it's one of the most prestigious opera venues in the world. But hark! There'll be no fat (or otherwise) ladies singing now; our ride is far from over.

From here until our first downland ascent, the route is mostly flat, on quiet country lanes. We pass through



Tooting past Selmetson church



1,742ft
Total elevation
(via Garmin)



Glyndebourne's throbbing erection



Pubs

The Roebuck Inn, Laughton, East Sussex, BN8 6BG, 01323 811464

The Barley Mow, Selmeston, East Sussex, BN26 6UE, 01323 811322 www.barleymownonline.co.uk

The Trevor Arms, Glynde, East Sussex, BN8 6SS, 01273 858208

The Snowdrop Inn, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2BU, 01273 471018 www.thesnowdropinn.com

Bike Shops

Future Cycles, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2LG, 01273 483108 www.futurecycles.co.uk

Lewes Cycleshack, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2AN, 01273 479688 www.lewescycleshack.co.uk

Places of Interest

Lewes Castle, www.sussexpast.co.uk

Glyndebourne opera house, 01273 812321 www.glyndebourne.com

Charleston, 01273 811625 www.charleston.org.uk

Firle Place, 01273 858307 www.firle.com

Trains

Lewes station is served by Southern trains from London Victoria, Ashford, Eastbourne, Brighton and Hastings.

the village of Laughton, skirt around Ripe, and then through Selmeston, nestled at the foot of Bopeep. Once we've crossed the busy A27, it's climb time!

Bopeep Lane is merely undulating at first, and lulls us into foolishly wondering 'What's the big deal?' A mile further on, and without warning, Bopeep Lane becomes Bopeep Bostal — the road kicks up sharply and twists right around a hairpin bend. For the next half-mile, it's an average incline of 10 degrees, and a few minutes of intense effort are called for.

At the top, our toils are rewarded with what the downland-loving writer William Hudson described as feeling 'on top of the world'.

Firle Beacon beckons

In a direct line 'as the crow flies' from Bopeep, our second climb, Firle Beacon, is only 2.5 miles away, but we have the pleasure of zooming back down from whence we came — making sure to brake early enough for the hairpin, so as to avoid ending up in Horseshoe Wood. Back at the main road, we're nearly two-thirds through the ride — you could stop here for refreshment at the Barley Mow pub, but we opt to manfully press on, hungry only for more climbing!

It's a further few miles on easy-going, tranquil lanes before we re-cross the A27 and begin our second



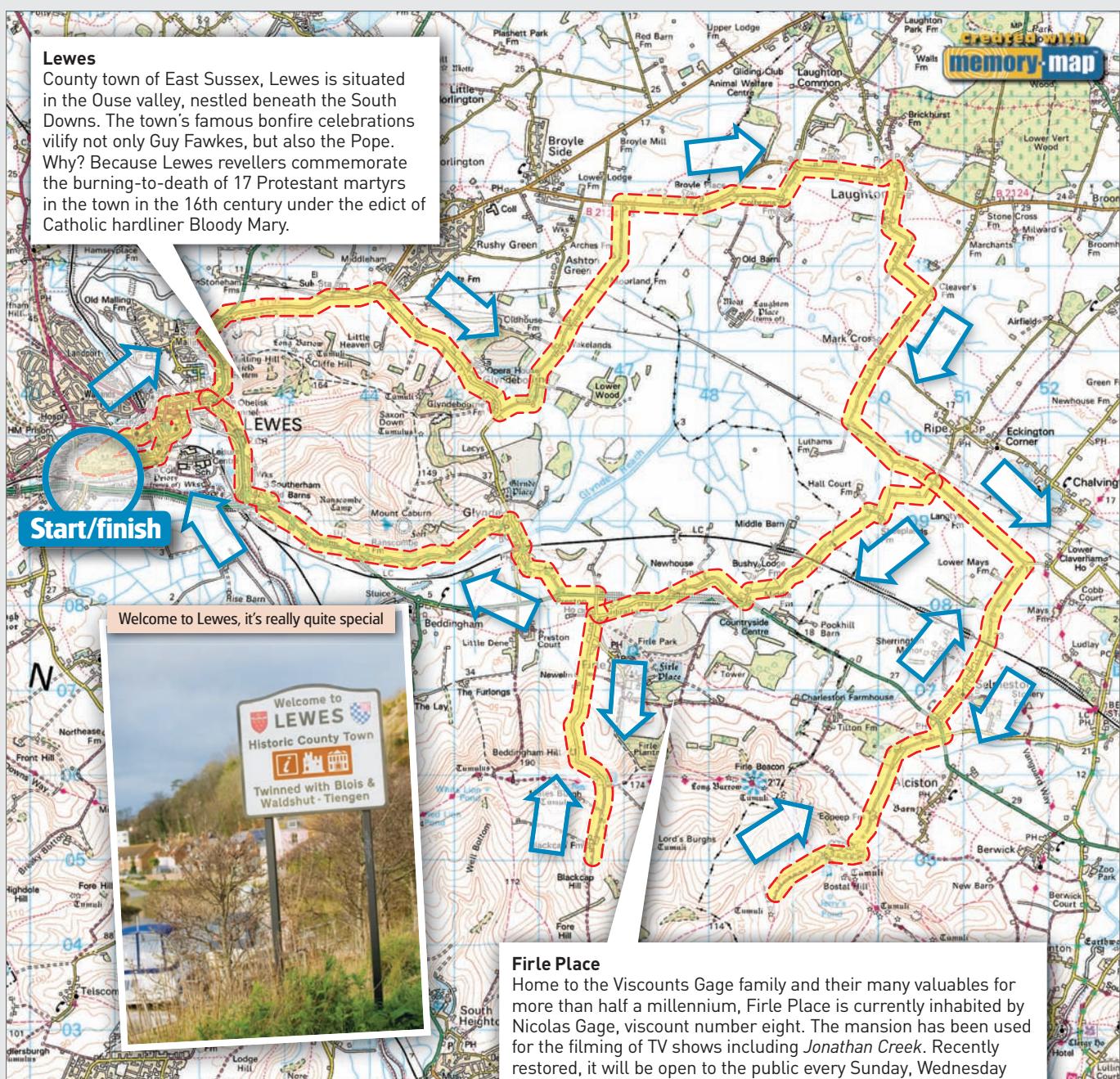
Top: The lower part of Firle Beacon

Above: Park your car here, alright?



major climb, Firle Bostal. This total ascent is roughly the same as at Bopeep, but it's a tougher challenge, as there's no respite — nearly a whole mile of 10 per cent average gradient.

Roo is edging ahead and I'm getting worried about being beaten to the top, mentally rehearsing excuses about being on a hefty hybrid while he's on a feather-light road bike — but thankfully he spots a must-snap vista and pulls over. Thanks to the wide, well-surfaced road, the descent is super-fast, whisking us with ease to 40mph-plus, which, on a bicycle, never fails to make me grin. And I'm grinning like an idiot once more just a few minutes later when, having ensconced ourselves in the Trevor Arms at Glynde, just five miles from our journey's end, the barmaid confirms that, yes, they are still serving lunch. Make that a double!

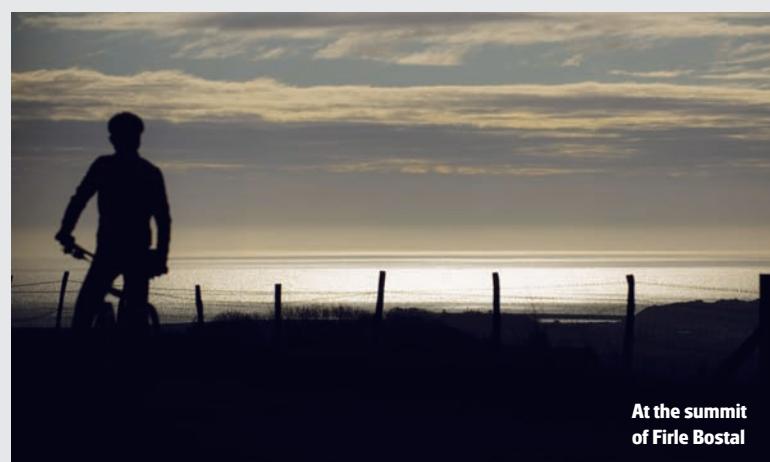


Firle Place

Home to the Viscounts Gage family and their many valuables for more than half a millennium, Firle Place is currently inhabited by Nicolas Gage, viscount number eight. The mansion has been used for the filming of TV shows including *Jonathan Creek*. Recently restored, it will be open to the public every Sunday, Wednesday and Thursday, from June to September. If you're thinking of trying your luck and 'picking up' a souvenir, be warned — the Gages are alert to such stunts since light-fingered visitors walked out with a pair of tables worth £10,000 in 2001. Worse, burglars raided the property of £1m-worth of antiques in 2009.

ROAD BOOK

From Southover Grange, head up Keere Street, then turn right on to the high street. Go straight ahead at the traffic lights, then into a left-hand lane. Straight ahead at Tesco and Cuilfail roundabouts, then right at Earwig Corner towards Ringmer. Take next right, pass wind turbine and descend past Glyndebourne. Take next left, then right on to B2124 towards Laughton. Take shortcut along Cow Lane, rejoin B2124, then turn right opposite Roebuck Inn. Turn right at T-junction, and go straight ahead at crossroads. Turn right at T-junction to Selmston. At junction with A27, turn left, then right on to Bopeep Lane. Having climbed Bopeep, retrace route back to Langtye Lane, then turn left on to Firle Road, then right on to Burgh Lane. Cross A27 on to Wick Street, then follow signs to Firle Beacon. Descend the same way, but go straight to A27 (not right on to Wick Street). Turn left, cross A27 onto cycle path, then first right and right again to Glynde. Take left on to Ranscombe Lane and follow cycle path along A27, cutting through industrial estate, then cross A26 to join cycle path back to Lewes.



**At the summit
of Firle Bostal**