



Tunbridge Wells: Toad Rock and Pantiles

Distance: 5½ km=3½ miles

easy walking

Region: Kent

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Refreshments: *Toad Rock, The Pantiles*

Map: Explorer 147 (Sevenoaks & Tonbridge) *hopefully not needed*

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Rocks, fine houses, common, woodland, historic shops, pubs



In Brief

This unusual walk takes you along a varied course visiting high rocks, a beautiful residential area of this spa town, local woodland and a famous Georgian colonnade full of specialist shops, cafés, restaurants and art galleries. Typical of the walks on this site, it takes some unexpected turns and unusual paths. The walk starts and ends at a distinctive pub just outside town, so you can treat it as a pub walk. Note: (2024) the pub is now known as the *New Toad Rock Retreat* and published opening times - supposedly from 12 noon Wed-Sun - seem to be only wishful; it is essential to 'phone 01892-356102 if you will be depending on this pub.



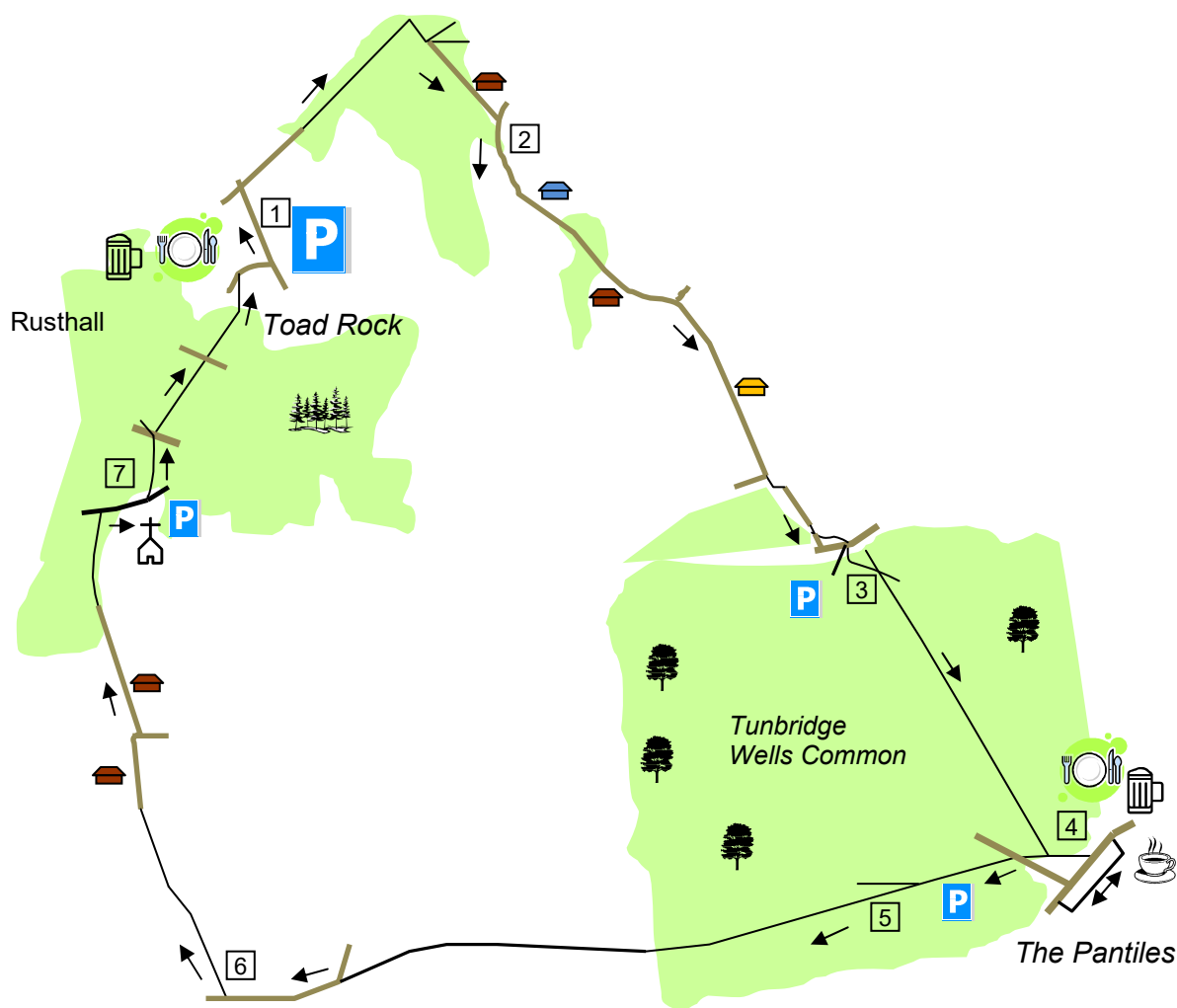
There are no nettles and virtually no rough patches, so any kind of clothing and sensible shoes should be fine. There are no stiles: your dog (with a short lead) is welcome.



The walk begins in **Tunbridge Wells, Kent**, either by car or by rail to **Tunbridge Wells Station** (regular daily service). Coming by car, begin the walk at the roadside just before the *Toad Rock Retreat* pub, Rusthall Common, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, www.w3w.co/decent.joystick.rotations, postcode **TN4 8NX**. Another possible start is the Upper Pantiles Car Park (2013 charge £4), www.w3w.co/tribes.moving.tips, postcode **TN2 5TP**, which places the pub at the centre of the walk. You could also park in the side lane by Rusthall church (www.w3w.co/dishing.blackmail.fiction, postcode **TN4 8XD**). For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk

- 1 Beginning from the roadside in Rusthall Common, go along the road (Harmony Street), passing the *Toad Rock Retreat* pub on your left. At a crossroads, turn **right** on Woodside Road. Where the road ends, continue ahead on a narrow tarmac footpath. Your path soon veers left beside a brick wall on your right. At a T-junction, turn **right**, passing the gate of a small old water treatment works. Immediately at a junction fork **right** onto an attractive residential road, ignoring a footpath straight ahead. Continue up this private road. (The signs are intended to deter unwanted motor vehicles: the road is well used by local people.)



- 2 At the end of the road, veer **right** continuing on Bishops Down Park Road, passing more residential properties. In 400m, avoid a drive on your left at a wooden barrier and continue uphill on Hurstwood Lane. In 300m, you reach Bishops Down Road at a bend. Keep straight ahead, making use of the footway on the left, passing six benches. In a short distance, you meet the main Mount Ephraim Road. Cross the road by a zebra crossing.
- 3 Take the tarmac path only 2m to your right, which leads you across Tunbridge Wells Common. Ignore the wider tarmac path on its right (which leads to a car park near the cricket pavilion). In 50m, at a crossing path, veer **right** passing the cricket pitch. *On your left here, as a short diversion, are the Wellington Rocks, a massive rocky outcrop hugely popular with families and their children.* Your path goes over a crossing path and through oak trees. *On the left you can see two rows of old trees and another row of younger trees: this is the Royal Victoria Grove, planted in 1835 to commemorate visits by the*

(then) *Princess Victoria*. At the end of this woodland, just before a road junction, turn **left** on a crossing path leading to the main London Road. Cross the road by a zebra crossing, turn **left** and, in 40m, go **right** through a portico into the famous Georgian colonnade known as *The Pantiles*.

The fame of Tunbridge Wells began when Dudley Lord North discovered the spring in 1606. Later in that century a flourishing village grew up around the spring with a number of London shopkeepers taking up residence along the Upper Walks for the summer season. The Bath House was built over the spring around 1804 to a design by J.T. Groves. A “dipper” would serve the water from a basin over the spring. After the restoration of the bathhouse façade in 1987, a dipper is still employed in the summer months.



4 *The Chalybeate Spring (which you can taste from a vending machine, credit/debit cards only) is at the left end. Various coffee shops and eateries abound, with the Duke of York pub. Peter Jenner's jewellers shop occupies what used to be the “Musick Gallery”. Further to the right are the Upper Walks and the bandstand. After possible refreshment and shopping, leave The Pantiles by any of the exits back onto the main road, go over the same zebra crossing, and bear **left** on the same short diagonal path across the Common. Stay on the path to meet a minor road near the entrance to the Pantiles Car Park. Take a tarmac footpath running just to the right of the car park. 50m after you pass the end of the car park, you come to a junction and a fork. Take the **left** fork, almost straight on, a dirt path, thus leaving the tarmac path.*

5 Follow this path for 400m through the woods of Tunbridge Wells Common to meet a wide tarmac crossing path. Keep straight ahead by a house on a track opposite. This pleasant straight level drive later begins to descend under hazel trees. At the end, you pass some houses and reach a lane at a bend. Keep ahead on High Rocks Lane (so-called because it leads to that famous adventure spot – see the other walk in this series [A Way Through the Rocks](#)). Only about 150m after joining the lane, just before an open meadow, turn **right** on a signposted footpath through trees.

6 Your path rises and graduates to a residential drive. Keep ahead passing several fine houses. After the mock-Tudor *Tye House*, avoid a road branching right and stay on the uphill side path. You pass the architecturally interesting *Glass House*. At the end of the drive, continue on a path through a metal barrier and keep right by a fence. *If you look down at your feet, you will see that this path was formed over a platform of rock. If you turn **left** after the metal barrier and walk 75m you will be on top of a high rock formation; return the same way.* Soon on your right is a cemetery. At a T-junction, turn **right**, staying by the cemetery wall. You quickly reach the gates of St Paul's Church, Rusthall, an impressive building built in 1849, unfortunately usually closed.

- 7 Directly opposite the church gates, turn **left** on a tarmac footpath beside the grass. Cross a main road, the A264 Langton Road, carefully and take a footpath straight ahead into the wood. Cross another road, Rusthall Road, to a similar footpath directly opposite. Your path goes down, by a handrail, between rocks. You are now near the top of Toad Rock on your right and it is worth a quick (and careful) look to see the formation up close.

The huge sandstone formation known as Toad Rock is so-called because the central figure looks like a crouching toad, even though it is a completely natural phenomenon, eroded by wind from the sandstone. It has been in the guide-books for at least 200 years, one of Tunbridge Wells best-known features and, unlike the High Rocks, free to access. Unfortunately, over time, the Toad has lost its head; there is a notice board with a photo of what it used to look like. The rock is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

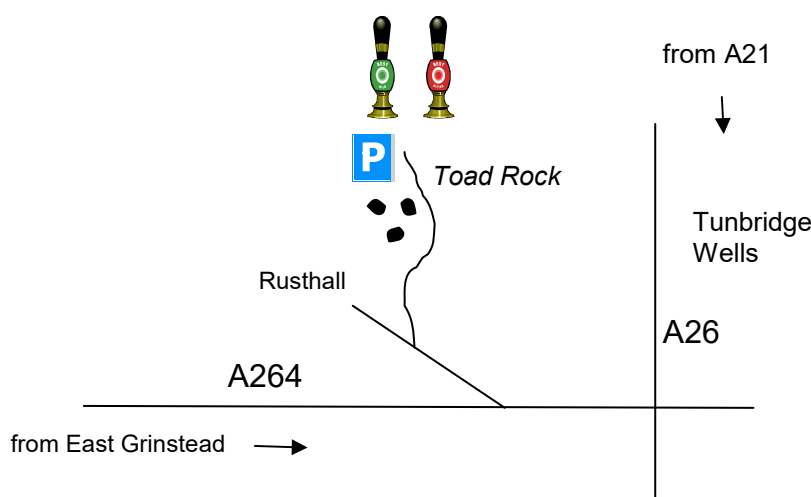


Continue on the path and veer **right** on a minor road by cottages to arrive at the *Toad Rock Retreat* pub where the walk began, an ideal place to finish, with a pleasant garden and food and drink, voted excellent by walkers. (See front page.)

Getting there

By car: If coming from the north through Tunbridge Wells, Rusthall Common can be reached by turning **right** on the A264 signposted *East Grinstead*; fork right after only ½ mile (700m) at a sign for *Rusthall*; the *Toad Rock* is signed right again in a short distance. Park on either side of the road. Cars that park on the left generally use the pavement.

If coming on the A264, from the East Grinstead direction, Rusthall is signed on the left.



By train: Tunbridge Wells station is ½ km from the walk: follow signs for *The Pantiles*.

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