

HIGH ROCKS

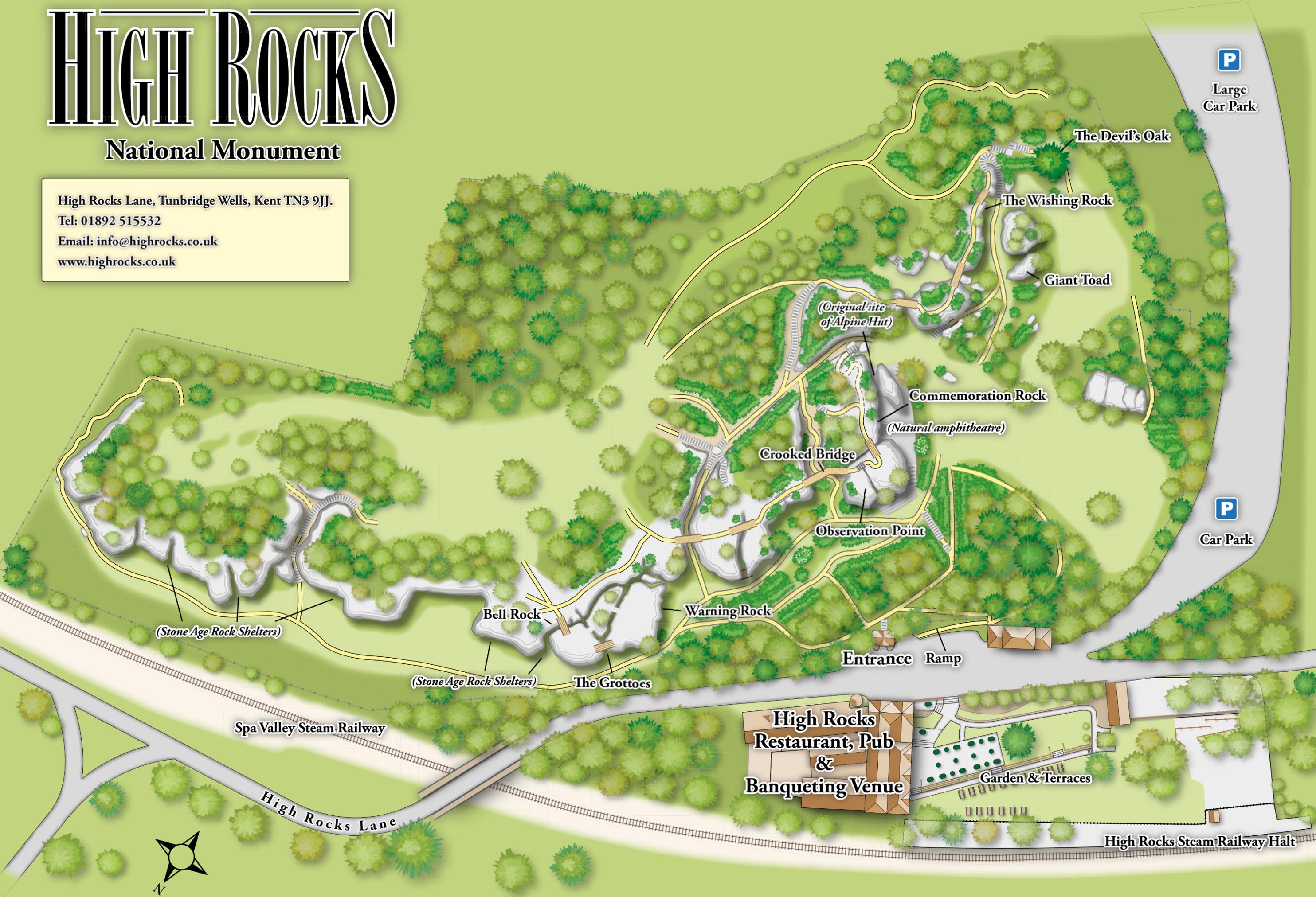
National Monument

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History of The High Rocks Ancient National Monument

ANCIENT HISTORY

Before man inhabited the earth the High Rocks were many millions of years old. Their history goes back to the time when Belgium, the Straits of Dover and the South East of England all formed one huge area of freshwater which is known to the historians as “The Wealden Lake”. For millions of years this huge stretch of water was fed by countless rivers and streams which brought with them deposits of sand and silt. As time progressed these deposits increased in depth and eventually grew to a thickness of some two thousand feet. Layers of loose sand and silt became tightly packed down, and gradually hardened into sandstone. It is of this that the High Rocks themselves are formed.

From 6000,000 B.C. to around 8,000 B.C. the whole area known as the “Weald of Kent”, of which High Rocks is a part, was covered in a huge sheet of ice, and although not permanently in the ice zone, conditions and climate were most certainly Arctic in the extreme. The severity of these Arctic conditions was, however, superseded by warmer weather, and this caused the snow and ice to melt and flow down through the valleys such as the one below High Rocks; the waters round the Rocks gradually receded and left them as they stand today.

Man’s history in relation to the Rocks goes back far in time. Certainly the first men to know High Rocks were the wandering, hunting tribes of the Middle Stone Age, who settled here in the dry sandy alcoves in front of the Rocks. Here, with the help of timber and brush wood which they found in abundance, and with the skins of animals which they hunted and killed in the forest, they built crude shelters beneath the overhang of the Rocks. Early man’s staple diet, which he found in and around the Rocks and adjacent forest, consisted of nuts and berries, deer and wild pig. With the exception of wood which would have been used for bows or the handles of their primitive weapons, their axe heads, knives, harpoon barbs and the scrapers (which they used for cleaning the skins of the animals they caught) were made of flint or stone. Various tests carried out have proved that the pottery made by these primitive men is amongst the earliest found in this country. Hot water was obtained by heating stones

in their fires and then dropping them into the water as the container itself could not withstand direct heat.

During the second century B.C. people of the second Iron Age, or the Wealden people as they are called, built a fort in the area of the Rocks. This fortress could not have been a very strong one; however it served its purpose in protecting its inhabitants from their enemies and other marauders of the day.

During the first century A.D. against the invasion of the Romans under the Emperor Claudius, early Britons once again used the Rocks as a fortification. They were obviously much stronger than they had been, a rampart was added with riveted masonry. However, although the fort was once again used during the Romo-British period, it was never again a great obstacle to the invader, and finally all habitation and agriculture in the area came to an end and the forest returned.

The natural processes of evolution have produced some beautiful flora and fauna in the High Rocks; not least of these are the variety of mosses which grow in abundance. The ancient oak, tall pines and beech trees which grow out of the rocks, clinging as they do with tenacity and with little soil, are themselves worthy of note.

HIGH ROCKS THROUGH THE CENTURIES

The story of the High Rocks is closely tied to the development of Tunbridge Wells, first as a health resort where people came to drink the steely, ochreous chalybeate waters, then as a fashionable spa and holiday centre, and later as a residential town of exceptional quality and comfort. High Rocks was, as it is today, a convenient distance from Tunbridge Wells, a destination encountered with surprise after a journey through green lanes little altered in centuries.

The first printed reference to High Rocks was in 1645 when Edmund Waller, a poet attracted by Lady Dorothy Sidney, 18-year-old daughter of his hosts, the Sidney family of Penshurst Place, wrote a poem chiding her for her proud inaccessibility. He called the Rocks “The rendezvous of fools, buffoons and praters, cuckolds, whores, citizens, their wives and daughters”.

The sombre woodland scenery of High Rocks was the chosen resort of James II and his friends when he stayed at Tunbridge Wells in the 1670s as Duke of York. Royal patronage led to the creation of a maze, and a bowling green and gambling rooms were added as the Rocks became established as one of the main attraction for visitors to Tunbridge Wells.

“Prinny”, George Prince of Wales, who had made Brighton famous as a watering place and attracted much of the fashionable patronage away from Tunbridge Wells, was an occasional visitor to High Rocks.

The opening of the Cold Baths close by in 1708 provided another fillip for High Rocks. Little is known about the cold bath buildings, but they must have been substantial to accommodate indoor fountains and, according to Bengé Burr, “in every room something curious calculated to divert and surprise the company”. Public transport was laid on, and the Rocks benefited.

Inevitably legends abound in a place as mysterious as High Rocks. One, enjoyed and repeated over the centuries, tells how the Devil, in the guise of an attractive youth, persuaded a local beauty to keep a tryst at the Rocks. He trapped her hand in the roots of an old oak, and refused to release it until she submitted to his desires. Unknown to him, the girl had hidden in her hand three drops of crystal clear water which entitled her to the fulfilment of a single wish. Unfortunately for the girl, as she was about to make her wish – presumably to be set free – she caught the eye of the handsome youth and submitted to the Devil’s design. For punishment, she was turned into a block of stone, which remains forever imprisoned in the roots of the Devil’s Oak. An inscription on the Wishing Rock reads:

*Pause ere you wish
From idle wish refrain,
For what you wished,
Not wish you wished, you gain.*

High Rocks, and particularly the gloomy part known as the Grottoes, abound with legends of diabolic forces. They have been embellished and added to from time to time. A local printer, Mr J Phippen, went to some trouble to engrave this verse below the Hanging Rock:

*Infidel! Who, with they infinite wisdom,
Would grasp things infinite, and dost
become a scoffer of God’s holiest mysteries,
Behold this rock, then tremble and rejoice.
Tremble, For He who formed the mighty mass
Could in this justice crush thee where thou art.
Rejoice! that still His mercy spares thee.*

In the reign of James II, the iron and other mineral deposits found in the water of the area, which gives it a reddish tinge, were recognised as beneficial to health. Local legend furnishes an entirely different explanation for the odd colour of this water, and this is perhaps the best loved of the many legends told of the High Rocks. The story goes that on one occasion St. Dunstan, who lived at Mayfield, was communing with God in solitude and cooking his evening meal, when the Devil decided that the time had come to test the patience of this local saint, and so accordingly he took on the guise of a beautiful young lady and appeared before him. For a time all went well and the Devil was congratulating himself on the success of his scheme. St. Dunstan meanwhile, although giving the impression that he had fallen for the Devil’s artful wiles, was not deceived, and suddenly seizing a pair of red hot tongs, clamped them on the Devil’s nose. Immediately the Devil’s disguise fell away and he fled howling to the nearby lake and plunged his nose into the cooling water, thus giving the water the extraordinary colour which it has today.

Even when Tunbridge Wells was being forced to give best to the new attractions of sea bathing at Brighton, High Rocks maintained its popularity, brakes and omnibuses being run from all the leading hotels throughout the summer.

The old dignity of romantic walks and clever versifying was augmented by the provision of swings and seesaws. The overgrown bowling green was pressed into new service as a tea lawn, the Maze was rescued, and a series of bridges linking the highest rocks was named the Aerial Walk.

The railway mania of Victorian times saw branches reaching out into the country round all major towns. Tunbridge Wells had the benefit of madcap competition between rival entrepreneurs, and High Rocks was quickly seen as a desirable place for a “halt”. From 1907 (when the fare was one old penny) until 1952 trains stopped at High Rocks halt. (This stop has been reinstated in the gardens of the High Rocks Inn with

the re-opening of the Tunbridge Wells to Eridge Steam Railway.)

A cheerful cosmopolitan air prevailed at this period, typified by a huge hoarding erected on one of the rock faces, which is still known as the Advertisement Rock.

This “popular” period for the former resort of the rich and famous set a pattern for High Rocks in the next half century. Turnstiles and a paybox marked the entrance to a fabulous playground, a place of simple wonder and recreation, and a centre of climbing in south-east England. An early Everest expedition trained on the Rocks, for the tortured sandstone offers challenges equal to many to be found at 10,000 feet.

A TOUR OF THE ROCKS

Nowadays visitors to the High Rocks can enjoy a Scenic Walk around this Stone Age National Monument.

Turn to the right at the top of the turnstile steps, and ascend the steps to see the remains of the Alpine Hut between two great boulders. The Commemoration Wall bears the names of High Rocks climbers who have achieved international fame.

In this area stood the popular teahouse of the 18th Century. There were romantic gazebos or summer houses among the trees, and French horn players would blow their loudest notes to awake the remarkable echo. A feast was held here in 1815 to mark Wellington’s defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

A little path across a small clearing leads to the stairway to Little Rocks. Look for water percolating from The Wishing Rock and test the legend that anyone who collects three drops in the bare hand can have one true wish granted. But, remember too the maiden who first had this power but fell for the temptation of the Devil!

To the right below the path is the Devil’s Oak, where the maiden was turned to stone. This tree stood against the full force of the hurricane in October 1987, holding firm to its rock when giants all around were falling. According to legend, a couple who join hands within the roots of the Devil’s Oak and are able to withdraw them still clasped will stay in love forever.

The path winds gently upwards to the first bridge of the Aerial Way. Note the Toad –

really much more like that animal than the celebrated Toad Rock at Rusthall. This rock, sculptured by wind and weather, was not noticed until 1957.

Just behind the rocks which guard the meadow, you will find the famous Wishing Rock.

Over the two bridges spanning the Fairy Glen into the Iron Age fortress. The great rocks provided natural defences on one side and earth ramparts with ditches protected by rows of sharpened stakes secured the other three sides. The area has been excavated and recorded, but covered again to preserve a valuable site from erosion by weather.

Down into a gully and up a short stairway to the High Rocks themselves. The crooked bridge from Observation Point crosses one of the ancient fortress’s natural openings. The walk follows the edge of the cliff, and down some 50 steps to the base where there is clear evidence of Mesolithic and Neolithic occupation.

Standing on the lowest step, the first of four Stone Age shelters excavated is immediately to the left. Hunting parties would have hung skins on the overhanging rock to make a rough shelter. Excavation has revealed holes used for roof support poles, arrowheads, spear barbs and pottery. Some of the finds are on show in Tunbridge Wells Museum.

A short flight of steps leads to the Bell Rock. The claim that its sound, when well struck, could be heard in Tunbridge Wells has never been demonstrated. It is possible – though unlikely – that the build-up of sub-soil and layers of vegetation has muffled the note.

The Bell Rock is best known for an inscription dated 1702, placed there by a lady whose little dog fell to death from its summit. It says:

*This scratch I make that you may know
On this Rock lies ye Beauteous Bow.
Reader, this Rock is ye Bow’s bell.
Strikt with thy stick, and ring his knell.*

So the Beauteous Bow is remembered across the centuries. The hundreds of thousands of other names and initials of visitors carved on every available face of High Rocks have merged and weathered over the centuries into unrecognisable hieroglyphics to become part of the mystery and charm of this romantic place.