

Walk... talk... make

Guide 1: Getting to know Birling Gap

You will need binoculars (you can also borrow some from the Visitor Centre – ask for the Explore Pack)

Spend some time exploring the beach front and the cliff at Birling Gap

Standing at the top of the beach steps, what do you notice? Is the tide in or out? Can you tell which way it's moving? Watch the movement of the water and how far up the beach it comes. Does it meet the water line on the beach, or go further?

What do you notice about the weather today? If there are any clouds, how quickly are they moving? Does it look like the weather is different further along the coastline?

Have a look at the chalk cliffs. Birling Gap is at one end of the Seven Sisters Cliffs and Cuckmere Haven is at the other. How many cliffs can you see along the coastline?

Look at the piles of chalk rocks on the beach. These are from cliff falls. It isn't safe to walk, stand or sit near to the edge of the cliffs at the top or bottom because rocks may fall.

Using your binoculars you can see the lines of flint in the cliff face. These are made of the chemical silica from the sea that crystallised into rock and is much harder than chalk. Chalk itself is made from the skeletons of tiny sea creatures that lived millions of years ago. There are also different birds which nest along this coastline, including fulmars and kittiwakes. When it's windy, you'll see them soaring through the sky.

At Birling Gap, the National Trust is working to ensure the conservation of Birling Gap and the Seven Sisters. This means not stopping the erosion from happening, but working with nature as it changes the coastline, managing the land, and supporting marine life and other animals as they cope with these changes.

What else do you notice? Can you see anything else along the coastline or the horizon? What do you like about being here? Does this remind you of anywhere else you've visited?

Did you know?

The cliffs erode at different rates at Birling Gap and the Seven Sisters – you can see the rock at Birling Gap is more crumbly than the pure chalk and flint of the Seven Sisters Cliffs.

You can see the old cliffs at low tide on the beach because they create rockpools which is part of the Marine Conservation Zone.

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Creative activity: photography, sketching, poetry

You will need: binoculars (you can also borrow some from the Visitor Centre), cameras, sketch books and pencils, map of Birling Gap and the Seven Sisters coastline.

Take photos of the horizon, the shoreline and the cliffs. Follow the route of birds as they fly above and below the cliff edge.

Choose something you've noticed and sketch it or write some words to describe what you're seeing. You can make this into a poem yourself or with the rest of the group you're visiting with.

On the way back to the Visitor Centre, look for the gabions between the car park and the beach steps. Gabions are wire cages which hold rocks. These gabions have been built to look like the cliffs you've just been looking at. Can you notice the dark lines part way up the gabion? Can you remember what these are?

Looking around the Visitor Centre, find the exhibition about the shoreline and the cliffs. You'll also notice the lines on the floor under your feet and some dates. These suggest when the coast will have eroded this far.

Look at the long picture of the Seven Sisters. Count how many there actually are (tip: it's more than seven!) This is because the tides and the weather have caused more cliff falls since mariners named them in 1588.

Can you find Birling Gap and the Beach below? You can take a photograph of this picture - or buy a postcard of it from the shop.

Did you know?

Birling Gap Visitor Centre was originally part of a hotel, built in Victorian times for the the first seaside tourists to the visit the area. Looking at your map of the Birling Gap, find the Visitor Centre, the beach steps and the cliffs, and the meadow, and trace the path you've travelled between them.

Is there a word for each place that will help you to remember it? You could write these words by those places on your map.

Extended Activities

On a large piece of paper or a roll of lining paper, start to create a map of the areas of Birling Gap that you've already explored. You can add some of the writings, drawings or photos that you've taken on your visit. You can also begin to create a map of the other outdoor or wild places that you visit, creating a series of Nature Maps of places you enjoy.

Get Into Heritage at Birling Gap



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Guide 2 - The History and Ecology of Birling Gap

You will need binoculars (you can also borrow some from the Visitor Centre - ask for the Bird and Bug Tracker Pack)

Begin in the Visitor Centre, look at the exhibits of birds and listen to the different sounds the birds make. Listen out for bird calls when you are on your walk through the meadow and up onto the hill.

What examples of insects are shown in the Visitor Centre? What can you find out about the way the land around Birling Gap is managed to encourage wildlife and biodiversity? Which animals will you look for in your walk through the meadow?

Scientists use techniques such as bug sweeping to study the biodiversity of an ecosystem. If you have time, the staff in the Visitor Centre can lend you some information and equipment to try bug sweeping for yourself while you are in the meadow.

Walk through the car park, up through the meadow and onto the hill, noticing what you see, hear, smell, and feel. Can you hear any of the bird calls that you listened to in the Visitor Centre? Can you spot any of the birds?

Once up on the hill, notice how different your view is. Can you feel the sun or the wind on your face and hands? Look around and notice how far you can see in the distance. Using binoculars, look at these same things again. What detail can you see?

Did you know?

The meadowland at Birling Gap is managed by letting grazing animals like cows, sheep and Exmoor ponies eat the rough grasses and bushes in the winter – this means more varieties of flowers have space to grow in the spring, summer and autumn.

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Creative activity: photography, collage

You will need: cameras, sketch books and pencils

Take photographs of the whole meadow, then take some close ups of the plants that you've noticed, or if you prefer, make sketches of these plants.

Experiment with taking extreme close up photos of parts of plants, for example, buds, petals or seed heads. If you make drawings, don't forget to label what you've drawn.

Collect some fallen leaves to take away and use to draw or make collages with.

It is not wise to pick flowers on the SSSI land as many are protected under the Wildlife & Countryside act 1981. If you want guidance on what flowers are ok to pick look up the guidance on the website <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wildflowerhunt/>

Once you've finished exploring the meadow walk through the car park and up the hill towards Belle Tout Lighthouse.

The walk can be quite steep, and it is relatively long. It is recommended that you take the route around the north of the meadow as this is gentler. Alternatively, there is a parking spot closer to Belle Tout Lighthouse further east along the coast road.

Belle Tout is French for 'everything beautiful'. Why do you think this lighthouse is called that? How does Belle Tout lighthouse compare to other lighthouses you've seen?

There is more information about Belle Tout in the Visitor Centre and in your resource pack.

Did you know?

Belle Tout Lighthouse could not protect ships from the rocks in foggy weather as the light was not visible from such a high position – that is why the Beachy Head Lighthouse was built to take over from Belle Tout and is on the rocky shore rather than the cliff.

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Creative activity: photography, collage, creative writing

You will need: Cameras, binoculars, A4 paper and pencils

When you are up on the hill, look around and list what you can see, near and far. Have your photograph taken with your back to Belle Tout Lighthouse. Have the person taking the photograph guide you to place your upturned palm so that it looks like you're holding Belle Tout Lighthouse in the palm of your hand. The photograph will help to show how far away in the distance it is.

How different is the view from here? And, what do you notice about the weather? How does it feel being up here? You can write some of your thoughts down and create a 'Belle Tout Lighthouse' or 'Everything is Beautiful' story or poem.

Extended Activities

On a large piece of paper or roll of lining paper, mark the outline of the meadow and the hill, with Belle Tout in the distance.

You might want to add some of the information you learned, draw some of the different things that you noticed, or mark your favourite spot with an X. You could talk about why this is your favourite place.

Have a bug sweep in your garden and discover what tiny insects are enjoying being there.

Take your binoculars and do some bird watching in your garden or a local wild place, noticing which birds visit, how many and how regularly. You could download and print some photographs of these birds and make a collage.

Find out about other lighthouses along the Sussex Coast and think about making a visit.

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Guide 3 - Exploring the Beach

You will need: cameras, A3 sugar paper, bags for collecting objects, a resource sheet on what to find on the beach. You could also ask to borrow a Strandline Tracker Pack from the Visitor Centre.

While you are in the Visitor Centre, spend some time looking at the examples of different rock types, the archaeology artefacts, the shipwreck objects and the rockpools which show the creatures and seaweed that may be washed up on the beach.

What do you notice about the flint and the chalk? What kind of shapes and markings do you notice? Look at the different fossils and the shapes and markings that they have made.

Can you find any information in the Visitor Centre about non-organic materials found on the beach? Where do you think these object came from? How long have they been here?

Walk down the beach steps and onto the beach, noticing the different birds that are flying around. Can you recognise the different types of birds? Can you see any of these landing on or nesting on the cliff?

Once on the beach, you may notice a line of seaweed and other objects that has been created across the pebbles. This is called a strand line and was caused by the tide washing the objects this far up the beach.

Begin to collect rocks, chalk, seaweed and other objects along the strand line, and that have been washed up on other parts of the shore.

Use the sheets in your tracker pack to identify these objects. Which of the objects you've found do you think belong by the sea, and which are rubbish?

Did you know?

Archaeology found at Birling Gap beach includes pieces of shipwreck but also old coastguard buildings that have now fallen into the sea. If you find anything like this National Trust can record it as part of the Seven Sisters Archaeology Project or CITIZAN.

You can also use citizen science to record things like shark and ray egg-cases – if you find any bring them up to the National Trust and we will record them with you.

Creative activity: photography, collage

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You will need: cameras, A3 sugar paper, bags for collecting objects, a Strandline Tracker Pack from the Visitor Centre.

Take photographs of the different things that you find.

Using the large pieces of sugar paper, begin to make a collage or a picture with the different objects that you have collected. You can also use the chalk to mark-make, write and draw.

If it's a sunny day, you can leave these objects on the sugar paper for a while. Once you take them off, you'll notice that the sun has bleached the paper around the objects, leaving darker shapes where the objects have been. These have left a trace of your picture on the paper, just like the strand line has left a trace of where the sea has been.

Extended activities

In your garden, set up a series of poles or garden canes in a straight or curved line pinned into the ground. Using balls of different coloured yarn, tie one end to one of the poles or canes, and begin to weave the yarn in and out through the canes to create a coloured strand line, like the one you saw on the beach.

If you collected any objects from the beach, or have others you've collected from other explorations in nature, weave these in through the yarn. You could leave it for some time, adding other yarn and other objects, and watch how the weather and the seasons change your strand line.

Using the photographs that you have taken you can make your own Beach Finds Guide. Remember to label the objects. Alternatively you could create a photo collage.

Do some research on the internet about finds on different beach searches or digs along the Sussex coast, or a place local to you.