



Clare Balding's...

# vineyard walks

If you enjoy hiking and love wine, there are some delightful routes that offer both. Clare Balding explored the Alfriston and Cuckmere River Walk in East Sussex, which included tastings and lunch at the Rathfinny Estate



**GRAPE ESCAPE** The chalk slopes of south-east England boast 150 vineyards, many of which are award winning

Wine and walking are two of my favourite things, so a chance to combine the two is too good to miss. There are some wonderful walks in Sussex and Kent with the reward of a fabulous wine tasting and a decent lunch. A few companies offer guided walks and wine tasting or you can do it yourself, as long as you book ahead with the vineyard.

The route I chose took me from Alfriston in East Sussex onto the South Downs and back via Rathfinny Wine Estate, where we tasted a variety of sparkling and non-sparkling wine. Established in 2010 and the home of Sussex Sparkling, Rathfinny has ambitions to become one of Europe's largest single vineyards.

Alfriston is a charming village with a 600-year-old National Trust-owned Clergy House, three old-fashioned pubs, tea rooms, small shops and a 14th century church called the The Cathedral of the South Downs.

It was in Alfriston that Eleanor Farjeon wrote the words to Morning Has Broken.

The poet was a huge fan of the area and, in particular, she loved to walk on the South Downs. She wrote in a letter to a friend: 'I can't imagine why the Downs are always deserted, even on the day like this, when they are better than woods and seashores or any other place to be. Perhaps they aren't deserted but have the power to



**CHALK MARK** The Seven Sisters – one of the lovely views on the south coast

make their lovers and wanderers invisible and so keep them to themselves.'

There is still that feeling of isolation on the Downs, even in the middle of the school holidays. The climb from the village offers stunning views south to the English Channel and north over the Weald.

Walking west from the Bo Peep car park along the South Downs Way, the footpath takes you to the edge of Rathfinny, walking down the south facing chalk slopes on the edge of the vines towards the Flint Barns and the impressive Gun Room, said to have been the Duke of Wellington's, where you can taste the wines.

The walk back to Alfriston offers views of Cuckmere Haven, with its exquisite meandering river, popular with smugglers in the 16th to 18th centuries and more recently featured in films like Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves, Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire and Atonement. It's all downhill back to the village and, if you're still hungry, there's always the option of a cream tea or a pint of cider in one of the ancient pubs.

## A history of English wine

It is generally accepted that the Romans introduced vines to Britain after invading in AD 43 and they started the fashion for drinking wine at social occasions.

Monasteries continued the tradition of wine production until the dissolution by Henry VIII and although small, private vineyards survived, it wasn't until the 1950s that the first commercial vineyard was planted in Hambleton, Hampshire (pictured far right). There are now

just over 500 vineyards in England and Wales producing sparkling and still wine, with 150 situated on the chalky slopes of south-east England.

Award-winning estates that will give you a warm welcome, many with a restaurant and/or rooms, include Ridgeview Wine Estate in East

Sussex, Nyetimber in West Sussex (whose sparkling wine recently beat French Champagne in a blind tasting in Paris), Chapel Down in Kent,



## Circular walk from Alfriston

**Distance:** 8 miles  
**Map:** Landranger 199 or Explorer 123, OL25 Eastbourne and Beachy Head  
**More details:** nationaltrust.org.uk/alfriston-clergy-house/trails/alfriston-clergy-house-countryside-walk  
**Difficulty:** Steep climbing at the start, then moderate  
**Dog friendly:** Yes, but check with the wine estate

About halfway around the route, go straight on towards Flint Barns and turn left at Rathfinny Wine Estate.



### Where to refuel in Alfriston:

The George Inn, The Star Inn and Chestnuts tearoom are all dog friendly. For a smarter evening out, Wingrove House has excellent reviews. The English Wine Centre stocks 150 of the best English wines, has a Michelin recommended restaurant and a luxury lodge with five bedrooms.

### Guided walk recommendations:

Trek n'Taste trekntastesussex.co.uk  
 Fizz on Foot fizzonfoot.com

# BOOK IT NOW

Quentin Letts



The theatre critic's guide to what's on



## Apologia

Trafalgar Studios, London

Stockard Channing, one of American acting's grander old dames, is in London for a few months in an edgy comedy. Miss Channing (above) may no longer be recognisable as the person who played Rizzo in the film version of Grease, but she has definite stage presence. Here she plays Kristen, a 70-something art historian and veteran political activist who has just published her autobiography – in which she omitted to mention her two adult sons.

They, understandably, are a bit miffed and conclude that their mother was so busy marching against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and being a pioneer feminist that she forgot all about her children. She neglected them.

Alexi Kaye Campbell's play, which has X-rated language, has plenty of quick-witted exchanges in its sparky first half. Things sag a little after the interval. Kristen is a comically splenetic old battleaxe and Miss Channing enjoys curling her lips as she delivers her character's cynical lines.

Was the 1950/1960s babyboomer generation selfish in the way it upturned the social order? Or was its self-absorption simply a necessary part of revolution? Kristen's friend Hugh (Desmond Barrit) argues that unhappiness can be the price pioneers pay. The younger generation is more sceptical and suspects Kristen was simply selfish.

Laura Carmichael, of Downton Abbey fame, is cast against type as a cliché-spouting American goodie-goodie. She does well.

The show, which runs until 18 November, also stars the excellent Joseph Millson and Freema Agyeman. What a pity it is at such a suffocating venue. If there is a London theatre more uncomfortable than the Trafalgar Studios, I have yet to have the misfortune to sit in it.

## Beautiful

Alhambra, Bradford

Saturday at Bradford is the first night of a 10-month tour for this musical about Carole King. London audiences loved its mix of biography and King's melodies. Songs include You've Got A Friend, (You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman and The Locomotion. This is one of the better greatest-hits compilations on the stage in recent years, and if they get the sound right at the many venues, it should be worth catching. Moves to Plymouth on 19 September.

## The Blinding Light

Jermyn Street Theatre, London

The tiny, basement Jermyn Street Theatre – a fringe experience in one of London's most chi-chi retail areas – presents the world premiere of a Howard Brenton play about August Strindberg. It opened last night, so I cannot offer a verdict, but the cast of Jasper Britton and Susannah Harker is promising. The theatre's new artistic boss Tom Littler offers 'a spooky, 90-minute thriller' – so if it's a disappointment, you'll be able to make it to dinner at nearby Wiltons. Until 14 October.

## Try Sussex wines at Waitrose

Look out for **Plumpton Estate Cloudy Ridge 2014** £9.99/75cl and **Bolney Estate Pinof Noir 2016** £15.99/75cl, both available at waitrosecellar.com and in selected stores.



Denbies in Surrey, Wyken Vineyards in Suffolk and the Three Choirs Vineyard in Gloucestershire.

For the more energetic, plenty of vineyards also welcome volunteers to help with the harvesting in October.

Those in East Sussex open to the public (by

appointment) include Bluebell Vineyard Estates, Breaky Bottom, Burwash Weald, Carr Taylor, Court Garden, Mount Harry Vines, Oxney Organic Estate, Plumpton College, Ridgeview Wine Estate, Sedlescombe Organic Vineyard and Rathfinny.

Photography: Alamy, Getty Images. Illustration: John Bradley