

Pursuits

The things we long to do

A group of people, including a woman with a long blonde ponytail, are walking across a wooden bridge in a lush forest. The bridge is made of light-colored wood and has a simple railing. The forest is dense with green trees and foliage, with sunlight filtering through the leaves. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up at the bridge and the people on it.

“Here Pooh dropped a fir-cone and later spotted it floating by on the other side of the bridge” ➤➤➤

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➤➤ He thought too much about honey, he needed to exercise more, and his reading skills could have been better. But Pooh Bear was, at times, a fine philosopher.

“You can’t stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you,” he explained to Piglet as they strolled together. “You have to go to them sometimes.”

If you can muster the energy to leave your own corner of the world, Pooh’s spiritual home is still within reach. On a large swathe of low heathland in south-east England, Pooh’s creator, A.A. Milne, used to walk with his son, Christopher Robin. Christopher’s toys (now, alas, in a branch of the New York Public Library) inspired the Pooh characters, while Ashdown Forest, a short walk away from the Milnes’ house, inspired the setting, which became the Hundred Acre Wood.

The first authorised Pooh sequel, *Return to the Hundred Acre Wood*, will be published next month. Author David Benedictus, known for his radio adaptations of the Pooh stories, was keen to avoid pastiche, so spent time exploring Ashdown Forest. It is, as I discovered, an enchanted place.

I begin my Pooh Bear walk a few miles south of Hartfield, the village near Cotchford Farm, where the Milnes lived. Armed with a battered Ordnance Survey map and a generous supply of elevenses, I leave Gills Lap car park and enter the forest. Gorse, heather and bog plants give it a suitably scruffy air. Taking the Weald Way northwards, it isn’t long before I pass the boggy valley where Eeyore wallowed in his Gloomy Place. It was across these moors, too, that Christopher Robin led his “Expotition to the North Pole”, declaring it successful when Pooh uses a fallen branch – the “North Pole” – to hook baby Roo from the stream.

Five Hundred Acre Wood, from which Milne subtracted to make



Visitors to Ashdown Forest enjoying a very special bear hunt; (below) Christopher Robin tied a string around trees when counting them – a tradition still honoured today



Hundred Acre Wood, looms darkly on the horizon. Owl lived here at The Chestnuts – “an old-world residence of great charm” – where visitors puzzled over the notice beside the bell-pull: “PLEZ CNOKE IF AN RNSR IS NOT REQID.” The Weald Way weaves through oaks, birches, beeches and pines; leaves and fir-cones crunch underfoot. There’s no sign of Owl today, but as I rest on a tree stump, a fallow deer approaches and grazes nearby.

Emerging at Fisher’s Gate, I briefly leave the world of Pooh and potter along a quiet lane to Withyham Church. Inside, there’s a magnificent monument to a 12-year-old boy, Thomas Sackville. Lady Dorset kneels beside, clasping her handkerchief. “What mother would not weep for such a child” asks the moving inscription. A slate tablet behind commemorates a more recent relative, Vita Sackville-West, whose ashes sit in an inkpot in the vault below.

The white weather-boarded Dorset Arms offers me a welcome

lunch stop and a thirst-slaking pint of Harvey’s Best – my Strengthening Medicine, I like to think. Revived, I join the Forest Way. This path follows the old Tunbridge Wells to Forest Row branch line, axed by Richard Beeching in 1967.

These days, this green corridor of arched trees beside the meandering River Medway provides a habitat for badgers, foxes and rabbits. Like Pooh’s white-tailed friend, they seem to have many Friends and Relations. At the old station house I chug uphill into Hartfield, a village of half-timbered cottages. Once it prospered from the iron and timber trades, but now the local economy benefits more from the worldwide popularity of Pooh.

I pop into Pooh Corner, previously the sweet shop where Christopher Robin bought bulls-eyes. Now it sells all manner of Pooh paraphernalia and offers “smackerels” for afternoon tea in a tiny café and garden.

Signposts snake me down the valley to the wooden-railed



Second opinion Fatal flaws

By Margaret McCartney

“ In July this year, Debbie Purdy, a 46-year-old woman suffering from multiple sclerosis, won an important victory in the debate on assisted dying. Purdy was concerned that her partner would be deemed culpable should he accompany her to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland in order to die. In response, the House of Lords asked Keir Starmer, the director of public prosecutions, to clarify the legal position. He is due to unveil an interim policy later this month; a wider public consultation will follow.

Objections so far to assisted dying seem to have been largely religious. My own unease is far more practical. The first concern I have relates to society's ability to reliably and enduringly interpret the law. Take, for example, the issue of abortion. When the Abortion Act came into effect in 1968, it was not intended to sanction abortion on request. This is widely acknowledged, even by Sir David Steel himself, who introduced the original bill.

That two doctors' signatures were required before a termination could proceed was meant to safeguard against this outcome.

Instead, the law has come to be interpreted as meaning that women who want an abortion can – up to a certain gestation – have one. The doctors' agreement serves as a rubber stamp, not an opinion. I am not sure that the medical profession has realised this discrepancy, never mind challenged it. This in turn makes

me afraid that similar rubber stamps will eventually be applied to even a careful law on assisted suicide.

My second concern is for carers. Research shows that they are under immense stress and in worse physical health than their contemporaries. Although many would not give up their role, they will admit to the strain they are under. This strain is witnessed, of course, by the person being cared for. Until this situation improves, it will continue to be a factor in some people feeling it would be better for all if they were dead.

My last concern relates to another problem facing patients with terminal diagnoses. In the last stages of life, all parties wish to ease distressing symptoms as much as possible. But in administering drugs at this point, doctors are often treading a fine line between relieving discomfort and hastening death.

Morphine, for example, can decrease consciousness and even breathing when used in sufficiently large quantities. This “double effect” means relief of pain at the cost of shortening life. After the scandal of Harold Shipman, the GP who murdered patients by administering morphine, many doctors have expressed concern that their decision to use the drug in terminally ill patients may be misinterpreted. It would seem more important to get this sorted out before creating

any new laws.
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For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney's blog at blogs.ft.com/mccartney



PHOTOGRAPHS: CHARLIE BIBBY | ILLUSTRATION: SOPHIE CASSON

THE DETAILS

“Return to the Hundred Acre Wood” by David Benedictus, is published by Egmont on Monday October 5.

ROUTE INFORMATION

Distance: approximately 14 km/8.75 miles.

Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 135 (Ashdown Forest).

Start at Gills Lap car park – at the junction of the B2026 (Chuck Hatch Road) and Kidds Hill.

By public transport, it is easiest to start early at Hartfield, take a mid-morning snack and have a late lunch in Withyham.

Catch a train to East Grinstead or Tunbridge Wells and then Metrobus 291, which runs hourly on weekdays and Saturdays (not Sundays) to Hartfield and Withyham; www.metrobus.co.uk

REFRESHMENTS

Anchor Inn, Hartfield, www.anchorinnhartfield.co.uk;

Dorset Arms, Withyham, www.dorset-arms.co.uk;

Haywaggon Inn, Hartfield, www.haywaggon.com;

Pooh Corner, Hartfield, www.pooh-country.co.uk

Poohsticks Bridge. Here, in a stream now stained orange with iron ore, Pooh dropped a fir-cone and later spotted it floating by on the other side of the bridge: “And that was the beginning of the game called Poohsticks, which Pooh invented, and which he and his friends used to play. But they played with sticks instead of fir-cones, because they were easier to mark.”

These days, you may have to queue with excited children to play a round of Poohsticks. Having scrutinised The Official Rules beforehand, I'd brought along my own sticks – sound advice as, after years of deforestation, it's hard to find a good stick around the bridge.

After a game or two I gently amble uphill on a broad sandy track. In a clearing to the right there is a fine panoramic view back to Hartfield. It is a fitting location for the commemorative bronze plaque to Milne and his illustrator, E.H. Shepard. Resting here for a moment, I watch a family on the heath below scattering their dear departed's ashes from a plastic bag.

Now climbing more steeply, I reach the Sandy Pit where Roo practised “very small jumps in the sand, and falling down mouse-holes”. I take care myself to avoid falling into a Cunning Heffalump Trap, a fate that befell Pooh one night in his pursuit of honey.

Milne's last lines on Pooh in 1928 left him sitting in a clump of firs at the “very top of the Forest called Galleon's Lap, which is sixty-something trees in a circle; and Christopher Robin knew it was enchanted because nobody had ever been able to count whether it was sixty-three or sixty-four, not even when he tied a piece of string round each tree after he had counted it.” Today there are more recent signs of tree counting, with thin white string carefully knotted at child-height around a few tree trunks.

It is this innocent and timeless charm that has endeared the Pooh books to children since the 1920s. As David Benedictus, the honoured inheritor to this tradition, puts it: “Pooh and Piglet, Christopher Robin and Eeyore were last seen in the forest, though can it really be 80 years ago? But dreams have a logic of their own, and it is as if the 80 years have passed in a day.” ■

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