

## SECRETS OF THE DOWNS – THE CHICHESTER SOCIETY FESTIVAL WALK 2014

### Levin Down

Levin Down is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, managed by the Sussex Wildlife Trust.

<https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/admin/resources/levin.pdf>

It still has much wildlife value, as it is too steep to cultivate; the name is thought to derive from ‘Leave-Alone Hill’. The Trust maintains a careful balance between grassland and scrub, to provide a mix of flowers and shelter for the many butterflies and other insects which live here. Taller plants are found on the lower slopes, from ash and hazel trees aloft to cowslips and marjoram below, food plants for the Duke of Burgundy Fritillary and the Marbled White butterflies, and others.



The grass is kept short on the upper slopes by controlled grazing, and many typical chalk downland flowers are to be seen – thyme, carline thistle, autumn gentian and orchids. The pyramidal orchid is common at the time of the walk, but return later for a sight of the rare Autumn Lady’s Tresses, only a few centimetres high. There is also a patch of unusual chalk heath on the eastern slope, where wind-blown acid soils deposited in the Ice Age lie on top of alkaline chalk, and acid-loving heather can be seen in the midst of downland.

The prickly conifers are juniper, a declining species in the south, but still to be seen here and on Bow Hill and Noar Hill near Selborne. The jury is out as to whether its decline has been caused by too many rabbits eating young plants, or whether fewer sheep trampling the soil has led to a lack of bare patches of earth which it needs for germination

### Oil wells

There are several small oilfields in the West Sussex area. The oil originated at depth in Jurassic rocks which are about 180 million years old, but as these rocks subsided under the weight of later strata, the oil moved to the edges of the basin where a proportion of it has been trapped as it came up against faults, as at Storrington, Singleton (on the walk), Horndean, Stockbridge and Humbly Grove near Alton. There is also a gas field at Godley Bridge near Wisborough Green, but all of these are unrelated to the Kimmeridge oil shales which are being investigated for fracking (though these too are Jurassic, about 150 million years old, and widespread as lower strata across southern England)



The Singleton Oil Field was discovered in 1989 and production wells were drilled in 1991 to a depth of about 4000 feet, Current production is about 600 barrels per day (21,000 gallons). Much of this now comes from bores drilled up to 4000 feet sideways through the reservoir rock of Great Oolite limestone (this rock is the same as at Bath). It is hoped to increase production to 1,500 barrels per day. About 4 million barrels have been produced so far, and it is predicted that 10% of the estimated 100 million barrels in the oilfield can be recovered without resorting to water injection.

Note that the oilfield is on private land and special permission has been obtained to go and view the 'nodding donkey' oil pumps. The 'nodding donkeys' can however be seen at the roadside in Horndean.

## Outlaws in Singleton Forest

From [http://www.graffhamparishnews.org.uk/Magazines/GPN2010\\_04.pdf](http://www.graffhamparishnews.org.uk/Magazines/GPN2010_04.pdf)

The Highwayman - A Legend of Lavington in Days Gone By - By Joscelyn Johnston

During the winter months of 1807 there had been many rumours locally of coaches being attacked and robbed on the roads between Chichester and the Petworth and Midhurst area. It was in November that a certain Mr Rhodes fell victim as his coach slowed down as it climbed the hill at Cocking. He was robbed of his money and his gold watch by a masked man who then ran off into the woods. The alarm went out and immediately a group of several friends set out on horseback to search through the woods in the neighbourhood without success.



Suspicion had been centred on a deserter from the Sussex Militia, the 13th Dragoons whose father lived in Graffham, but they found the house locked and empty. Riding on to Lavington, they sought help from the squire, the Rev. John Sargent, asking him to have the house watched in case the robber tried to return under cover of darkness. The squire's brother, Captain George Sargent recently returned from service in the French War, was keen to join the search and together they rode along the top of the Downs where they met a shepherd who answered their enquiry saying that a man had just passed him. The riders separated, agreeing to shout if they found any trace. Captain Sargent, riding ahead, caught sight of a fleeing figure carrying a gun who disappeared into thick bushes by the tree now called *Sargent's Tree*. A moment later a shot rang out, and as his companions reached George Sargent, they realised that he was dead and the footpad had escaped once more.

The three gentlemen brought his body back to Lavington and no more could be done as it was already night. A week passed and there was no news of the fugitive, but very early on the

following morning a farmer from Graffham was going duck shooting on the “ochre ponds” below the village. He hid himself in the morning mist at the edge of the pond and waited until the birds would take flight. At last a rustling in the reeds opposite his hide alerted him and he took aim ... to his horror it was not the ducks he had expected but he had hit and killed a man who was hiding. The highwayman had been shot.

The report in the local paper, dated November 9th 1807, together with the Coroner’s report of the incident, states that the victim was identified by several local men who knew him and in further proof, Mr Rhodes’ gold watch was found on the body. The verdicts given were of wilful murder against the said James Allen for shooting Captain Sargent and a verdict of justifiable homicide against the man who had shot the highwayman.

*MURDER OF CAPTAIN SARGENT, LEWES. NOVEMBER 9TH 1807*

*A dispatch, containing the following authentic particulars of the late atrocious murder of Captain Sargent, was on Friday forwarded from Midhurst to our Office, by orderly Dragoons, for the purpose of being given as a faithful record of that melancholy transaction, in our Journal of this day. Various paragraphs having already appeared in the papers relative to the death of Captain Sargent it is hoped the Public will approve of a circumstantial account of the melancholy event framed from the depositions given before the Coroner, and, from the concurrent testimony of the parties engaged in the scene. [The reporter at the Coroner’s Court continues for 1200 Words including this vivid description of the evidence given by the gentlemen who rode along the crest of the Downs above Lavington to search for the miscreant]. Guided by a shepherd, Sargent spotted a man who quickly hid under a blackthorn bush ... He shouted to the man “Come out or I’ll shoot!” adding “but I can’t shoot a man ...” But before he finished the sentence his friends heard a gunshot and the thief leapt out and ran into a neighbouring covert.*

Captain Sargent had been fatally wounded. Had he felt, as a gentleman that he could not shoot “a sitting bird”? His courtesy had cost him his life. The tree where Captain Sargent was killed is in the Lavington woods near the top of the Downs. A wooden plaque nailed at the foot of the tree reads “Sargent’s Tree”. This plaque is still visible but in poor condition.