

THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

- the anonymous area with features of international importance

Do you REALLY know where you live? Well, did you know that if you live in the area bounded by Wantage, Didcot, Reading, Newbury, Basingstoke, Andover, Devizes, Calne and Swindon you are fortunate to be living in one of the country's finest landscapes. In fact, so fine that an Act of Parliament has given it the same status and level of protection as a national park, like the Peak District or the New Forest.

The North Wessex Downs is one of Britain's 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and with an area of 668 square miles it is the third largest. However, unlike the Cotswolds or the Chilterns, both nearby AONB, the North Wessex Downs is for many people almost unknown, even when they live within it. And yet it contains many gems, both natural and man-made, some of which are internationally important. For instance, there are white horses carved into the sides of hills, Neolithic long barrows, Roman mosaics, castles, Civil War battlefields, over 250 Grade 1 or 11* Listed Buildings, and 15 Registered Parks and Gardens. Let us look more closely.

Were you aware that Silbury Hill, 39.3 m (129 ft) high, on the A4, 5 miles west of Marlborough, is the largest man-made mound in Europe? It is estimated to have taken some 18 million man-hours to build 4,500 years ago. Or that together with the nearby Avebury stone circle (and Stonehenge) it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1986?

As well as having probably the country's richest array of prehistoric sites, the North Wessex Downs is blessed with some outstanding examples of landscapes and biodiversity. The chalk hills, like Walbury Hill south of Inkpen and the Downs north of Marlborough, are very visible but the associated chalk streams are rare and need protection (see footnote 1). The North Wessex Downs also contain a rich mosaic of woodlands, like Savernake Forest and West Woods, pasture, heath and common land, such as at Bucklebury and Hungerford. Between them they support a rich and diverse array of wildlife. Next time you go for a walk you may see a flock of lapwings, brown hares boxing, a marbled white butterfly, green hellebore, native bluebells, meadow saxifrage, or a freshwater white-clawed crayfish. The chalk grassland is one of the most biologically rich and diverse habitats in the whole country. Over 40 species of flowering plants can be found in just one square metre of the best quality turf. But such areas are shrinking – in the 30 years since 1968 chalk grassland has declined by 32%.

Mankind's interventions have taken their toll but you will be sure to find something appealing in what was built, even when little remains. Take the Roman mosaic in the grounds of the equally interesting Littlecote House, near Hungerford; or the home of the 8th Earl and Countess of Carnarvon, Highclere Castle, south-west of Newbury, now almost universally known for its "starring" role in *Downton Abbey*; or the Kennet and Avon Canal which was snatched from abandonment in the 1950s, then restored, and reopened in 1990;

or two “by-products” of the canal – Wilton Windmill and Crofton Beam Engines. The former is the only operating windmill in Wessex, while the latter is the world’s oldest working steam engine in its original location and still performing the task for which it was designed.

But the North Wessex Downs is also very much an area where people live and work. The market towns of Hungerford and Marlborough lie in the centre while further away lies Lambourn, well known as a centre of horse racing, and Pewsey with its statue of King Alfred the Great, Anglo Saxon King of Wessex. In between there are dozens of picturesque villages often with historic churches and attractive public houses. Farmland makes up 84% of the AONB but many and varied are the activities that have been located here, quite often in former farm buildings. Food production, brewing and tourism may be unsurprising but what about publishing, classic car restoration, leather working, and the only place in the world where all stages of bespoke kitchen knives are made in the one place (in Savernake Forest)?

In reading this article, the chances are that you have found out something new about the North Wessex Downs, even if you live in this amazing area. So are you now tempted to walk the Ridgeway or Wansdyke, or visit an attraction which you have never got around to before now, or search for a new plant, bird, fish or animal, or support the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust? The links and books noted below will help.

Notes

1. Action for the River Kennet (ARK: www.riverkennet.org) is a charity set up to address the threats to the Kennet and the fragile plants and animals which it supports.
2. Globally there are estimated to be 210 chalk streams of which 160 are in England.
3. Useful web site: www.northwessexdowns.org.uk
4. Helpful book: “North Wessex Downs” by Steve Davison; Robert Hale, London; 2013
5. North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust is a registered charity which caters for individuals who wish to get involved in conserving and the enhancing the AONB: www.nwd-landscapetrust.org.uk

Note to Editor - Photos (which can be placed adjacent to text reference): Cherhill White Horse, Silbury Hill, Avebury, Savernake Forest, Meadow saxifrage, Littlecote House, Wilton Windmill. [N.B. photo credits needed, depending on those chosen]

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