**Heritage and Culture **

Within The North Wessex Downs there are many fascinating places to visit and experience from prehistory to the present day. Along the Ridgeway are dotted some of the most magical prehistoric locations in the country. The internationally renowned Avebury Stone Circle and White Horse Hill are well known to visitors but there are many other interesting sites such as the Neolithic tombs of Kennet Long Barrow and Wayland’s Smithy that are equally mysterious places to visit.

For a predominantly rural area the North Wessex Downs has a surprisingly rich industrial heritage. At the Crofton Pumping Station on the Kennet and Avon Canal you can see the world’s oldest steam engines in action in their original location. And if you love the nostalgia of steam, travel in style on the steam railways of Cholsey and Wallingford or Swindon and Cricklade or plan a visit to Didcot Railway Centre or the STEAM Museum in Swindon before you leave. For people who like more tranquil locations, the Windmill on the hill at Wilton is the only working windmill in Wessex.

The North Wessex Downs is home to some of the England’s finest country houses from the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries. Highclere Castle (famous as the location of ‘Downton Abbey’ in the television series) has impressive staterooms, an Egyptian exhibition and wonderful grounds to roam. Less well known but just as interesting are the 18th Century, Basildon Park near Pangbourne and the 17th Century ‘Dutch style’ Ashdown House. The Watermill Theatre near Newbury manages to combine heritage, culture and cuisine to deliver the perfect night out on your stay. The historic old watermill set in an idyllic location has established a reputation as a leading regional theatre with a great atmosphere.

**Places to visit before you leave**

**White Horse Hill and Wayland’s Smithy**

The Bronze-age White Horse cut out of the chalk on the ridgeway escarpment is one of the most famous prehistoric landmarks in the UK. Together with the Iron Age fort on the summit, this is a must-see if you’re visiting the area. The hillfort known as Uffington Castle is surrounded by a rampart and ditch and there are many Neolithic burial mounds dotted around the site. At 262 metres above sea level, the castle is the highest point in Oxfordshire with amazing views over 6 counties.

Located just 2km to the west of the White Horse on the Ridgeway is Wayland’s Smithy. The Smithy is a Neolithic chambered long barrow and is believed to take its name from the Saxon smith-god Wayland. Excavations have shown two building phases with the large barrow we see today covering a smaller chamber with 14 burials dating back to 3,590BC. The site is secluded and very atmospheric and well worth the short walk if you are visiting the White Horse.

**The Watermill Theatre**

There can be few theatres in the country more picturesque and tranquil than the Watermill Theatre near Newbury. Converted from a centuries-old corn and paper mill in the 1960s, the theatre is now viewed as an important regional venue with shows progressing from here to London or touring the UK. It is the perfect place to spend an evening, after a day on the Downs, with its cosy 220 seat auditorium and wonderful restaurant for a pre-show meal.

“This rural idyll has quietly become one of the most admired and influential theatres in the country.”

The Daily Telegraph

**Avebury**

In the pretty village of Avebury you can visit the internationally renowned prehistoric stone circle, the largest in Europe. There is an on-site museum housed in the stables and a 17th Century barn where fascinating finds from the 1938 excavation can be viewed plus interactive displays.

Close by is Avebury Manor and Garden owned by the National Trust, which following a major transformation (featured on the television programme ‘The Manor Reborn’) is open to the public.

Inside you can sit on chairs, lie on the beds and get a unique experience of rooms from different periods of the house history dating back to 1500. Well worth a visit.

Also included in the Avebury World Heritage Site are the Neolithic tomb of West Kennet Long Barrow and the man made chalk mound of Silbury Hill. Dotting the landscape are ancient burial mounds or Tumuli, some topped with Beech Trees, also known locally as Hedgehogs!

**Wiltshire Heritage Museum**

Located in Devizes, the Wiltshire Heritage Museum is the place to go to discover some of the most fascinating archaeological finds from the last 5,000 years. The outstanding collection of artefacts are displayed in a series of galleries covering Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, Saxon, and Medieval periods.

**Ashdown House**

This unusual 17th house in the Dutch style is an architectural gem set on the Berkshire Downs. Described by some as resembling a dolls’ house, it was built by Earl William Craven in 1662 as a house fit for the queen he loved, Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia. Owned by the National Trust, part of the house and grounds are open to the public in summer months. This was also the site of the Battle of Ashdown in 871, when Alfred the Great was victorious against the invading Danish Army.

**Basildon Park**

This 18th Century mansion was restored from a ruin to its former glory by Lord and Lady Iliffe in the mid-1950s. No expense was spared in its refit with Georgian architectural features, fine paintings, fabrics and furniture which can all be enjoyed by visitors today. Outside there are 400 acres of parkland to explore by way-marked trails, plus activities to keep the children amused.

**Whitchurch Silk Mill**

Whitchurch, one of the prettiest towns in North Hampshire, is home to a textile mill built in 1815. The Mill is operated by a charity, who started silk production again in 2012. Other hidden treasures include naturalist Gilbert White’s house and garden at Selborne, the Watercress steam railway at Alton, Stratfield Saye House, home of the Great Duke of Wellington, and Basing House, visited by Henry VIII and besieged by Cromwell.

**Highclere Castle**

Home to Lord and Lady Carnarvon, Highclere Castle is world famous as the location for the hugely successful television series ‘Downton Abbey’. The magnificent Victorian house is open to the public and features lavish state rooms and bedrooms plus the Egyptian Exhibition. The Exhibition celebrates the achievements of the 5th Earl of Carnarvon who together with Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922. In addition to the house, visitors can explore the 1,000 acres of beautiful garden and parkland, designed by ‘Capability’ Brown.

**WWII History**

There are many military associations with areas of the North Wessex Downs. Aldbourne was host to Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division, featured in the HBO series ‘Band of Brothers’ in the weeks before D Day. Other WWII airfields could be found at Wroughton, Yatesbury, Membury, Grove and Hampstead Norreys. Trenches, used for training troops prior to deployment can still be seen in Savernake Forest, which was used as an ammunition dump. The Kennet and Avon Canal also played its part as one of the last lines of defence against possible German invasion. Concrete ‘pillboxes’ can still be seen along much of its length.

**Wilton Windmill**

Wilton Windmill can be found just 14 kilometres South East of Marlborough on a hill above the village of Wilton. Built in 1810 to replace a water mill when water from the River Kennet was diverted to the newly opened Kennet and Avon Canal, it is the only working windmill in Wessex and still produces, stone-ground flour. It is open for guided tours on Sunday and Bank Holiday afternoons from Easter to the end of September and you can buy flour, or enjoy refreshments at the Shepherd’s Hut. It is worth visiting at any time of the year just to experience the breathtaking views across the Down.

**Crofton Beam Engines**

The Crofton Pumping Station on the Kennet and Avon Canal boasts the oldest working steam engines in their original location in the world and is a must-see attraction for families and steam enthusiasts. The engines were installed 200 years ago to supply water to the highest point of the canal near Savernake Forest and on steaming days of the year they still perform the same job. The station and engines (one of which is of original Boulton & Watt construction) are maintained in their original condition so this is a wonderful opportunity to immerse yourself in the past and re-live history.

**Didcot Railway Centre**

Take a trip back in time to the golden age of railways at the Didcot Railway Centre. Open throughout the year, the centre has a unique collection of Great Western Railway steam engines, coaches, wagons and workshop buildings including an original 1930s engine shed. There are locomotive running days when you can experience first-hand the thrill of steam travel and after the journey you can explore the workshops, museum and shop. Thomas the Tank Engine is also a regular visitor along with his friend the Fat Controller.