

DISCOVER EXPLORE WALK

The North Wessex Downs

AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY



MAP OF THE AREA

Where to go and what to see



www.northwessexdowns.org.uk

A truly special place...

From remote, rolling downland to picture postcard villages the North Wessex Downs are truly special. Undoubtedly among Britain's most beautiful landscapes, they are somewhere to be treasured, protected and enjoyed.

Straddling four counties and often unheralded, this is an area united by a single factor – chalk. The geology gives the North Wessex Downs their wide open downland topped by rampant white horses, dramatic scarp slopes, majestic ancient woodland and sheltered valleys with sparkling rivers and streams. Peace and tranquillity on top of the Downs contrast with the bustling business of charming market towns below.

Protected for the nation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, this is *your* North Wessex Downs - a place to unwind and relax - so why not step outside and explore more of this fascinating patch of English countryside?

"...somewhere to be treasured, protected and enjoyed."



...protected for you.

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are recognised as so outstanding that it should be protected for the nation. The North Wessex Downs make up the third largest of Britain's 46 AONBs, covering an area of 668 square miles (1,730 square kilometres), straddling four counties and taking in 173 parishes including the market towns of Marlborough and Hungerford – “the heart of the AONB”.

The celebrated poet Edward Thomas wrote: “This is pure downland, the breasted hills curved as if under the influence of a great melody. It is a beautiful, quiet, and unrenowned and a most visibly ancient landscape.” This landscape is not, however, just about being beautiful. This is a living, working landscape much loved by residents and visitors.

“This is a living, working landscape...”

Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is the legal responsibility of nine local authorities in Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. They come together with community, farming, conservation, tourism and heritage representatives in the AONB Partnership, which is supported by a small professional team. The staff produce a management plan for the area and work with all interested parties to bring it to life.



Digging down

Scratch the surface in the North Wessex Downs and you find what really makes it tick – chalk. The area lies at the heart of the chalk band that stretches across southern England and 100 million years ago – when dinosaurs roamed the earth – it was under a warm sea, teeming with billions of tiny creatures. Those creatures – microscopically small - are the source of today's soft rock.

Rain runs easily through the chalk creating valleys with streams and seasonal winterbournes that carry crystal-clear filtered water from hillside springs at a constant temperature. These chalk streams are internationally-rare habitats that support some of the UK's most threatened and fragile plants and animals.

The geology is responsible for the rolling and sometimes dramatic contours of the landscape but also for the thin soils - less suited for cultivation - under sweeps of chalk grassland some of which haven't been disturbed in centuries. Ancient historical features remain largely untouched and still visible today. This rich heritage includes the World Heritage Site of Avebury which, with its three great stone circles enclosed by a massive bank and ditch, is one of the principal ceremonial sites of Neolithic Britain. Nearby is Silbury Hill, the motive for which remains a great unsolved mystery. Along the northern edge of the area runs one of Britain's most ancient roads, the Ridgeway, the chalk route used by prehistoric man. Other historic sites include numerous Bronze and Iron Age enclosures and hillforts, for example at Ladle Hill and Beacon Hill in north Hampshire and Barbury Castle near Swindon.

“... Ancient historical features remain largely untouched.”



Getting here

Close to Reading, Swindon and Basingstoke and with eight railway stations within the area including Hungerford, Bedwyn and Pewsey and 12 others nearby, such as Goring and Theale, the North Wessex Downs is easy to reach by public transport. The AONB is served by bus routes too such as the No 49 from Swindon to Devizes. Many of our walking and cycling routes start and finish near stations or make use of local bus services so why not plan a day out without the car?



For train information call **03457 484950** or visit www.nationalrail.co.uk
For bus information call Traveline on **0871 200 2233** or visit www.traveline.info

Cycle Routes:

Sustrans' National Route 4 follows the Kennet & Avon Canal west out of Reading across the North Wessex Downs. Other routes include 45, 403 and 246. For more information about cycle routes visit www.sustrans.org.uk.

Information Centres & Websites:

North Wessex Downs AONB: www.northwessexdowns.org.uk
VisitWiltshire: VisitWiltshire.co.uk
Hungerford Tourist Information Centre: Tel: **01488 686858**
Marlborough Tourist Information: Tel: **01672 512487**
Vale of Pewsey: www.visitpewseyvale.co.uk
Great West Way: GreatWestWay.co.uk

Ordnance Survey Maps:

Landranger Maps: 173, 174, 184, 185.
Explorer Maps: 157, 158, 159, 130, 131, 144, 169, 170, 171.

Love nature? Love North Wessex Downs!

Wildlife here has an abundant range of special places to live and one of the most significant is the chalk grassland. Traditionally grazed by sheep and rabbits, the springy turf provides a rich habitat. Chalk-loving wild flowers that thrive here include the nectar-rich scabious and pyramidal orchid; these, in turn, attract insects - you could well catch sight of rare butterflies like the Adonis blue. Visit the Pewsey Downs National Nature Reserve to see one of the finest examples of chalk grassland in southern England.

“...an abundant range of special places...”

The North Wessex Downs farmland is a home to lots of rare bird species. Listen out for the 'peewit' call of the lapwing or the distinctive chirruping of the skylark. The stone curlew with its long yellow legs and round yellow eyes is a regular summer visitor while red kites and buzzards swoop and wheel above.

There are heathlands like that at Snelsmore Common (where you might be lucky enough to see an adder on a warm day), veteran trees at Ashmansworth and Savernake, and in spring brilliant bluebells appear in profusion in West Woods near Marlborough. The sparkling chalk streams, such as the River Kennet, are home to brown trout and watch out for the iridescent flash of a kingfisher.



Walk the North Wessex Downs...

Top class walking country and hundreds of miles of rights of way make the North Wessex Downs a great place to get some fresh air and stretch your legs. Get outside, get active and feel great!

What's your walking style? Whether you regularly hike on the hills or prefer a more relaxing stroll, the area offers many rewards. And everywhere stunning landscape will lift your spirits, intriguing history will engage your curiosity and rare wildlife will thrill your senses.

Take in the view from some of the highest points in the South of England – perhaps at Martinsell Hill in Wiltshire from where you can see Salisbury Cathedral, or Walbury Hill in Berkshire as red kites float at eye-level. Admire the ancient, fat-bellied oaks as you lose yourself in the glorious Savernake Forest near Marlborough or consider the mysteries of Neolithic Britain while exploring the Uffington White Horse.

Visit www.northwessexdowns.org.uk for more ideas of where to walk with free-to-download route guides. You may like to walk parts of the many long-distance paths that are in the AONB – such as the Ridgeway National Trail, the Thames Path, the Lambourn Valley Way, or the Wayfarer's Walk all of which are featured on OS maps.

If you would like company there are numerous walking groups to join. The Ramblers are active across the four counties (ramblers.org.uk), the Long Distance Walkers Association has a Wiltshire group (ldwa.org.uk) and there are several Walking for Health Groups in and around the North Wessex Downs (walkingforhealth.org.uk). And check out The North Wessex Downs Walking Festival which usually takes place in June (northwessexdowns.org.uk).

“... hundreds of miles of rights of way.”



...or Cycle or Ride!

The National Trails and the canal towpath are accessible to both horses and bicycles and, of course, cyclists can use all the bridleways too. National Route 4 of the National Cycle Network runs through the area and this rolling country presents the keen cyclist with numerous challenges if you wish to take them! Can you pedal up Walbury Hill in one go?

And don't forget, this is the Land of the Horse! With many racing and livery stables in the area visiting equestrians are very welcome and what finer sight is there than a string of racehorses out on the gallops in the morning sunshine?

“... this rolling country presents the keen cyclist with numerous challenges.”



Photos: Uffington White Horse: © Vale of the White Horse Council. Woodborough Hill: © Dave Gray. Lapwing: © Barry Stalker. Alton Barnes White Horse, Avebury Stone Circle, Silbury Hill, Dog Walkers, Signpost, Walking at Cherhill, Bridleway Sign, Hackpen Hill, Leisure Riding: © GreatWestWay.co.uk. Marlborough: © Abby George. Kids in Bluebells: © Sharyn Ladds. Rolling Contours: © John Cruise. Off-road Cycling: © Sustrans.

20 things not to miss...

1 Uffington White Horse
Carved into the chalk downland and visible for miles, there are eight huge white horse hill figures in the North Wessex Downs – look out for the white horse symbols here on the map. The prehistoric Uffington White Horse near Wantage is the best-known. Located high up on the Lambourn Downs, it was probably carved around 1000 BC in the late Bronze Age making it the oldest surviving hill figure in Britain. You can take a fairly easy walk, of less than a mile, to the White Horse from the National Trust car park or extend it to take in one of the many circular routes in the area. Alternatively, the White Horse Trail distance walking route. And nearby ...

2 Wayland's Smithy
A Neolithic long barrow and chamber tomb site built around 3700 BC at Ashbury which had been associated since Saxon times with a Germanic smith-god called Wayland. According to legend, a traveller whose horse has lost a shoe can leave it with a silver coin at the smithy and return the next day to find it re-shod.

3 Ashdown House
This unusual property with its dolls' house appearance was built for the Queen of Bohemia in 1662. Set in a beautiful valley, it is also surrounded by woodland to explore.

4 Combe Gibbet
Located at the top of Inkpen Hill on a Neolithic long barrow close to the Hampshire/Berkshire border is the eerie monument of Combe Gibbet. Only ever put to its grisly use once in 1676, today a replica gibbet marks the site. With far-reaching views of the surrounding area and just a stone's throw from Walbury Hill, the highest point in south east England, it is now popular with paragliders and is a much-loved walking and cycling spot. Wander up to the Gibbet – less than a mile from the car park along a sloping gravel track – to take in the views or embark on a more strenuous circular route along part of the Test Way and into Combe Wood.

5 Watership Down
Richard Adams' timeless novel Watership Down about the rabbit families and their adventures draws on his memories of living near the real Watership Down in north Hampshire. A bridleway, the Wayfarer's Walk, runs along the ridge of the Down. Other nearby features include the Iron Age hillforts at Ladle Hill, on Great Litchfield Down, immediately to the west, and Beacon Hill a little further on – all great spots for a picnic and glorious views. And nearby...

6 Highclere Castle
Seat of the Carnarvon family and well-known as television's Downton Abbey, this 'Jacobethan' house is home to some of Egypt's finest treasures from the 5th Earl's exploration with

7 Avebury
Containing the largest and one of the most important megalithic stone circles in Europe, the UNESCO World Heritage site of Avebury is a very special place. Constructed around 2600 BC archaeologists believe that it was part of a larger prehistoric landscape and was most likely used for some form of ritual or ceremony. Today, Avebury is managed by the National Trust but access to the stone circle is free and there are fascinating walks of varying lengths in the area which is jam-packed full of Neolithic archaeology. And nearby...

8 Silbury Hill
Europe's largest man-made hill at 130 feet high (40m). It was built around 2100 BC with antler picks and shoulder blades of oxen as shovels. (Please don't climb the hill – the archaeology and rare chalk plants are very fragile.)

10 Wittenham Clumps
The Clumps are the oldest known planted hilltop beeches in England. Renowned English artist Paul Nash (1889-1946) wrote of a "beautiful English country" on discovering the Wittenham Clumps in 1911 and they became a major inspiration for him, returning to paint them many times during his life. Managed by the Earth

11 Basildon Park
This elegant 18th century Palladian mansion managed by the National Trust is set in beautiful grounds near the River Thames between Pangbourne and Stratfield Mortice. And nearby...

12 Wilton Windmill
Wilton Windmill is the only authentic working windmill in the entire AONB and wider Wessex region and still produces stoneground flour. You can visit the windmill site any time of year, but the building is open for guided tours from Easter to the end of September on Sundays and Bank Holidays. The picnic area has sweeping views and there are numerous walks to be enjoyed from the mill including down to the Kennet and Avon Canal and Wilton Water. And nearby...

13 Crofton Pumping Station
A Grade I listed building that houses two Cornish beam engines one of which is the oldest working beam engine in the world. Admire the steam-powered engineering which lifts water 40 feet (12m) from river to canal.

14 Kennet and Avon Canal
Meandering 87 miles and passing through beautiful, tranquil and unspoilt scenery, the Kennet and Avon Canal is one of the most picturesque waterways in Britain. Discover an abundance of wildlife, bustling market towns, picturesque villages and historic monuments along the way. A well-maintained towpath makes it ideal to explore by bike or on foot, as well as by boat. And, of course, there are plenty of waterside pubs and restaurants from where you can watch the world float by.

15 Savernake Forest
Believed to be over 1000 years old, Savernake Forest is one of the oldest woodlands in England. Rich in history with lots to explore it makes for an exciting and interesting day out. A particularly impressive sight is the 'Grand Avenue' of tall 200-year-old beech trees. Laid out in the late 1790s by Capability Brown and at just over four miles long it stands in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest avenue in Britain. With beautiful picnic areas including barbeque sites and various routes of different lengths, walking in the forest is the perfect way to get some fresh air.

16 Horse Racing
Lambourn and its surroundings are second only to Newmarket in their importance as a centre of activity for the UK racing industry. About 10% of Britain's racehorse trainers and approximately 3,700 racehorses are located within the North Wessex Downs AONB. The springy, free-draining chalk turf found here is the perfect landscape for training and the sight of thoroughbred racehorses being exercised on the gallops early in the morning is truly exhilarating. Look out for the Lambourn Trainers' stables open day every Spring.

17 Pewsey Downs National Nature Reserve
A stunning sweep of chalk downland with breathtaking views stretching across Pewsey Vale. Taking in three hills and the Alton Barnes white horse, the reserve offers great opportunities for landscape and wildlife photography. A circular walk from the small car park includes Neolithic features, the white horse and the Wansdyke.

18 Roundway Hill
The scene of a crushing Royalist victory in the English Civil War, Roundway Hill near Devizes is now a 68-acre nature reserve which features broadleaf woodland with sunny grassy areas where chalk-loving plants thrive. The plants in turn attract a wide range of insects including butterflies, grasshoppers and bees. A nature trail offers panoramic views in all directions.

19 Barbury Castle
An Iron Age hill fort on the edge of the Marlborough Downs first occupied around 2,500 years ago and then used during the Roman occupation of the area. The fort is sited on a vantage point which affords views as far as the Cotswolds and the River Severn. And nearby...

20 Liddington Hill
Rising over 900 feet (275m) and with its clump of beech trees, Liddington Hill is visible for miles around. The western side is topped by an Iron Age hill fort where King Arthur is said to have defeated the Anglo-Saxon armies. There is also a World War 2 'starfish' decoy control bunker whose purpose was to create localised fires to fool enemy bombers targeting Swindon.

Symbols
Railway with station
20 things not to miss
Ancient monument
Hill figure
Attraction
Height in metres

Long-distance Trails
The Ridgeway National Trail
White Horse Trail
Kennet & Avon Canal Path
Wansdyke Path
Lambourn Valley Way
Wayfarers Walk
Test Way
Thames Path National Trail

