

Factsheet

Historic Environment of the North Wessex Downs

The North Wessex Downs is an ancient landscape, marked with the impact of thousands of years of human use and settlement. This cultural heritage makes a fundamental contribution to the present-day landscape. In the 3000 years since the White Horse was carved at Uffington the landscape has constantly evolved to serve the changing needs of the successive generations who have lived and worked here .

Early Monuments

Foremost amongst the many sites and monuments which scatter the area is perhaps Avebury World Heritage Site. The imposing circle of standing stones forms part of this area, together with the remarkable circular mound of Silbury Hill, believed to be the largest man made mound in Europe. One of the most distinctive features of the North Wessex Downs is the Neolithic long barrows, including some 20 examples around Avebury.

The numerous round barrows were constructed in the Bronze Age. The barrows are often highly visible on ridges and hill tops across the area. Extensive patterns of field systems once divided up the area and remnants of some of these ancient systems can still be found today.

Silbury Hill by David Hall



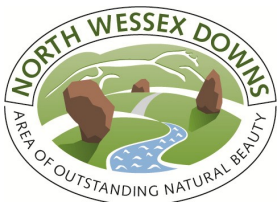
Forts, boundaries and Britain's oldest road

The Iron Age is represented with "banjo" shaped enclosures and hillforts such as Ladle and Beacon Hills in Hampshire and Liddington and Barbury Castles in Wiltshire. It is also at this time when the first of the chalk cut white horses is believed to have been created at Uffington.

The Ridgeway, termed Britain's oldest road, follows an ancient chalk ridge route through the Downs. It starts at Overton hill, near Avebury and runs along the edge of scarp to the Thames at Goring, where it continues into the Chilterns.

Massive earthworks such as the Wansdyke which straddles the chalk uplands south of the Kennet and Bedwyn Dyke on the Savernake Plateau, are thought to have been constructed to mark territorial boundaries or lines of defence during and around the Anglo Saxon times.

The Normans established motte and bailey castles such as at Marlborough to act as local centres of power. Under the Normans, management of the hunting parks established by the Saxons was arranged under special Forest Law. Savernake and Chute Forests are small remnants of such areas.



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Highclere Castle Grade 1 Listed



Land Management

During the 13th century a population explosion resulted in more intensive land use with new areas being cleared and ploughed, as shown by the many terraces or “strip lynchets” visible on the downland slopes today. The numerous small, irregular shaped fields or assarts which are common in the east of the AONB are also evidence of hunger for land at this time and represent clearance of areas of forest and encroachment onto heathland.

Famines and Black Death reduced population levels in the 14th century and altered the social and economic balance of society resulting in the consolidation and enclosure of land using hedges, banks and ditches. This and low corn prices lead to reversion of arable land to grass, particularly on the thin downland soils and the development of a wood industry. Towns such as Marlborough became important textile centres, while the production of clothing yarns was an ongoing activity in many villages.

Later Parliamentary enclosures during the 18th and 19th centuries resulted in larger farm sizes, large, rectangular field systems and the conversion of pasture back to arable once more. The 18th century also saw the wealthy financing the development of “polite”

Canals, railways and roads

Communication through this otherwise isolated area improved significantly in the early 19th century, including the construction of Turnpike roads and, in 1810, the Kennet and Avon Canal. The Wiltshire and Berkshire Canal was another important waterway. The construction of railways initiated an increase in dairy farming in the lower lying landscapes. In the 1970s most freight began to shift to roads. The M4 and A34 are the area's largest modern roads and contrast with the relatively narrow roads that otherwise characterise the area.

20th century mechanisation and intensification of agriculture has led to a continuation of ploughing on the downs and the removal of hedgerows and field boundaries, creating the very large scale, open landscape we see today

Kennet and Avon Canal

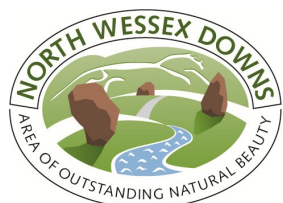


The Built Environment

The North Wessex Downs contain over 4,000 Listed Buildings. Buildings protected through listing take many different forms and reflect nearly a thousand years of human settlement. As well as grand country houses, the area's market towns are enriched by the town houses of wealthy merchants and its villages by many splendid medieval parish churches.

Listed buildings in the North Wessex Downs also include some spectacular and very early barns; locks and other structures associated with the Kennet and Avon Canal; milestones, roadside pumps and signs related to turnpike roads; and pillboxes built as part of the planned defence of Britain in the early phase of the Second World War.

The North Wessex Downs include 15 Registered Parks and Gardens. One of these, Highclere Castle (pictured above) is registered at Grade I, and four examples, Tottenham House, Purley Hall, Ashdown House and Inkpen House, are registered at II*. Although not on the national Register, many other areas of designed landscape, including historic parkland, gardens and cemeteries add significant local value, especially within and around some of the AONB's towns and larger villages.



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