

THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY



Photograph: Gary Pricor



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{ NORTH WESSEX
DOWNS
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Overview of The North Wessex Downs



Photograph: North Wessex Downs

The North Wessex Downs is a tranquil yet stunning landscape of rolling chalk downlands, forests, woods and dales. Beech woodland crowns the tops of many of the downs providing wonderful panoramic views for miles around. Thinly populated, the downs project a feeling of remoteness and timelessness. In the vast skies above, skylarks, lapwings and majestic birds of prey can be seen.

The world famous Uffington White Horse and Avebury Stone circle are located on the Ridgeway path running across the north of the region along with many other ancient barrows and hill forts.

Close to major conurbations, the Downs is the ideal place to get away from it all and enjoy the freedom of the countryside while respecting the environment. There are many footpaths, horse riding trails and cycle paths criss-crossing the landscape and taking in many of the best views and ancient monuments. If you prefer to travel by water you can hire a canal boat or go canoeing along the Kennet and Avon Canal.

The North Wessex Downs has a great industrial heritage. At the Crofton Pumping Station on the Kennet and Avon Canal, you can see the world's oldest steam engines or visit the only working windmill in Wessex at Wilton. There are also fine country houses. Highclere Castle (Downton Abbey) has impressive staterooms, an Egyptian exhibition and wonderful grounds to walk.

The picturesque market towns and villages of the Downs have much to offer. If you like browsing antiques there are lots of dealers in Marlborough, Hungerford and Pewsey. For those with an interest in history there are fascinating museums and visitor centres in Devizes, Pewsey, Wantage and Whitchurch. During the summer, many of the towns and some of the larger villages have music and arts festivals, carnivals plus special events around Christmas.



Photograph: North Wessex Downs



Photograph: Anne Seth



Photograph: David Crosby



Photograph: Abby George



Landscape and Nature

The North Wessex Downs is a dramatic landscape with rolling chalk downlands, forests, woods and dales. Open expansive views are punctuated by clumps of beech woodland crowning the downland summits, forming prominent landmarks. Sparsely populated, the downs possess a strong sense of remoteness and timelessness.

The ancient Ridgeway runs along the northern scarp of the downs and is peppered with barrow sites and hill forts, the world famous chalk-cut figure of the Uffington White Horse and even passing through the Avebury World Heritage Site.

Grazed for centuries by sheep and rabbits, the grassland of the downs supports a wide array of wildlife including rare butterflies such as the Marsh Fritillary, Chalkhill Blue and Silver Spotted Skipper. Chalk grassland is one of the most biologically rich and diverse habitats in the UK with over 40 species of flowering plants recorded in a single square metre. This includes rare orchids and wonderfully named plants like the Devil's-bit Scabious, Lady's Bedstraw or Kidney Vetch. In the vast open skies above the downs, skylarks, lapwings and majestic birds of prey can be seen.

The extensive woodlands of Savernake and West Woods provide peacefulness and seclusion in contrast to the remoteness of the nearby open chalk downs. Savernake is ancient woodland of oak and beech established in the 11th century as a royal hunting forest and now designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The chalk downs form an imposing backdrop to the flat, low-lying vales. The Vale of Pewsey separates the two main chalk upland blocks. Belts of willow, alder and scrub line the watercourses that thread across the vales, the streams, waterside pastures and woodlands forming a lush wetland landscape of considerable ecological value.



Photograph: Dave Gray

Places to visit before you leave

Savernake Forest

Extensive (2750 acre) ancient oak and beech forest. Visit the Grand Avenue of beeches planted by Capability Brown, the Big Belly Oak and other veteran trees and try to see (or hear) crossbills, hawfinches and even a nightjar.

[WEB LINK](#)

Wittenham Clumps

Two distinctive round hills topped with 18th century beech trees give a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside and the nearby historic town of Dorchester on Thames. There is a hillfort on Castle Hill, with earthworks dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages. The hills can be seen from miles around and are popular with local people for kite flying

and weekend walks. Just a short walk away are Days Lock on the river Thames and Dorchester Abbey.

[WEB LINK](#)

Watership Down

The Down became famous, first from Richard Adams's book Watership Down about a group of rabbits, then the animated film accompanied by Art Garfunkel's song 'Bright Eyes'. Rabbits can still be found on the Down along with rare butterflies such as the Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper. The Down is a well-known beauty spot and is well used by walkers. Stunning views from Woodcott Down and Ladle Hill contrast with the picturesque Hampshire villages of St. Mary Bourne and Binley.

The Living Rainforest

No need to travel the world to experience the delights of a rainforest as surprisingly there is one on our doorstep. Located at Hampstead Norreys, The Living Forest's tropical glasshouses are packed with over 700 species of plants and animals normally found in exotic locations. A great day out for children, who can watch birds, butterflies and lizards roam free in their natural habitat.

[WEB LINK](#)



White Horse Hill

Situated on the northern escarpment of the downs, the hill is world-famous for its stylised Bronze-Age chalk White Horse. Just below the White Horse the last Ice Age has left a dry valley with rippled sides known as Giant's Steps – a must for landscape photographers. On top of the hill is an Iron Age fort with a rampart and ditch. The fort is the highest point in Oxfordshire and on a clear day gives a view of six counties.

[WEB LINK](#)

Photograph: Jon Cruise

Landscape and Nature

Pewsey Downs National Nature Reserve

A wonderful sweep of chalk downland located to the north of the Pewsey Vale. The reserve covers three hills and includes Alton Barnes chalk white horse cut into the hillside. The reserve offers great opportunities for wildlife photography with a landscape views stretching across the Vale of Pewsey to Salisbury Plain. While you are there, also look out for the Sarsen stones, known locally as 'Grey Weathers'. Other magnificent examples of chalk downland can be found at Cherhill Down, Barbury Castle, Seven Barrows at Lambourn, Walbury Hill and Beacon Hill.

Visit our interactive map and select 'Chalk Downs' -

[WEB LINK](#)

West Woods

Located to the south west of Marlborough, West Woods are famous for their spectacular display of bluebells in May and early June. The woods are almost entirely made up of beech trees and are very popular with walkers and wildlife photographers. Bluebell woods can also be found at Collingbourne and Coldridge Woods, Hailey Wood in the grounds of Ashdown House and in Brightwalton. A little earlier in the year in February, you can see the glorious snowdrop display at Welford Park.

[WEB LINK](#)

Rare Habitats and Wildlife Sites

The North Wessex Downs are home to some very special wildlife sites, many designated as 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest'. A must for the wildlife enthusiast who likes to get off the beaten track. Rack Marsh is a fine old wet meadow characteristic of the Lambourn Valley in days gone by, with considerable botanical interest. Full of rushes and sedges, it is possible to find such plants as early marsh orchids and Water Avens. Abandoned lime workings at Old Burghclere are now a refuge for rare flowers and butterflies. Kintbury newt ponds and the watermeadows of Freeman's Marsh and Stonebridge Lane can be found along the Kennet Valley. 'Commons' dating from the Medieval period are a great place to walk, including those at Inkpen, Ashampstead, Snelsmore and Bucklebury.

[WEB LINK](#)

Letcombe Valley

Letcombe Valley has one of only two chalk streams in Oxfordshire. The clear waters of this rare habitat are home to some unusual and interesting wildlife including Bullhead fish, Brook Lamprey (a primitive jawless fish) and Water Vole. The chalk streams of the Kennet, Lambourn, Pang and Og also flow through the North Wessex Downs. Meanwhile, watercress is still grown by the River Bourne in North Hampshire.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: Mark Somerville

Outdoor Activities

The terrain of the North Wessex Downs provides many ideal locations and routes for a wide range of outdoor pursuits. The numerous footpaths, trails and bridleways give easy access to the beautiful countryside for walking, cycling and horse riding. For example the Three Downs Link is a multi-user bridle path connecting the two national trails of the South Downs Way and The Ridgeway. En route you will enjoy mile after mile of open chalk downland, crossing Watership Down and heading North towards Marlborough and the hill forts of the Ridgeway before heading South again towards Hungerford.

Within easy reach of major conurbations, but remote in its feel, the North Wessex Downs are the ideal place to enjoy country pursuits while

respecting the environment. Kite flying is very popular on the Ridgeway, Wittenham Clumps and many other Downland locations. There are horse riding trails with minimal contact with roads, taking in many of the best views and ancient monuments. Alternatively, check out the North Wessex Downs on the 1SW Adventure Map to find off road cycle trails, graded according to your level of skills and experience.

[WEB LINK](#)

If you like messing around in boats you can hire a canal boat or go kayaking along the Kennet and Avon canal, which runs through the middle of the North Wessex Downs.

The 'Rose of Hungerford', run by the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, offers 2-3 hour trips from Easter to October. Further along you can visit the historic Crofton Pumping Station or simply walk the scenic towpath.

For those who like country sports there is game shooting and deer stalking at Hungerford Hall, or a shooting school at Barbury Castle. Alternatively you can enjoy a day's fly fishing or coarse fishing on the River Kennet at Barton Court and Aldermaston Mill, or on the River Lambourn (we recommend you use a professional guide). Why not visit the Lambourn Valley Open day on Good Friday when over 30 horse trainers open their yards to the public?

Places to visit before you leave

The Ridgeway

Some of the most dramatic scenery of the Ridgeway National Trail passes through the North Wessex Downs. This is an ancient route used since prehistoric times by travellers, herdsman and soldiers.

For walkers, horse riders and cyclists it is the perfect location to get away from it all in this busy part of England. The climbs are not too strenuous, but the views are very dramatic. It is the ideal trail for both long distance treks and day trips.

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Horse Riding

The North Wessex Downs is a wonderful landscape for horse riding, taking in some of the most remote locations and finest views and escaping the pressures of modern life. The Pewsey Vale Riding Centre offers trail rides along the Ridgeway, plus day rides to other locations. Other riding schools and equestrian centres can be found at Southill Stables in Aldbourne, Little Hidden Farm near Hungerford, Cunetio at Mildenhall, Cullinghood in Pangbourne or the Blewbury Riding Centre. For information on horse-friendly accommodation or other equine facilities contact the British Horse Society.

[WEB LINK](#)

Game Shooting at Hungerford Park

For those who enjoy country sports there is a full programme of day shoots throughout the year at Hungerford Park. The estate offers driven shoots of mixed pheasant and partridge plus deer stalking. For a simulated shooting experience, try Hilldrop Farm near Ramsbury or Barbury Shooting School.

[WEB LINK](#)

Lambourn Valley Way

The Lambourn Valley Way starts at the Uffington White Horse and follows the River Lambourn for almost 30 kilometres to Newbury. Lambourn is a Special Area of Conservation –the highest level of protection – for its very special chalkstream wildlife. The route is well sign posted with waymark discs and fingerposts and takes in the picturesque villages of East Garston, Great Shefford and Boxford. The terrain is easy going, with a gradual drop in height of 560 feet from west to east.

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The Kennet and Avon Canal

The Kennet and Avon Canal has been developed as a popular heritage tourism destination for boating, canoeing, fishing, walking and cycling, and is also important for wildlife conservation. You can hire canal boats for longer visits or canoe down the canal. Along the way you will find fascinating places to visit, including Crofton Beam Engine and Pumping Station, historic pubs such as the Dundas Arms at Kintbury or wharf-side cafes in Pewsey and Devizes.

[WEB LINK](#)

Racing Yards and 'Valley of the Racehorse'

The Wessex Downs have many links to horse racing and eventing. The Lambourn Valley is one of the major horse racing centres in the UK. On Good Friday every year over 30 trainers open their yards to the public. Alternatively, get up early and watch the horses being ridden out on West Down, near Beckhampton, have a day out at Newbury Racecourse, or visit the Barbury International Eventing Show in early July.

[WEB LINK](#)

Watership Down and Whitchurch

The Watership Down Trail is an invigorating cycle ride which takes in some of Hampshire's finest scenery. The route begins on a quiet country lane out of Kingsclere, followed by a challenging off-road climb to the top of Ladle Hill. The route continues along the ridge of Watership Down, south past North Oakley, through Ibworth and off road back to Kingsclere. Choose between a 9-mile or 17-mile trail.

Whitchurch off-road cycle trail is a challenging trail covering many of the places that were also an inspiration for Richard Adams' 'Watership Down'. Stunning views from Woodcott Down and Ladle Hill contrast with the picturesque Hampshire villages of St. Mary Bourne and Binley.

[WEB LINK](#)

White Horses

The White Horse trail is a 90-mile walk providing the best vantage points for viewing all of Wiltshire's 8 White Horses cut into the chalk hills. In addition the route takes in other historic and prehistoric locations, including Avebury, Silbury Hill and the Kennet Long Barrow. You can try and view all 8 White Horses in one go, or do the walk in stages on separate visits. Slightly further afield in Oxfordshire, the prehistoric Uffington White Horse sits alongside Dragon Hill, where legend has it that a bare patch of chalk shows where St George spilled the dragon's blood.

[WEB LINK](#)

Swindon to Marlborough Railway Path

The Path follows the old railway line (closed in 1967) from the Coate Water Country Park to Marlborough. The path is ideal for walking or cycling with gentle slopes and magnificent views of the North Wessex Downs. The Friends of the Railway Path group offers opportunities to get involved in maintaining the Path, with activities such as hedgelaying and wildlife walks.



Photograph: Anne Seth

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.

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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



Photograph: North Wessex Downs

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.

[WEB LINK](#)

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.

[WEB LINK](#)

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

The Daily Telegraph



Photograph: Anne Seth

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. Dotted the landscape are ancient burial mounds or Tumuli, some topped with Beech Trees, also known locally as Hedgehogs!

[WEB LINK](#)

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.

[WEB LINK](#)





Photograph: Peter Orr

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.

[WEB LINK](#)

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.

[WEB LINK](#)

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.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: Lord Carnarvon

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.

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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.

[WEB LINK](#)



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.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: Brian Beggs



Photograph: Anne Seth

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.

[WEB LINK](#)

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.

[WEB LINK](#)



Towns and villages

Within and close by the North Wessex Downs there are many picturesque market towns and villages with much to offer the day or weekend visitor. If you're interested in antiques there are lots of interesting shops and dealers in the Marlborough, Hungerford and Pewsey 'Triangle'. The close proximity of these towns and villages means you can browse lots of different antique dealers in a day.

For those with an interest in history there are fascinating museums and visitor centres in

Devizes, Pewsey, Wantage and Whitchurch. They give an insight into the way of life and landscape of the area from prehistoric times to the present day and are well worth a day out. The Kennet and Avon Canal passes through Devizes, Hungerford, Pewsey and Kintbury, giving them a shared industrial heritage which is now a focal point for walking, cycling and boating.

The market towns all have their distinctive character with independent shops, superb

pubs, restaurants and plenty of B&Bs and hotels. During the summer many of the towns and some of the larger villages have music and arts festivals, carnivals plus special events around Christmas.

The Villages of the North Wessex Downs have their own distinct architectural character and include a high proportion of listed properties. In these villages you will find atmospheric Medieval churches dating back to the 12th century plus there is a wonderful Roman villa

site with mosaic at Littlecote near Ramsbury. A mix of building styles can be found, mostly influenced by the geology on which the North Wessex Downs sits. From the use of Sarsen stone in the Marlborough Downs and Pewsey Vale and chalk block cottages of the Berkshire Downs, to the eye catching 'Flint Knapping' of the Bourne Valley. More information can be found in a leaflet called 'Diversity in Stone', available to download here.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: Abby George

Marlborough

Marlborough is a very attractive and bustling market town on the River Kennet. It is packed with antique shops, galleries and independent fashion retailers. If you're looking for collectable art, old books or just like to browse for antiques then Marlborough is the place to come. Once you get here you will find lots of places to eat and drink and things to do. And if you are a jazz fan you will not want to miss the International Music Festival in July featuring up to 120 bands. As the Daily Telegraph puts it:

"Each year the exquisite market town of Marlborough becomes a mini New Orleans"

[WEB LINK](#)

Pewsey

For a village, Pewsey is packed with things to see and do. The Kennet and Avon Canal passes through the conurbation and at the pretty wharf you can stop for tea and watch the narrow boats go by. In the town you will find a statue of King Alfred the Great, who owned lands in the area and there's a wonderful Heritage Centre based in a Victorian Foundry which showcases Pewsey life through the ages. There are many antique shops in the vicinity, a music festival in August and carnival/feast in September, which culminates in an illuminated procession.

[WEB LINK](#)

Wantage

Located just to the North of the Ridgeway lies the historic market town of Wantage, famous as the birthplace of King Alfred the Great, and you will find a marble statue in the main square in his honour. The Vale and Downland Museum is a great place to discover more about the Downs and there are over 3000 objects on display, many hands-on experiences and a large model railway. Wantage has its own Arts festival in Summer plus the town is packed with many pubs, restaurants and shops. And if you're interested in literature you may be fascinated to learn that Thomas Hardy's 'Jude the Obscure' was set in nearby Letcombe Bassett where 'Arabella's Cottage' can still be seen.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: Pam Cruise

Hungerford

Situated on the Kennet and Avon Canal, this historic town has much to offer the visitor. The town is famous for its antique shops and independent retailers. For lunch or dinner you will find a wide range of vibrant pubs and restaurants. There are popular events throughout the year including a 3 week arts festival in summer and a Victorian Extravaganza evening in December. Just 5 minutes from the centre you can take a stroll or have a picnic on Freeman's Marsh or the ancient Hungerford Common. Hungerford is now the only place in the country that celebrates the annual Hocktide festival, an English Medieval tradition celebrated on the second Tuesday after Easter Sunday. The festival dates from the 14th Century when John of Gaunt gave the rights of free grazing and fishing to local 'commoners'. It has celebrated the granting of commoners' rights for over 600 years.

[WEB LINK](#)

Great Shefford

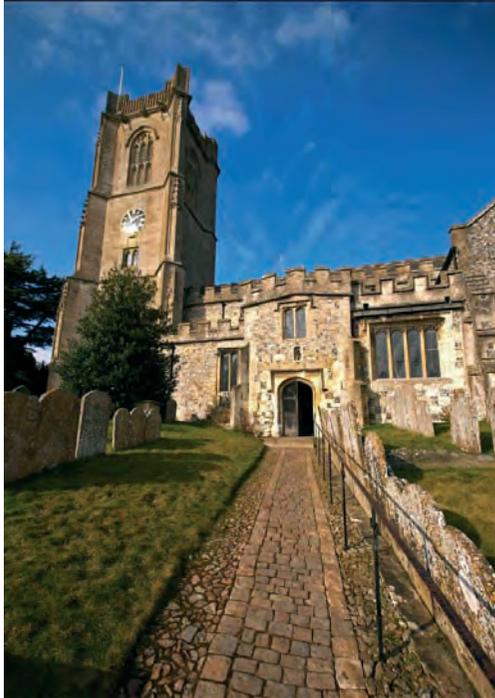
Located by the river Lambourn, this pretty village has many lovely centuries old and thatched houses to view. The 13th Century parish church of St Mary is architecturally interesting as one of only two round-tower churches in Berkshire.

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Kintbury

The picturesque village of Kintbury is regarded as one of the most beautiful villages in England and one of the most sought after to live in. Located beside the Kennet and Avon Canal, one of the few remaining horse-drawn barges can be seen at weekends during the summer, pulled by Cross-Shire horses Freddie and Monty. The village was likely first inhabited in the Middle Stone Age, with evidence of Saxon and Roman settlement. If you like to sample local produce why not try the local Ciderniks cider which can be purchased in the local shops and pubs.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: Stan Green

Aldbourn and Ramsbury

Aldbourn and Ramsbury are two pretty villages located 10 kilometres North East of Marlborough in a valley south of the Lambourn Downs. Aldbourn medieval church of St Michael is a Grade I listed building and well worth a visit. Plus the Village has more recent fame as the real base during WWII for Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division who featured in the award winning television series 'Band of Brothers'.

Ramsbury boasts its own Brewery and an award-winning tea company and within its parish you can visit the impressive Littlecote Roman Villa with its outstanding Orpheus mosaic. There is also a beautiful 13th Century church complete with its own ghost.

[WEB LINK](#)

Devizes

Devizes is a charming town to visit with over 500 listed buildings, some of which date back to the 16th Century. The Kennet and Avon canal passes through the town and at Caen Hill you will find a spectacular flight of 29 locks. The town boasts 2 museums and a free visitor centre at Wadworth Brewery. The Wiltshire Heritage Museum has the finest Bronze Age archaeology collection in England while the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust Museum tells the story of the construction and restoration of the canal. The Brewery visitor centre provides a fascinating insight into the brewing process and an insight into the lives of the Shire horses that still make deliveries in the town.

[WEB LINK](#)



Photograph: North Wessex Downs

Lambourn

Lambourn takes its name from centuries-old sheep breeding in the area. More recently Lambourn has become synonymous with the horse racing industry with over 50 yards and 2,000 horses based around the town. The springy downland and large open spaces are ideal terrain for gallops. At Easter every year Lambourn Open Day gives access to many of the yards, and there are events and activities for all the family in the afternoon.

[WEB LINK](#)

Goring and Stratley

Located close to the picturesque 'Goring Gap' on the Thames are two villages either side of the river – Goring in Oxfordshire and Stratley in Berkshire. The villages are situated at the only meeting place of three ancient routes: The Ridgeway, Icknield Way and River Thames. From the bridge across the Thames you get some wonderful scenic photographic opportunities or you can just stand and admire the view. In the villages you will find shops, pubs, a 12th Century church, places to stay and some very nice riverside walks.

[WEB LINK](#)

Whitchurch

The town is believed to have taken its name from early church built of white chalk. Situated at the head of the river Test, Whitchurch has many listed buildings and the UK's only working Silk Mill. Built in 1800, the mill is open for visitors and features the original mill wheel and Victorian machinery plus beautiful fabrics on the looms. The shop sells silk products made at the mill and there is a tea room for refreshments.

[WEB LINK](#)

Food and Farming

More and more people are keen to sample local food and drink when visiting the North Wessex Downs. Eating, drinking and buying local produce is seen as an important part of appreciating the flavour and distinctiveness of an area. The Downs is fortunate in having some very high quality food producers who supply local restaurants, pubs and shops. Most of the market towns including Marlborough, Hungerford, Devizes and Wantage have their own community or farmers markets which showcase local produce and are great places just to visit.

[WEB LINK](#)





Market Days

If you've ever wanted to know where local food comes from, how it is grown, and ideas for cooking it, then visit one of the Farmer and Community Markets held every month in Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. This is one of the best ways to meet the people who grow superb fruit and vegetables, make delicious cheese, bread and preserves, and produce tasty meat. They are always happy to have a chat about their products.

In addition to Farmer and Community Markets, many towns and villages in the North Wessex Downs AONB have weekly street markets. There are also food events, such as the Hungerford Food Festival in September, or plenty of stalls at the Wiltshire Show in June and the Royal Berkshire show in September. Information about local farmers and food producers in the area can be found on our interactive map.

[WEB LINK](#)

Farm and Wildlife Experiences

You can see life on the farm at a number of places in and around the North Wessex Downs. Bucklebury, Finkley Down and Laverstoke Farm Parks, Four Kingdoms Farm, Cholderton Charlies and Roves Farm are open come rain or shine! Other farms welcome visitors during lambing season (generally March to May) and many more take part in Open Farm Sunday in mid June. Beale Park, the Nature Discovery Centre, Butterfly World and the Hawk Conservancy Trust can also offer an up close view of wildlife.

A Tipple (or Two!)

There are Vineyards in Littleton Parnell, Laverstoke Park Farm and Brightwell that are open to tours. Try cider and apple juice from producers like Ciderniks, the Lambourn Valley Cider Co., and Tutts Clump. A revival in real ale is good news for Butts, Ramsbury, Three Castles, Plain Ales, Wadworths and West Berks breweries. It is also notable that the chalk geology of the North Wessex Downs is remarkably similar to that of the Champagne region in France, so who knows if we may hear the popping of corks someday?

Meat

Farmland of the North Wessex Downs helps to rear some high quality meat. You can source wonderful sausages from pork reared at Welford Park or Brunskill beef from Francombe Farm. Family owned butchers like Walter Rose in Devizes, Bastable Brothers of Kintbury, Sumlens in Marlborough and Three Trees Farm at Chiseldon serve the best cuts. Many pubs and restaurants are known for sourcing local meat, especially the Pot Kiln in Frilsham where TV Chef Mike Robinson even runs a game and wild food cookery school.



Photograph: North Wessex Downs

Bread and Cakes

Award winning flour is milled at Doves Farm, Clarks of Wantage and also at the historic Wilton Windmill. Wonderful cakes and pastries can be found at small bakeries such as Marshalls of Pewsey, Great Bedwyn Bakery and the Old Farmhouse Bakery in Kintbury. Why not try Lardy Cake, a Wiltshire speciality, or the Marlborough Bun. To unleash your creative side, Cakes by Cocochoux offers cake baking and decorating courses.

[WEB LINK](#)

Art and Literature

The landscape of the North Wessex Downs has left an impression on many artists and writers throughout history. There are several Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) paintings of the North Wessex Downs around Burghclere and Beacon Hill. Other work includes the series of 19 paintings influenced by the Great War which are in the Sandham Memorial Chapel, Burghclere.

Eric Ravilious (1903-1944) painted the White Horses at Uffington and Westbury as part of a series intended for illustrations in a book. Paul Nash (1889-1946) had a special affinity for the Wittenham Clumps which he first encountered as a teenager. He was immediately caught by their atmospheric shapes and mystical associations and called them 'a beautiful legendary country'.

Many artists continue to take inspiration from the North Wessex Downs. Anna Dillon recently painted the 'Icons of the North Wessex Downs' series, while the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes is home to 'Cartoon for a Stained Glass Window' by John Piper, among other works.

[WEB LINK](#)

Photograph: Peter Orr

Icons of the North Wessex Downs – Available as Greetings Cards

[WEB LINK](#)



Illustrations : Anna Dillon

Numerous authors have written about the area and perhaps the most famous novel is 'Watership Down' (1972) by Richard Adams.

Thomas Hardy visited and knew the area around Wantage. Arabella's cottage in *Jude the Obscure* is in Letcombe Bassett and Fawley is depicted as Marygreen. John Betjeman (1906-1984) spent much time in the North Wessex Downs and the lines about the Upper Lambourn summarise the landscape well:

*Feathery ash in leathery Lambourn
Waves above the sarsen stone
And Edwardian plantations
So coniferously moan
As to make the swelling downland
Far-surrounding, seem their own.*

Many other authors have been influenced by these surroundings including Agatha Christie who is buried at Cholsey, Jane Austen, who spent much time in the area and writes of the landscapes in many novels, and Thomas Hughes who based the semi autobiographical 'Tom Brown's Schooldays' at Uffington where he had lived.

Photograph: Andrew Perrott



Landscape

This is pure downland, the breasted hills curved as if under the influence of a great melody. It is beautiful, quiet and unrenowned and a most visibly ancient landscape.

Edward Thomas

Jefferies often thought of the sea upon these hills. *The eye expects it. There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their solitude... They are never abrupt, but, flowing on and on, make a type of infinity... they have a hugeness of undivided surface for which there is no comparison on earth.*

From Richard Jefferies: His life and Work (1909), Edward Thomas

The slopes of the downs, if they have general forms, are continually changing and interchanging in localities, assuming new and strange shapes, charming and surprising with their grace and exquisiteness... for ever reflecting the mood of the heavens...

Alfred Williams

At length the snow ceases and the wind drops to a whisper; then over the hill-top the lapwings start up again and wheel in phantom flight, shrieking their weird night call.

From The Woodland Life (1897), Edward Thomas

The Ridgeway

A broad green track runs for many a long, long mile across the downs, now following the ridges, now winding past at the foot of a grassy slope, then stretching away through a cornfield and fallow.

From Wildlife in a Southern Country (1879), Richard Jefferies

... at once it [the Ridgeway] strikes you out and away from the habitable world in a splendid purposeful manner, running along the highest ridge of the Downs, a broad green ribbon of turf ...

Out on that almost trackless expanse of billowy Downs such a track is in some sort humanly companionable; it really seems to lead you by the hand.

From Pagan Papers (1898), Kenneth Grahame



Photograph: Steve Davison



Photograph: North Wessex Downs

History and Culture

*Tombs of endless storms and winters simple, rugged, and sublime,
Monuments of kings and heroes, undeciphered and undated,
Sacramental shrines and temples greyer than the hairs of Time;
Where the hills are strown with relics of old warriors and sages,
Carved with strange and runic features, cleft with furrows long and deep,
Great with human recollection of the dark and troubled ages,
And the battles of the fathers who amid their ruins sleep...*

From About Wiltshire, (1909), Alfred Williams

They heard of the Great Barrows, and the green mounds, and the stone-rings upon the hills and in the hollows among the hills. Sheep were bleating in flocks. Green walls and white walls rose. There were fortresses on the heights.

From The Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien

The Marlborough Downs

*I who have walked along her downs in dreams,
And known her tenderness and felt her might,
And sometimes by a her meadows and her streams
Have drunk deep-storied secrets of delight*

From Marlborough and Other Poems (1919), Charles Hamilton Sorley



Photograph: David White

Avebury

'Wonderfully surprised at the sight of those vast stones of which I had never heard before.'

John Aubrey, 17th-century antiquarian and author of Brief Lives, who took King Charles I to visit Avebury in the summer of 1663.

The great stones ... were always wonderful and disquieting, and, as I saw them, I shall always remember them Their colouring and pattern, their patina of golden lichen, all enhanced their strange forms and mystical significance.

From Picture History, Paul Nash

Uffington White Horse

What is truly notable about the White Horse is not that people at some time in the ancient past took the trouble to cut it into the hillside...but that continuously for over twenty centuries others have made the effort to maintain it.

Bill Bryson, Introduction to The English Landscape (2000)

Wildlife

*Glad I was to feel the light, and hear the hum
Of bees, and smell the drying grass
And the sweet mint . . .*

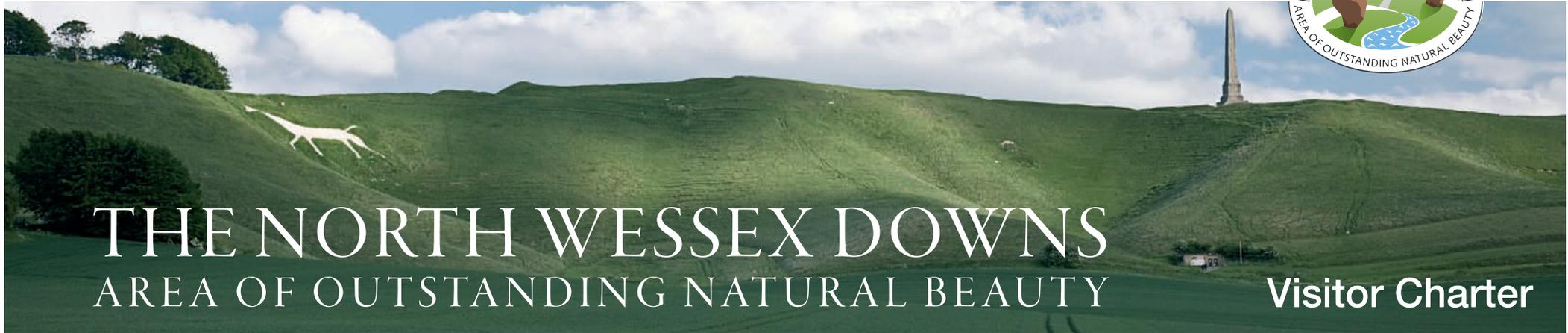
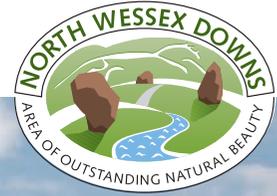
From The Other, Edward Thomas

*Their cry is the one sound under the sky.
They alone move, now low, now high,
And merrily they cry
To the mischievous Spring sky,
Plunging earthward, tossing high...*

From Two Peewits, Edward Thomas



Photograph: Bumblebee Conservation



Try local, buy local

Visit the many farm shops, farmer's markets, pubs, cafes and shops across the North Wessex Downs. By buying our tasty local produce you'll be supporting the local rural economy.



Give the car a rest

The North Wessex Downs has 2855km miles of footpaths, bridleways and byways – great ways to see the area without adding to the traffic.

Use public transport or reduce your mileage by exploring near where you are staying – there are lots of fantastic places to discover right on your doorstep.



Reduce, reuse, recycle

Please help us reduce waste by avoiding overly packaged goods and remembering your re-usable shopping bag.

Use the local recycling facilities and keep the North Wessex Downs beautiful by taking your rubbish home.



Switch off, save energy and water

Help us reduce energy use and CO₂ emissions by turning off lights and appliances when you don't need them. Enjoy the dark skies of the North Wessex Downs!

The North Wessex Downs are home to internationally rare chalk streams that provide very special habitats and valuable water resources – help us conserve the streams by not wasting precious water



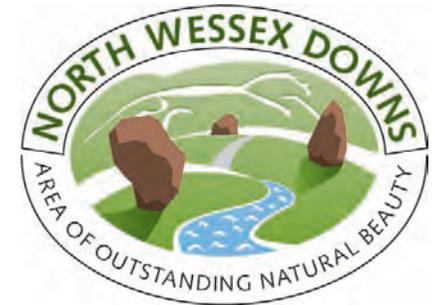
Show you care

When you're planning your next trip to the North Wessex Downs try to choose businesses which are environmentally friendly such as the Our Land members who are part of the North Wessex Downs Tourism Network.





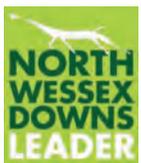
Photograph: Mark Somerville



North Wessex Downs AONB Office
Units 3-4
Denford Manor
Lower Denford
Hungerford
Berkshire
RG17 0UN

Telephone: 01488 685440

E-mail: info@northwessexdowns.org.uk



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