Welcome to the North Wessex Downs

Escape to the country
Retreat from the stresses and strains of everyday life

A guide to the landscape, history, attractions and leisure activities of the North Wessex Downs – an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
The North Wessex Downs AONB may feel tranquil and remote but it is surprisingly easy to visit. Several major conurbations border the AONB including Reading, Basingstoke and Swindon and it is within easy reach of west London.

The area is well-served by the road network and is bisected by two major arteries – the M4 and the A34. However, before jumping in your car remember that increasing road traffic is undermining the tranquility of the downland. Spilling the very thing that attracts many visitors to the downs in the first place.

Therefore, please consider taking public transport whenever possible. The Downs is accessible from three mainline railways with stations at many of the large towns and villages. Innovative bus services are available too including the Ridgeway Explorer Bus that helps walkers complete linear sections of the famous route. Several dial-on-demand bus services, where passengers can book a bus to pick them up at a custom location, exist too.

“THIS IS PURE DOWNLAND, THE BREASTED HILLS CURVED AS IF UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF A GREAT MELODY. IT IS A BEAUTIFUL, QUIET, AND UNRENOVED AND A MOST VISIBLY ANCIENT LANDSCAPE”
– EDWARD THOMAS 1878-1917
Welcome to the North Wessex Downs...

The rolling North Wessex Downs is recognized as one of England’s finest landscapes, (it’s an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)) and we hope this pack will help you make the most of your stay in this remote and tranquil landscape lying at the hub of the southern chalk downlands.

The area has a rich archaeological heritage, picturesque villages and towns, sparkling chalk streams and peaceful, open downland dotted with woodland for everyone to enjoy. The North Wessex Downs has always been popular with those who want to escape to the country. The area is not only an AONB, but its lack of urban intrusion and sparse road network means the area is rich in a wide variety of wildlife and habitats, and this is reflected in the designation of 66 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Turn the pages to discover more about this exceptional area – the symbols on the right will help guide you through.
You’ll enjoy a refreshing change of perspective as you look out on the outstanding landscape of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The North Wessex Downs is an ancient landscape full of dramatic scarp slopes, remote open downland, majestic old woodland and quiet sheltered valleys. It’s a mysterious landscape too, and if you want to unlock its secrets you must look below the surface. Get under its skin, so to speak, because despite the contrasts the landscape is united by a single underlying element – chalk. About 65 million years ago much of Britain was covered in a rich soup of shallow warm seawater swimming with tiny creatures. The shells of these creatures sank to the ocean floor and, packed tightly layer upon layer, eventually formed chalk.

Chalk erodes slowly and drains well and it’s these characteristics that make the North Wessex Downs so special. It’s a classic downland landscape of high, gentle slopes and v-shaped dry valleys with broad, sweeping arable fields and, on the steeper ground,
grassland that hasn’t changed for centuries. Some chalk is softer than others and there’s a soft band that runs right across the north of the region. This has eroded faster than the harder chalk to the south leaving a striking scarp slope that plunges down into the Vale of the White Horse. Across the top of the scarp runs ‘the oldest routeway in England’, the Ridgeway.

The one overwhelming sense that you’ll experience whilst roaming across the downlands is that of remoteness. The exposed downland slopes and lack of water led people to settle lower down, strung along a few key river valleys and, even today, the lack of major roads and large towns lends the area an extraordinarily tranquil atmosphere that sets it apart.

However, it is easy to forget that this is a managed landscape, and one that has been shaped as much by man as by geology. Originally, the entire area would have been wildwood, but much of that was cleared about 4,000 years ago for arable crops and grassland for grazing sheep and cattle; a management style that still continues today.

Some areas of woodland have remained and the largest is the Savernake Forest, at the heart of the AONB. Paradoxically, this magnificent ancient woodland actually owes its survival to man since it was decreed a royal hunting forest by the Saxons and was ruthlessly safeguarded against public settlement for centuries.

Where there is chalk you will also usually find deposits of flint and borders of clay; and both have positively influenced the landscape of the North Wessex Downs. Flint is an excellent building material and you’ll see hundreds of old cottages, farmhouses and even churches all built from this indigenous material instilling in each building a sense of place.

On the eastern boundary of the AONB, on a bed of low lying clays and silt, lies a medieval mosaic of settlements, farmland and pockets of ancient woodland. The rich soil was more suited to settlement than the high downs and the mix of open farmland, wood pasture, areas of parkland and connecting hedgerows is of significant ecological interest.

There’s one final rare landscape that’s been both familiar and, at the same time, alien to people of the North Wessex Downs for thousands of years and you can still enjoy it today. Next time you’re out on the downs on a cloudless evening, look up, beyond the horizon to the night sky and you’ll enjoy a pristine view of the bright stars and planets beyond our solar system, without the orange taint of street lighting polluting your view. This is one of the few places in our crowded country that you can still enjoy this bejewelled panorama, and, like all the other glorious terrestrial landscapes of the North Wessex Downs AONB, it must be protected.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- The Saxon name of Wessex reveals the area’s literary connections. Thomas Hardy used it as a setting for *Jude the Obscure* and evocative descriptions of the landscape are portrayed in *Watership Down*.
- Set in a peaceful village location, Avebury stone circle is much more accessible than nearby Stonehenge.
- Silbury Hill is the largest prehistoric artificial mound in Europe, probably constructed in the Bronze Age, around 2,600BC.
What is a henge?

A henge is a prehistoric monument consisting of a circle of stone or wooden uprights.

The history of the North Wessex Downs is an elaborate tapestry tightly woven with just two common threads – the natural landscape and man’s attempts to manage it through the ages.

This area is perhaps the richest and most extraordinary ancient landscape in Europe, and is littered with evidence of the peoples that settled here. Every field, wood, hamlet and track is a link with the past and, if you know how to read the signs, they can help you unravel some of the mysteries of the communities that made them.

Generations of archaeologists have tried to separate fact from legend, but one thing is for certain, people have lived here for a very, very long time. There was a small population here up to 13,000 years ago when the area would have been covered in forest and Britain was still joined to Europe. We know very little about these people, but it is believed they may have cleared some of the forest and practiced a basic form of agriculture.

In about 3,500 BC the Neolithic tribes arrived in Britain from mainland Europe and brought with them advanced farming techniques from the Middle East, and sophisticated religion. They began to clear the forests so that they could rear livestock and grow arable crops, and they buried their dead in barrows. Most significantly they built the causewayed enclosures at Windmill Hill, Knap Hill and Rybury; and the huge henge enclosures at Marden and at Avebury World Heritage Site.

The Celtic invasion in about 600 BC brought powerful iron implements, lines of hillforts and established trade routes across Europe. Important hillforts in the area include Liddington Castle, Barbury Castle and Beacon Hill but there are many others for you to discover.

The Ridgeway, which runs across the northern length of the scarp is thought to have been part of a trading route from the Dorset coast to Norfolk where boats could be taken to Europe. You can still follow in the footsteps of our Celtic ancestors today, 1,000 feet up with fabulous views across open country.

A dramatic legacy of the Iron Age is the White Horse at Uffington, carved into the northern scarp face just below the Ridgeway. More routes were cut across the downs by the Romans, and by the time the Anglo Saxons arrived great swathes of grassland dominated the higher ground. The Saxons built massive earthwork territorial boundaries such as the Wansdyke, south of the Kennet. They also established the royal hunting forests of Savernake, Chute and Freemantle – protection that helped preserve them for centuries.

More arable land was turned into pasture by the Normans, who also introduced their open field system across parts of the downlands, and a population explosion during the 13th-century meant that more land was being put to the plough to feed hungry mouths. Some parts of the downland were terraced and you can still find evidence of these on some slopes. The Black Death in 1349 eased pressure on the land and many arable areas were converted to pasture as the wool trade took off and sheep became more valuable than corn.

From the 17th-century the wool trade went into steep decline and vast areas of grassland were ploughed up and planted with arable crops or clover. Sadly, this trend has continued, resulting in the loss of many natural habitats for rare species of flora and fauna.

Despite being largely rural, the industrial age didn’t bypass the area completely. The Kennet and Avon canal is an outstanding feat of engineering. Built between 1794 and 1810 it includes aqueducts, tunnels, bridges and lock flights.

More recent history is also carved into the chalk. The remains of World War II airfields still exist on the open downs.
The North Wessex Downs is a natural haven for wildlife and the broad range of countryside within the AONB provides a huge variety of valuable habitats.

Wildlife and habitat

From the chalk downlands to the forests and river valleys, there are many rare and threatened species that you can see during your visit. Sheep and rabbits traditionally graze the wide chalk downlands and they clip the grassland short, which stops it reverting back to woodland. This enables many wildflowers to thrive here, including early gentian, birdsfoot trefoil, pyramidal orchid and hairy violets. The rich mix of plantlife attracts insects and, during the summer months, you may be lucky enough to spot rare butterflies like the Adonis blue and the silver spotted skipper.

A healthy insect population is good for birds and you'll probably hear the loud chirruping of a skylark before you spot its tiny body flitting high up in the sky. A major initiative in the area is the Stone Curlew Project, run by conservationists with the help of local landowners, which is successfully increasing numbers of this very rare bird by improving habitat. You may be lucky enough to hear its eerie shrieking and wailing calls long into the night.

The clear fast-flowing chalk streams support a diverse range of plant and animal life including pea mussels, freshwater white clawed crayfish and the rare but poisonous water-dropwort. The historic water meadows alongside the River Kennet, where the river floods nearby grassland during the winter months, sustain patches of fen nettle and summer snowflake.

Ancient broadleaf woodlands are home to an enormous variety of wildlife, from vast swathes of spring bluebells to noisy woodpeckers. Mostly populated with oak and beech, the forests in the centre of the AONB are great places to see rare plants like the beautiful herb-paris, which is topped by a striking cross of eight golden stamens. Venture out at dusk, particularly in the autumn, and you should see small shadowy groups of roe and fallow deer through the trees. Other nocturnal creatures that are fun to watch flitting through the branches during the summer months are the many species of bat that roost in the forests. Rest assured that associations with Count Dracula are unfounded, but they are voracious – some can eat an astounding 3,000 insects in a single night!

Adonis blue butterfly – a rare species
- Restricted to chalk and limestone grassland, its numbers have declined by over 90 percent since 1950
- The main threat to the Adonis blue, because of its dependence on short vegetation, is changes in grazing intensity. Its distribution could be reduced rapidly if rabbit populations decline or grazing by livestock is reduced
- Recovery of colonies in southern England is estimated at 25 percent per decade, due to recovery of rabbits from myxomatosis and increased stock grazing.
For centuries the downs have been great sheep country and there are still plenty of farms producing succulent lamb reared on the herb-rich slopes. However, if you fancy something a little different, try cheese made from ewes’ milk. This has recently become hugely popular, and award-winning soft and hard styles are available locally.

Wiltshire is famous for its pigs. In earlier times Calne, which borders the AONB, was reputed to market the finest bacon in England. Local herds are still reared organically up on the downs today. Dairy cows do well on the lush lowland pastures and you can buy wonderful double cream, flavoured yoghurts, crème fraîche, cheese and ice cream direct from some farm shops.

Devizes Pie is a celebrated regional dish that contains bacon, tongue, veal, sweetbreads and hard-boiled eggs but every child’s favourite is Lardy Cake. Try one if you can, it’s a deliciously sticky, sweet pastry concoction made with dried fruit and lard. Vast arable fields dominate the North Wessex Downs and some farmers still have flour milled locally to make tasty bread, flapjacks, cookies and biscuits too good to resist.

The chalk valleys may be ‘dry’ but if you're looking for a good drink you’ve come to the right place. Try award-winning wine from local vineyards; the sparkling whites are especially impressive and regularly give our friends across the channel a run for their money.

Nothing completes a long walk on the downs better than a lengthy lunch in a lovely old country pub but make sure you try some of the traditional-style local ales like Dr Hexter’s Healer or Jester.

Excellent fruit and vegetables are grown in the lowlands and if you enjoy the country air, there are pick-your-own sites and farm shops dotted around the area.

The beauty of local honey is that its taste is rooted in the flora on which the bees feed so look out for different flavours as the landscape changes – a subtlety mass-produced honey just doesn’t have.
Visiting the remote North Wessex Downs is a fantastic way to escape to the great English countryside. If you enjoy birdwatching, cycling, walking, horse riding or just want to relax, you’ll have miles of open countryside to explore.

There is an extensive public rights of way network in place for enjoying the area on foot, horseback or bicycle. You can take it easy on one of the numerous woodland walks or flat riverside rambles but, if you’re feeling more energetic, why not tackle a long downland hike or a challenging cross-country ride? Reach the top of the downs, where the clouds race across never-ending skies, and you’ll experience breathtaking panoramic views over the surrounding countryside.

Nature reserves are wonderful places to spot rare animal and plant life and the National Nature Reserves of Fyfield Down and Pewsey Down are a couple of the best wildlife sites within the AONB, but you’ll find plenty more.

There are many great places to fish here. Anglers can try their luck on the Kennet, the Pang, the Lambourn and the Avon, or even on the Kennet and Avon canal – the restored waterway that links London with Bristol.

Novice and experienced shots alike are well catered for with many well-run commercial and syndicated shoots operating within the AONB. It’s not for everyone, but the shoots do play their part in the conservation of important woodlands and other semi-natural habitats.

Riders will be interested to learn that the Lambourn area is now the second most important centre for the racehorse industry in Britain, employing over 800 people directly, having an annual income of £20 million and providing its own micro-economy, with one third of the population employed locally.

Adrenalin junkies will be ‘stoked’ at the whole range of more extreme activities on offer from paragliding and all-terrain kiteboarding to canoeing down the K&A canal and relaxing high above the downs in a hot air balloon.

* Help to preserve this landscape by taking public transport when possible and by following the countryside code.

England’s oldest routeway

For at least 5,000 years people have walked or ridden the Ridgeway. Thought to be part of a much larger route that stretched from the Dorset coast to the Norfolk coast, it provided a path over the high ground, avoiding the wetter, more wooded springline villages below.

At 137km (85 miles) long, it is great for long distance hikes, but parts are also fun for day trips, or even just a couple of hours. Sheep grazing continues and a characteristic sight is the immaculately clipped grass tracks now used as gallops for training racehorses.

Many common birds such as finches can be found on the Ridgeway, together with more typical downland species like skylarks, yellowhammers and corn buntings. Hares can be spotted racing across open ground and both roe and fallow deer are found here.
There are prehistoric sites scattered all over the AONB, and a great starting point from which to explore is The Avebury World Heritage Site that accommodates the highest concentration of important Neolithic monuments in Europe. The mysterious wide stone circle and massive earthworks, thought to have been built about 4,500 years ago, are joined by an avenue of standing stones that leads to The Sanctuary, a second ceremonial site almost two miles away.

Nearby are West Kennet Long Barrow, a huge Neolithic tomb, and the peculiarly pudding-shaped Silbury Hill, which is the largest man-made prehistoric mound in Europe. A little further away is the ancient enclosure at Windmill Hill; believed to have been constructed much earlier, it may date back 6,000 years or more. Other ancient monuments not to be missed include the Ridgeway – England’s oldest route way – and the White Horse at Uffington.

Farmers’ Markets are held regularly at every major town and Marlborough also holds a cheese market, which dates back 600 years, in its impressive wide high street that is lined with Georgian houses. You can watch top jazz musicians from around the world perform here when the town hosts its International Jazz Festival during the summer months. If you’ve over-indulged on jazz or cheese and fancy a good walk, then Savernake Forest is within easy reach.

The Berkshire Show, held each year at Newbury, is a great day out for the whole family. This two-day event includes a host of trade stands including crafts and foods, livestock showings and even camel racing! The quiet old market town of Hungerford has become famous as an antiques centre in recent years and it is fun to search the quaint little shops for hidden treasures. The industrial past can be explored on a visit to the Kennet and Avon Canal and in particular the Crofton Pumping Station where water is pumped 400ft up from the River Kennet to feed the canal locks.

There are plenty of historic houses and gardens to visit too, including Highclere Castle and gardens (open from June to August) Avebury Manor and Ashdown House in Lambourn, but for a more blood-curdling experience visit the old gibbet at the top of Coombe Down, where two murderous lovers were hanged in 1676.
Ancient woodland
Woodland that has existed for many centuries, allowing species of slowly colonising woodland plants to thrive.

Aqueduct
An artificial channel for carrying water. Usually a bridge or a viaduct that carries a waterway over a valley.

Avebury World Heritage Site
A complex of Neolithic sites and monuments, situated on the edge of the Marlborough Downs. The archaeological sites provide evidence of past landscape patterns and use.

Barrow/Long barrow
A prehistoric earth mound, thrown up over a burial site. The earliest versions, dating back as far as 5,000BC were elongated. From 4,000BC to around 10AD, circular barrows were also built.

Broadleaf woodland
Woodland consisting of trees with relatively wide flat leaves.

Causewayed enclosures
A type of large prehistoric earthwork common to the early Neolithic period. They are often on hilltop sites and comprise of a roughly circular ditch, segmented by several causeways which cross it. Within the ditch is a central area used for inhumations and cremations, usually covered beneath a barrow.

Chalk downlands
Often grassland, a downland is an undulating upland area of open chalk.

Drovers’ routes
National routes once used to take animals to market, often hundreds of miles away.

Dry valley
Found in chalk uplands, water only flows when the water table rises to the surface during the winter and early spring.

Farmers’ Markets
Farmers, growers or producers from local areas sell their own produce direct to the public. All products sold should have been grown, reared, caught, brewed, pickled, baked, smoked or processed by the stallholder.

Grassland
A large open area of country covered with grass, especially one used for grazing.

Henge
A Neolithic monument surrounded by a bank and ditch and encompassing a circle of stones. Their exact purpose is unknown, but they may have served some ceremonial purpose.

Scarp slopes
Pairs of chalk downs, where the chalk dome has been eroded, exposing less resistant underlying rock. Vales commonly occur between scarp slopes – forming a wide river valley, usually with a particularly wide flood plain or flat valley bottom.

Springline village
Most downlands are waterless due to the porous nature of chalk and springlines are common where the water meets the impermeable clays beneath. Villages originated when the Saxons moved down from the hillsides to near the springline in the 8th- and 9th-centuries.

Water meadow
An area of pasture within a river valley that is deliberately flooded. The nutrients in the water deposits encourage the growth of grass and enables early production of animal fodder and an increased number of hay crops per year.

Wessex
The kingdom of the West Saxons, established in Hampshire in the early 6th-century and gradually extended by conquest to include much of southern England. The name was revived in the 19th-century by Thomas Hardy to designate the south-western counties of England in which his novels are set.

Wildwood
Natural woodland unaffected by Neolithic or later civilisation.
There are 37 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England covering about 15 percent of the land. They are havens for wildlife and places for people to live, work and enjoy the countryside. Areas are designated solely for their landscape qualities for the purpose of conserving and enhancing their natural beauty (which includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries).

The conservation of England’s finest countryside is vital. So important that it is marked out for special protection and management as National Parks, Heritage Coasts and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Local AONB partnerships, led by local authorities and including a wide range of key organisations, are dedicated to the conservation of these nationally important areas. They also strive to strengthen the local rural economy in a sensitive and sustainable way. Staff teams funded mainly by the local authorities and the Countryside Agency are located locally to co-ordinate and deliver action on the ground.