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In addition to publicity material, the OGT have organised a programme of guided walks and talks around the region to promote the unique character of the building materials and styles to be found here. A more detailed article outlining the findings of this project will also be available from end-March 2008 on the North Wessex Downs AONB and the OGT websites (addresses given below).

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Who are we?
The Oxfordshire Geology Trust was launched in 2000. We are a non-profit making organisation with two main aims - to protect and conserve geological sites and our landscape and to raise awareness of the county’s rich and varied Earth Heritage and geology. We are the only dedicated geoconservation organisation in Oxfordshire.

The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty covers 1,780 sq km and is the largest AONB in southern England. It was created in 1972 to give a protective coherence to one of the largest tracts of chalk downland in southern England which is least affected by development. The AONB aim to recognise and celebrate the rich diversity of archaeology, ecology, landscape and culture in the North Wessex Downs and conserve and enhance its special qualities for everyone to enjoy.

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To find out more information about the North Wessex Downs AONB, please visit their website www.northwessexdowns.org.uk
Introduction

The attractive variety of building styles across the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) reflects the diversity of building materials available including chalk, flint, sarsen and clay for brick and tile making.

In most areas, there is a direct link between the building materials used and the local, underlying geology. Although there are a wide of building materials available across the region, these materials by themselves make rather poor building stones. Hence, we see these diverse materials used in combination for building. Indeed, it is these combinations of materials used in different areas that have produced such unique and contrasting architectural building styles so easily seen when exploring the region.

This leaflet guides you through the different combinations of building materials used in the North Wessex Downs AONB. It highlights the key characteristics of these materials, and using photographs, shows the vernacular building styles associated with them.

This map shows the predominant building materials used across the North Wessex Downs AONB in relation to the local geology. You can clearly identify areas across the region where different building materials have been used. This diversity gives each area its own contrasting and unique character.

Upper, Middle and Lower Chalk underlies most of the region. Generally, the chalk is too soft, porous and liable to be used as a building stone. However, chalk is used as a building stone along the northern edge of the region where, historically, chalk chalk was quarried from locally occurring hard bands of chalk in the lower and middle Chalk.

The use of flint as a building material matches the distribution of Upper Chalk well. This pure, soft, white chalk locally contains thin bands of flint and flint nodules which weather out easily and are found scattered in fields across the Downs.

Not shown on this geology map are the scattered remnants of locally hardened sandstone of Palaeogene age called sarsen stones. These durable, cemented sandstones are found as isolated boulders overlying the Chalk in the valleys west of Marlborough and around Lambourn and other areas in West Berkshire. Sarsen stone is used as a building stone in the west of the region.

The use of Palaeogene clays for brick and tile making corresponds well to their distribution on the map. With the opening of the Kennet and Avon canal and later the railway, coal could be imported for firing the brick kilns and bricks could be manufactured more cheaply and transported more widely to all areas within the region.

Gault Clay and Upper Greensand have not been used as building materials in the North Wessex Downs.
Chalk block

Harder bands of chalk, such as the Melbourne Rock (occurring at the boundary between the Lower and Middle Chalk) have been quarried in the past and cut into regular creamy-white blocks for use as a building stone in the north of the region.

Ashdown House, Upper Lambourn. Large chalk blocks with limewall dressings. During a restoration programme in 2005, the chalk quarry at nearby Compton Beauchamp was reopened to provide new chalk blocks quarried from the original Melbourne rock.

Chalk block cottage with brick and sarsen foundations and wooden lintel, Ashbury. Such chalk block cottages have resisted the weather for centuries by having “good shoes and a hat,” that is a plinth of stone or brick to stop rising damp and overhanging eaves of thatch to resist the weather.

Ground chalk or cob

Ground chalk is mixed into a slurry with chalky clay, chopped straw, horsehair and other binders. This material known as cob is compacted to form broad boundary walls with rounded outlines. Cob is an ingredient of wattle and daub.

Lime-washed cob walls at Bloxham, protected from the weather by a thatch capping and from rising damp by a stone base.

Flint

Thin bands of flint and flint nodules weathered out of the soft chalk are found scattered in fields across the Downs. Flint is a very hard glassy material, resistant to weathering and is used in walls as a protective facing stone. Rough, field flints are used in their original nodular form to give a nubbly appearance, or they can be shaped or “knapped” to give a glassy surface which is then arranged to face outwards.

Knapped flint wall with brick framing, Astmansworth. In skilled hands flints can be knapped into rectangular blocks which can be laid in courses like bricks.

Flint is used in combination with either brick or stone. Such combinations of materials represent the most cost-effective option, especially historically, when transporting materials was more difficult and expensive. Hence, local flints are used for the bulk of the wall facing with more expensive brick or stone being used for cornerstones and framing where extra strength or decorative shaping is needed.

Flint and brick house, St Mary Bourne. Brick has been used for framing and strengthening the building with flint restricted to the wall facing.

Sarsen stone

Sarsen stone has been used for building in the west of the region, close to areas where surviving scatters of sarsen stones can be found in the landscape such as at Lockeridge Dene, west of Marlborough.

Sarsen stone is locally hardend sandstone of Palaeogene age which occurs naturally as large blocks up to several metres across. Sarsen stone being very hard has resisted weathering for thousands of years. It has been used as a building stone since Neolithic times – the best known example in the region being that of the megalithic monuments at Avebury. However, sarsen stones have also been used over the centuries for domestic buildings and wallsing.

Sarsen stones are difficult to cut and shape. They are commonly used in their original state as roughly broken blocks of sarsen fitted together in a jigsaw pattern. Rough sarsen is used in combination with other building materials such as brick, flint, chalk and limestone. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, a sarsen cutting industry was flourishing in this area and sarsen stone was being cut into regular blocks suitable for walls, corner stones, lintels and paving.

Rough sarsen stone with courses of chalk block and brick framing, Coopers Farm, Avebury.

Cut sarsen laid in courses with shaped sarsen blocks around the window, Avebury Manor Stable.
Brick
Brick is the dominant building material used across the region. Houses built solely of brick with clay roof tiles dominate the areas underlaying by Palaeogene clay. However, in areas where chalk, sarsen and flint building materials are available, brick has been used for framing and strengthening these materials.

Local brick making began around the 15th century with kilns fired using wood or charcoal. By the 16th and 17th centuries, brick, although still expensive, was being used in timber-framed buildings to replace earlier wattle-and-daub infills and for pillars, chimney stacks, fireplaces, corners, window and door frames.

By the 18th century, cottages were being built entirely of brick, often using combinations of unplastered red brick and glazed grey-blue brick in chequered style, or with window and door surrounds in a contrasting colour to the walls. Red clay tile-hanging on gable ends became popular. From the early 19th century, coal brought by canal or railway was used to fuel the kilns and the now-cheaper brick became the dominant building material. This was the hey-day of the local brickworks.

Limestone
Limestone used for building in the North Wessex Downs AONB is sourced from outside of the area. The Jurassic oolitic limestones quarried in the Cotswolds of Wiltshire and Oxfordshire are the most commonly used in this region. However, the need to import limestone makes it an expensive material to use. Hence, traditionally it was only used for prestigious buildings such as churches and wealthy merchant or manor houses and then only for parts of the buildings which could not be constructed of other local materials.

The use of flint with limestone characterises the majority of church buildings across the North Wessex Downs. The limestone is used primarily for dressings such as the basal plinths, cornerstones, window and door frames and buttresses which require larger-sized blocks, strong enough to support loads without cracking, resistant to weathering and with freestone properties which allow the carving of ornamentation.

Timber-framed houses with elaborate chevron-patterned brick infill and tile hanging gable, Clifton House, Clifton.

Modifications and extensions to existing flint or chalk built houses were often in brick.

The Old School House, Hurstbourne Tarrant with thatched roof, rough flint walls and brick framing. The use of all brick to the the Old Bakery next door may indicate that this is a later extension, built at a time when brick had become less expensive.

Almshouses in Lambourn showing diamond patterns in red and grey brick dated 1852. The initials are those of the benefactor, Henry Hopkisley.

St Mary's Church, Great Bedwyn is built of rough field flints with limestone dressings for window, buttresses and basal plinth.

St James' Church, Avonbury. Knapped flint and cut sarsen chequerwork with limestone window frame.