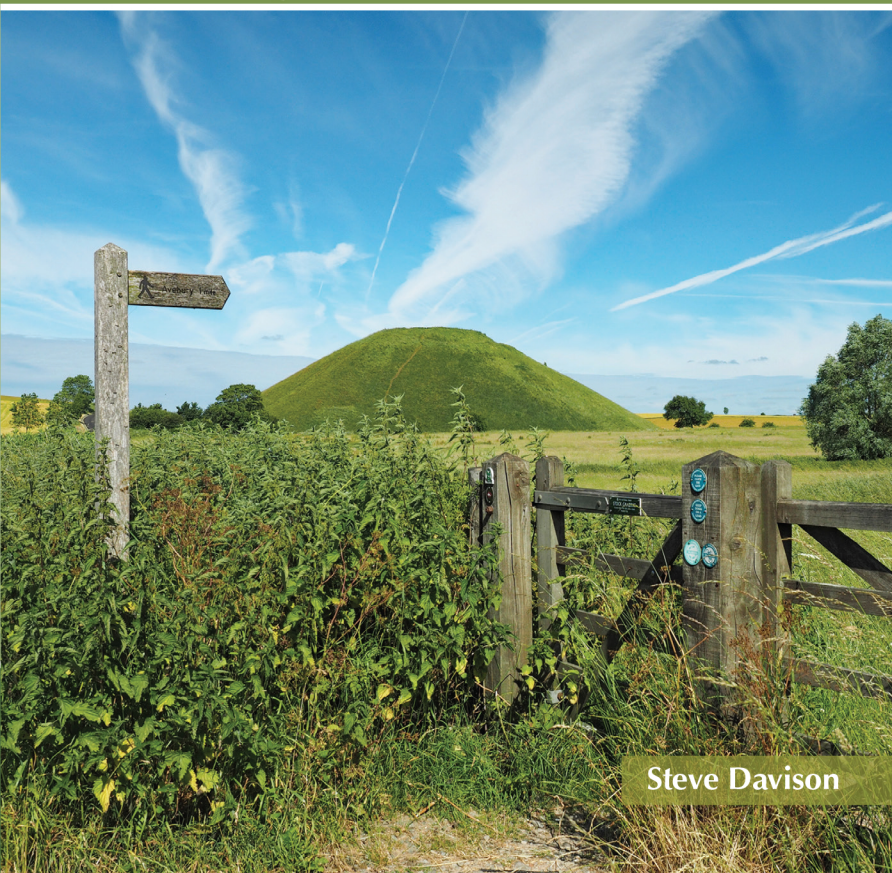


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# WALKING IN THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

30 walks exploring the AONB



Steve Davison

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**30 WALKS EXPLORING THE AONB**

**by Steve Davison**

**CICERONE**

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,  
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL  
[www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)

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### Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website ([www.cicerone.co.uk/1110/updates](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/1110/updates)), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to [updates@cicerone.co.uk](mailto:updates@cicerone.co.uk) or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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*Front cover:* Mystical Silbury Hill at Avebury (Walk 18)










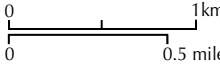
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Route symbols on OS map extracts (for OS legend see printed OS maps)	Features on the overview map
 route	 County/Unitary boundary
 alternative route	 Urban area
 start/finish point	 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty/National Scenic Area eg <i>North Wessex Downs</i>
 alternative start/finish point	 600m 400m 200m 75m 0m
 route direction	
	
The extracts from 1:50,000 OS maps used in this book have been reproduced at 1:40,000 for greater clarity	<b>GPX files</b> GPX files for all routes can be downloaded for free at <a href="http://www.cicerone.co.uk/1110/gpx">www.cicerone.co.uk/1110/gpx</a>



The fascinating linear earthwork of the Wansdyke stretches out across Tan Hill (Walk 21)

## INTRODUCTION



*The Devil's Den – three large sarsen stones seen on Walk 17*



*Looking north across The Manger and the Vale of White Horse from the Uffington White Horse (Walk 11)*

The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the third largest AONB in England, covers an area of 1730km<sup>2</sup> and takes in parts of four counties – Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. It encompasses one of the largest and least developed tracts of chalk downland in southern England. The AONB has a relatively low population, but because its boundary skirts around larger urban areas, such as Swindon, Reading and Basingstoke, a large number of people live within easy access.

This rolling chalk downland stretches west from the River

Thames in a broad arc to the south of Swindon, including the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs, with a steep scarp slope looking out over the Vale of White Horse, and then sweeps south and east to include the Vale of Pewsey and the North Hampshire Downs before circling round Newbury back to the Thames.

Although the downs are termed 'hilly', they don't rise to any great height, which makes the walks here suitable for a wide range of abilities. Nevertheless, the walks in this guide take in not only the highest chalk hill in England (and highest point in Berkshire), Walbury Hill (297m;



Walk 26), but also the highest points in three other counties – Milk Hill in Wiltshire (294m; Walk 21), Pilot Hill in Hampshire (286m; Walk 27) and Whitehorse Hill in Oxfordshire (261m; Walk 11).

This classic chalk landscape has been shaped by human activity for thousands of years, and some of the walks follow ancient trackways past some stunning historic sites, such as Avebury (one of the largest henge monuments in Britain; Walk 18), the 3000-year-old stylised galloping figure of the Uffington White Horse (Walk 11), impressive Neolithic long barrows, Bronze Age barrows and Iron Age hill forts. Take time to admire the views and ponder why and how our ancestors created these iconic features.

But that's not all. The walks allow you to explore parts of the Ridgeway National Trail, the Kennet and Avon Canal, peaceful riverside locations and picture-postcard villages with thatched cottages, historic churches and cosy pubs.

The North Wessex Downs offer an abundance of peace and tranquillity – here you can listen to skylarks singing over the open chalk grassland and the wind gently rustling through the trees; be dazzled by the myriad of flowers and butterflies; in late autumn see flocks of fieldfares and redwings feed along the hedgerows; and enjoy the views across the gently rolling chalk landscape that has inspired many a writer, poet and artist over the years.

For more information on this beautiful area, see [www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk).

### GEOLOGY

The geology of the North Wessex Downs tells the story of the seas that once covered southern England and the sediments that were laid down at that time. The predominant feature – one that forms the rolling contours of the downs – is a thick layer of Upper Cretaceous chalk (99–65 million years old), composed of incredible numbers of tiny fossil skeletons of algae, called coccoliths. Associated with the upper (white) layer of chalk are horizontal bands of irregular silica concretions, known as flints. These also occur in profusion in the jumbled deposits of weathered chalk, known as 'clay-with-flints'. When struck, flint breaks with a shell-shaped fracture, leaving very sharp edges, and our Stone Age ancestors used flints to make arrowheads and hand axes. Being a very

*Upper (white) chalk with layer of flint*



hard-wearing rock, flint has also been widely used as a building material.

Underlying the porous chalk is an impervious layer of Gault Clay laid down during the latter part of the Lower Cretaceous period (145–99 million years ago). This junction between the clay and chalk gives rise to the spring-line along the northern edges of the downs, where water that has seeped through the chalk is forced to the surface to form springs.

A natural process of patchy and irregular hardening within the sandy beds that overlay the chalk produced blocks of tough sandstone that are more resistant to erosion. These are the famous sarsens, known locally as grey wethers (from a distance they are

said to resemble sheep – a 'wether' being a castrated ram). Sarsens were used in the construction of the stone circle at Avebury and the Neolithic long barrows at West Kennett (Walk 18) and Wayland's Smithy (Walk 11); a great number of sarsens can be seen in their natural state at Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve (Walk 17).

Throughout the last 2.6 million years (the Quaternary period) Britain has been subject to periods of glaciation separated by warmer interglacial periods (the last glacial period ended about 12,000 years ago). There is no evidence to suggest that the North Wessex Downs were ever covered in ice, but the area did suffer periglacial conditions that allowed the



*Wilton Windmill – the only working windmill within the North Wessex Downs (passed on Walk 24)*

formation of dry valleys, or coombes, in the chalk plateau. The coombes were formed by erosion, as water flowed over the surface of the chalk during cold periods when the underlying ground was frozen, making the normally porous chalk impermeable (good examples of coombes are seen on Walks 10, 11 and 12).

Another major feature caused by glaciation was the creation of the Goring Gap, through which the River Thames now flows. The gap was created when a large glacial lake, which formed over the Oxford area about 450,000 years ago, eroded a line of weakness in the chalk. The Goring Gap now forms a junction between the Berkshire Downs to the west and the Chiltern Hills to the east.

### BRIEF HISTORY

The earliest inhabitants of the area were nomadic hunter-gatherers who travelled through the wooded landscape over 10,000 years ago. However, by the Neolithic period (4200–2200BC) a farming lifestyle was developing, permanent camps were being constructed, and areas of land cleared for crops and animals. This is the period when the great monuments at Avebury came into being. The Bronze Age (2200–750BC) saw further developments at Avebury, as well as the building of numerous characteristic round barrows. It was during this period, some 3000 years ago, that the stylised galloping outline of the Uffington White Horse was carved into the chalk. Later, during



*Monument to Colonel Robert Loyd-Lindsay, soldier and philanthropist (Walk 6)*



*The Kennet and Avon Canal  
(Walk 21)*

the Iron Age (750BC–AD43), defensive hill forts such as Barbury Castle (Walk 16) were built.

The Romans left little visible evidence in the region, although they did construct several roads that are still used today. Archaeological investigations have shown that they built a fortified town near Mildenhall (Walk 14) and a number of villas, including one near Ramsbury (Walk 13).

The demise of the Roman Empire in Britain around AD410 was followed by a Saxon invasion. In AD556 Saxons led by Cynric and his son Ceawlin (who later became King of Wessex in AD560) defeated the Britons at the Battle of Beranburgh (Beran Byrig);

the site of the battle is claimed to be Barbury Castle (Walk 16). It was during the early part of the Saxon period that the Wansdyke – a massive linear earthwork across the Marlborough Downs – was constructed (Walk 21).

During the ninth century Danes were invading parts of England, and in AD871 Alfred the Great, who was born at Wantage, defeated the Danes at the Battle of Ashdown in Berkshire ('Ashdown' was the ancient name for the whole expanse of the Berkshire Downs). He later became King of Wessex and Overlord of England, funded church schools, brought in a code of laws and developed his capital at Winchester, where he is buried.

The Norman period, following the Battle of Hastings in 1066, was the time of the Domesday Book, when many motte and bailey castles were built, along with monasteries and churches characterised by Romanesque rounded arches over windows and doorways. Many churches within the North Wessex Downs have their roots in the Norman period.

Prosperity and growth in the late 12th and the 13th centuries led to the expansion of towns surrounding the downs. In the 18th and 19th centuries, transport improved with the opening of the Kennet and Avon Canal, quickly followed by the arrival of the railways. During the Second World War a number of airfields were built, including Wroughton and Alton Barnes.

Major transport connections in the area, such as the opening of the M4 and A34, have allowed towns and villages to continue to grow, but this has put more pressure on precious countryside. However, in 1972 much



of the rolling chalk countryside was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and this should help to preserve this special area for future generations.

#### PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

The North Wessex Downs form a patchwork landscape with areas of open chalk grassland, broad-leaved woodland and farmland. Chalk streams flow from the spring-line that forms along the boundary between the upper porous chalk and the lower impervious layer of clay, where water that has seeped through the porous layer is forced to the surface. Chalk streams support a diversity of plant and animal life. Some of these streams in their upper reaches

*Common blue butterfly* (*Polyommatus icarus*) (L); *Small heath butterfly* (*Coenonympha pamphilus*) (R)



*Clockwise from left: Harebell* (*Campanula rotundifolia*); *Clustered bellflower* (*Campanula glomerata*); *Autumn gentian* (*Gentianella amarella*)

are termed 'winterbournes', and appear only after sustained heavy winter rainfall, such as the River Lambourn between Lambourn and East Garston.

Throughout the region there should be plenty of opportunities for catching glimpses of local wildlife, from foxes to roe and fallow deer (or the much smaller muntjac) – and perhaps even the elusive badger as dusk approaches.

The open chalk grasslands support a wide range of butterflies, plants

(including gentians and orchids) and birds, such as the skylark and yellow-hammer. High above, you might see the silhouette of a buzzard or hear the high-pitched whistling call of a red kite, with its distinctive forked tail and chestnut-red plumage.

Alongside the streams and rivers, as well as the ever-present ducks and mute swans, there may be glimpses of the vivid turquoise-blue-and-orange flash of a kingfisher as it darts along the river, or of an otter or the endangered water vole.



## WALK 1

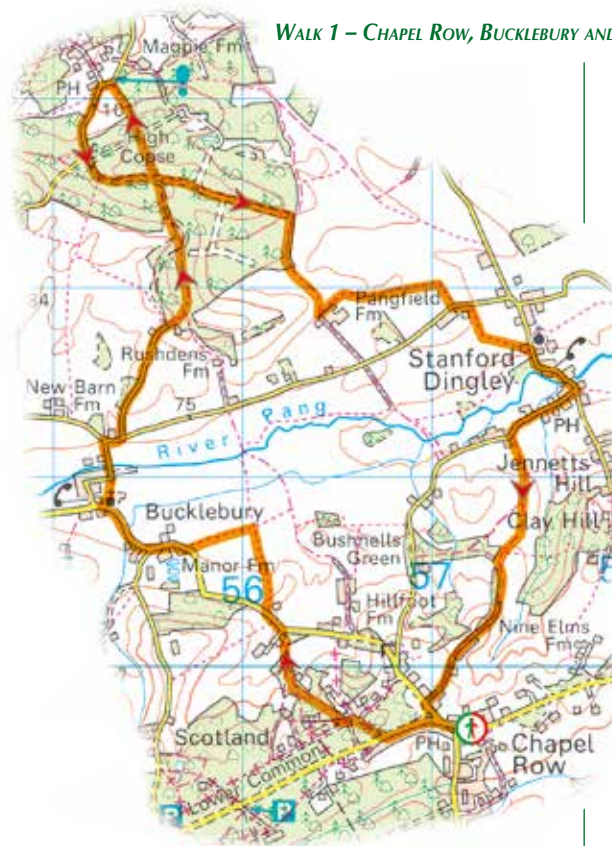
*Chapel Row, Bucklebury and Stanford Dingley*

<b>Start/finish</b>	Junction of The Avenue and Hatch Lane at Chapel Row (SU 571 696); limited parking. Alternative parking/start: Bucklebury recreation ground (SU 552 708)
<b>Distance</b>	11.6km (7¼ miles)
<b>Ascent</b>	230m
<b>Time</b>	3¼hr
<b>Map</b>	OS Explorer 158
<b>Refreshments</b>	Blackbird Café (0118 9712332) and The Bladebone (0118 9714000) at Chapel Row; The Pot Kiln (01635 201366) at Frilsham; The Bull Inn (0118 9744582) and The Old Boot Inn (0118 9745191) at Stanford Dingley
<b>Public transport</b>	Bus services to Chapel Row from Newbury and Tilehurst (excluding Sundays)

After leaving Chapel Row the route heads down towards the River Pang and the picturesque village of Bucklebury before meandering through woods to the ideally located Pot Kiln pub. The return continues through woods and open fields to call in at peaceful Stanford Dingley before a gradual ascent back to Chapel Row.

From **Chapel Row** head west along the main road (Thatcham direction), passing The Bladebone pub, and after 250m turn right across the road. Follow the track, signposted to Scotland Corner, through the trees of Chapelrow Common.

Keep left at the split to a junction and turn left for 50m to another junction just after passing a house (right). Turn right and follow the bridleway down through the trees – keeping right at a bridleway junction – to a lane. Turn left up the lane for 100m, and just after passing a house turn right over a stile in the hedge. Head northwards down through the field with a view across the



WALK 1 – CHAPEL ROW, BUCKLEBURY AND STANFORD DINGLEY

valley and cross a stile in the lower-right corner. Keep ahead through the next field following the left-hand margin to a four-way path junction beside a footbridge. Do not cross the footbridge, but turn left along the grass strip between fields aiming for the large house.

Cross a stile and turn right along the lane passing **Manor Farm**, keeping right at the junction towards **Bucklebury**. After the Old Vicarage turn right, following the surfaced path through the churchyard and passing clockwise round St Mary's Church. ► Go through gates

The alternative parking/start is up the road ahead at the junction.

either side of a track and continue across the field before leaving through a gate.

The **manor of Bucklebury**, mentioned in the Domesday Book, was granted to Reading Abbey by Henry I. Following Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, the manor was sold to John Winchcombe, son of the famous 'Jack of Newbury' who had made his wealth in the cloth trade.

The 11th-century parish Church of **St Mary the Virgin** has some impressive features, including an elaborately carved Norman doorway. The colourful east window depicting the Crucifixion, by Sir Frank Brangwyn, is unusual in that the crucified Christ is looking up to heaven, rather than down at the ground. Before leaving, take a look at the curious 'fly-window', complete with painted sundial; the realistic fly is a pictorial substitute for the usual sundial motto – *Tempus fugit* ('time flies').

Follow the road northwards, crossing the **River Pang**, to a junction. Turn right towards Stanford Dingley for 75m before going left up a lane signposted to Old Hawkridge House and Cottage.

At the brick-and-timber house keep right towards a gated (private) entrance and then fork left onto a narrow restricted byway up through the trees with a fence on the right (ignore paths to the left and right). Continue up through Burgess' Copse, passing over the brow of the hill, then down to a dip and back up before reaching a signposted crossing track at SU 556 725. ◀

Cross over and follow the narrow path down through the trees of **High Copse**, ignoring a crossing track (private). Go through a gate and follow the right-hand boundary through two fields, separated by a footbridge and gate. Leave through a gate in the top-right corner and turn left along the lane to the Pot Kiln pub. At one time there were a number of kilns here that were used to fire bricks made from local clay deposits; much later the West Berkshire Brewery (now in Yattendon, Walk 2)



started brewing in one of the old barns. Continue along the lane up to a right-hand bend and fork left along the track. Keep right (straight on) at the split and follow the track as it curves left back to the junction passed earlier; keep ahead.

Follow the track eastwards for 700m, through the wood (passing Highwood Copse) and later descending to a junction. Turn right along the tree-shaded byway for 500m to reach a track; the restricted byway goes straight on through the trees.

Here, turn left and follow the track (permissive path) as it curves right along the field edge towards **Pangfield Farm**. Stay in the field and turn left following the right-hand boundary through two fields. Go through a gate in the corner beside some trees and keep ahead through the next field, following the boundary on the left along two sides of the field to a lane.

Turn left along the lane for 100m then right up the bank and follow the right-hand field edge. Cross two

*Following a good track past Highwood Copse*

Anyone not wanting to visit the Pot Kiln pub at Frilsham can turn right here to continue with the walk (1.5km shorter route).





*St Denys' Church*

stiles and bear half-left across two fields separated by a stile aiming for the church in **Stanford Dingley**. Cross a stile in the field corner and turn right along the lane.

The name of picturesque **Stanford Dingley** is derived from the original lord of the manor, William de Stanford, mentioned in 1224, and from the Dyneley family, who lived here in the Middle Ages. The church here is unusual in that it is dedicated to St Denys, who was martyred in third-century France. The church has Saxon origins, although it mostly dates from the 12th and 13th centuries, with a 15th-century white weather-boarded bell turret. Inside there are fragments of 13th-century wall paintings, a brass memorial to Margaret Dyneley dated 1444, and a modern engraved memorial window to the novelist and poet Robert Gathorne-Hardy (1902–1973), who lived in the village for many years.



*The Bull Inn*

Follow the lane and, once level with The Bull Inn, fork right across the grass to follow an enclosed path, soon crossing the River Pang beside the former mill (private house) to join a road beside the tile-hung Garden House. Turn right along the road for 400m, soon passing The Old Boot Inn. At the right-hand bend, just before some houses, turn left along a track (bridleway). Enter a field and follow the right-hand boundary to the top-right corner. Go through a gate and follow the bridleway uphill with trees to the right. Continue up along the track passing St Crispins Farm to a road. Turn left and keep left at the junction to get back to the start.



- 30 inspiring walks • Avebury, the Uffington White Horse, Neolithic long barrows and Iron Age hill forts
- highest points in Berkshire, Hampshire, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire • highest chalk hill in England

These walks allow you to explore the undulating chalk landscape, offering panoramic views and peaceful riverside strolls along the Thames, Kennet, Pang and Lambourn. They feature fascinating prehistoric sites, picturesque towns and villages with thatched cottages, historic churches and cosy pubs.

The Downs can be explored throughout the year – spring and early summer are best for wildflowers, butterflies and birds, autumn brings a change of colour, while frosty winter days can offer far-reaching views.



- walks to suit most ages and abilities (from 4 miles to 12 miles long)
- some walks follow parts of the ancient Ridgeway – one of Britain's oldest 'green' roads
- easily accessible from London, Reading, Basingstoke, Swindon and Bristol

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