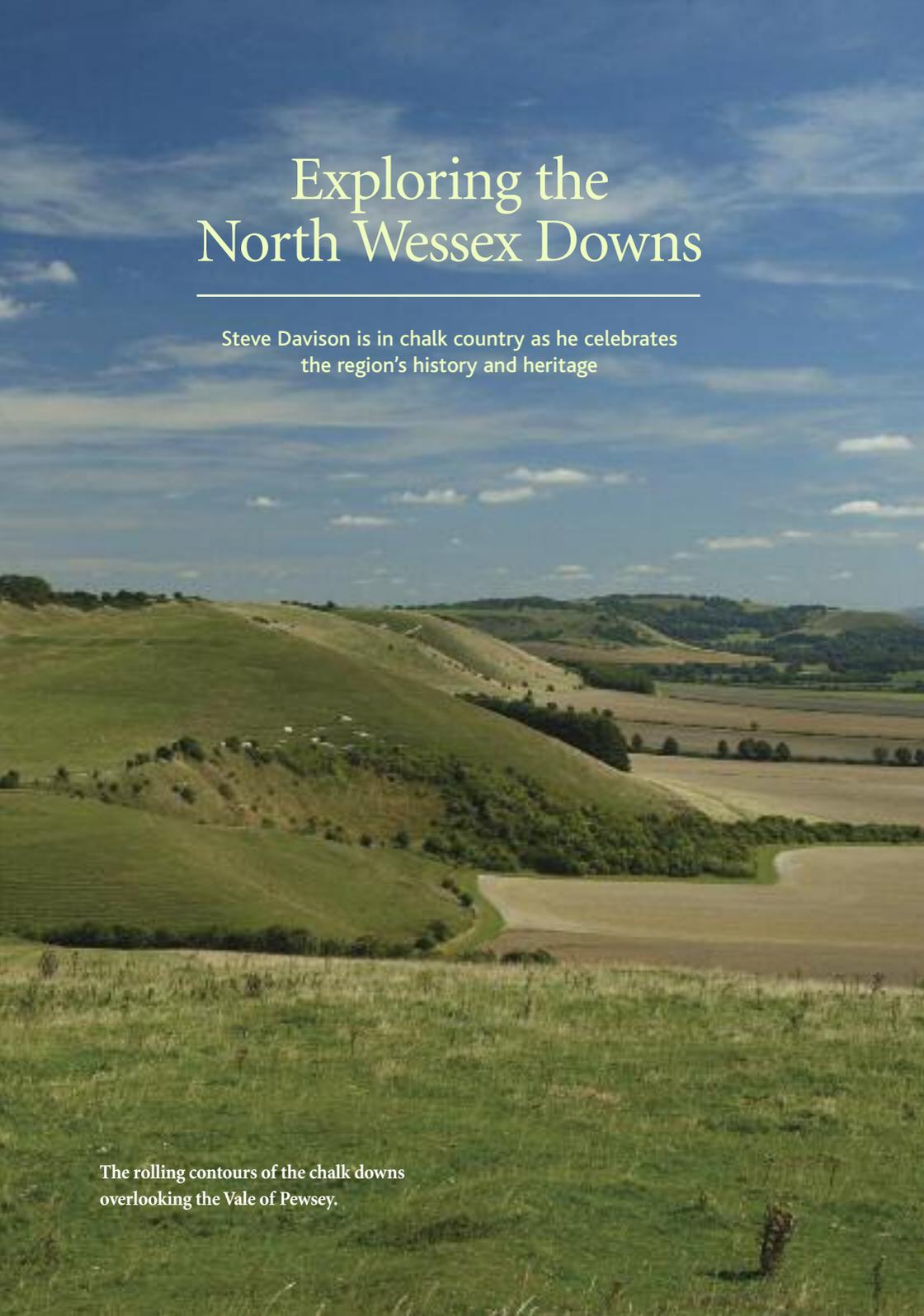


# Exploring the North Wessex Downs

Steve Davison is in chalk country as he celebrates the region's history and heritage



The rolling contours of the chalk downs overlooking the Vale of Pewsey.

England's thirty-three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) have been described as the "jewels of the English landscape", and the North Wessex Downs, the third largest of these AONBs, is no exception.

Designated in 1972, the North Wessex Downs encompasses 668 square miles of rolling chalk landscape, stretching from its western tip near Calne in Wiltshire across a broad arc to the south of Swindon, passing through Oxfordshire and Berkshire, with a steep scarp slope looking out over the Vale of White Horse, to meet the River Thames on its eastern edge, adjoining the Chilterns across the Goring Gap.

Along the crest of the downs, followed for much of the way by the Ridgeway — probably the oldest green road in England — prehistoric man

has left us some fascinating treasures, including the beautiful Uffington White Horse, the magical Wayland's Smithy and several Iron Age hill forts.

The AONB then sweeps south, following the River Thames to Pangbourne before encircling Newbury and part of the Kennet Valley, to encompass the northern reaches of the North Hampshire Downs. The southern edge stretches westwards, passing north of Andover to take in the Vale of Pewsey, and the market towns of Hungerford and Marlborough.

The predominant feature is the underlying Cretaceous (99-65 million years ago) chalk geology; the North Wessex Downs cover one of the most continuous tracts of chalk downland in England. The chalk itself is formed from the remains of billions of minute sea creatures (known as coccoliths)





that over time have been compacted and raised above sea-level by the gradual movement of landmasses drifting across the Earth's surface.

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 Kennet and Wayland's Smithy; a great number of sarsens (around 25,000) can be seen in their natural state at Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve.

The sparsely populated landscape has been etched by the impact of

Above, Wilton Windmill, built in 1821; below, Alton Barnes White Horse on the Pewsey Downs; facing page, colourful stained glass window designed by John Piper in memory of John Betjeman, All Saint's Church, Farnborough.



humans over several millennia, from the impressive Neolithic henge at Avebury to the Kennet and Avon Canal, with picturesque towns and villages, and mile after mile of footpaths.

In two further articles we will discover more about the fascinating archaeology and the unusual white horses of the North Wessex Downs, but here we'll learn about its literary associations, history and heritage.

Passionate about the beauty of the countryside and richness of nature that he saw all around him, the Victorian writer Richard Jefferies became particularly noted for his depiction of English rural life. Born near Swindon, he knew the area well and in *Wildlife in a Southern County* (1879) he writes about the ancient Ridgeway as being "a broad green track runs for many a long, long mile across the downs".

The First World War poet, Edward Thomas, who is commemorated in a stunning engraved-glass window by Sir Laurence Whistler at the Church of St James the Greater in Eastbury, wrote a biography of Richard Jefferies in 1909, and he captures the sense of remoteness and huge vastness of the Berkshire Downs:

"The Downs ... are among the highest, most spacious, and most divinely carved in rolling ridge and hollow flank ... Jefferies often thought of the sea upon these hills. The eye sometimes expects it. There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their ease, their solitude above all, in their liquid forms, that combine apparent mobility with



placidity, and in the vast playground which they provide for the shadows of the clouds."

Another writer inspired by the Ridgeway was Kenneth Grahame, author of *Wind in the Willows*, who wrote:

"No villages nor homesteads tempt it aside or modify its course for a yard ... 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."

Thomas Hughes, who was born in the Vale of White Horse, wrote about the area in his most famous book *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1856); whilst G K Chesterton was in awe of the ancient galloping Uffington White Horse in his poem *Ballad of the White Horse*; and the historical novelist Sir Walter Scott referred to the legend of Wayland's



Above, Highclere Castle — home of Lord and Lady Carnarvon. Facing page, mystical Silbury Hill — the largest prehistoric man-made mound in Europe.

Smithy (a Neolithic long barrow) in his novel *Kenilworth*.

Many who have watched the TV series *Downton Abbey* will recognise Highclere Castle (ancestral home of the Earls of Carnarvon), a stunning early-Victorian mansion designed Sir Charles Barry. Close to the River Thames is the beautiful late-eighteenth-century Palladian mansion of Basildon House that has starred in films such as *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Dorian Gray* (2009). Historic Littlecote House is where Henry VIII reputedly met Jane Seymour, who became his third wife. While Ashdown House, built by William Craven, 1st Earl of Craven, in the early 1660s as a hunting lodge and house fit for the queen he loved, Elizabeth of Bohemia,

has been described as “the perfect doll’s house”.

Standing high on Inkpen Hill is a grisly reminder of a bygone era: the haunting outline of Combe Gibbet, clearly visible for miles around. The gibbet (replaced on several occasions) was built in 1676 to hang a local man and his mistress for the murder of his wife and son. The story of the murders was used as the basis of the 1948 film *The Black Legend*, produced by a group of Oxford undergraduates including John Schlesinger, who later became a well-known film director.

Situated at the summit of the 200-year-old Kennet and Avon Canal is the world-famous Crofton Pumping Station. Although electric pumps have been installed, the original magnificent



Cornish Beam engines (the oldest working steam engines in the world) are still used on several occasions throughout the year. Nearby at Wilton, is the North Wessex Downs’ only working windmill.

Picturesque Aldworth is home to St Mary’s Church and the Aldworth Giants — nine larger-than-life effigies of the influential de la Beche family, which constitute the largest number of medieval memorials to a single family in a parish church. The churchyard is the final resting place of the poet Laurence Binyon, especially remembered for the lines from his poem *For the Fallen* that are quoted at Remembrance Day services.

The final location on our whistle-stop tour is the Inkpen Crocus Field. Here, in spring, tens (even hundreds) of thousands of purple spring crocuses (*Crocus vernus*) break into

flower, covering the meadow with a mass of flowers. It’s known that the crocuses have been here for over 200 years; however, some believe that they were brought back here by the Knights Templar during the Crusades. ■

**In the August issue, Steve delves into the ancient past with a look at the archaeology of the North Wessex Downs.**

*More information: North Wessex Downs AONB: 01488 685440; [www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk)*

*Further reading: The North Wessex Downs, Steve Davison (Hale Books); Walking on the North Wessex Downs, Steve Davison (Cicerone).*

