

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Summer

2005

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

Did you hear this wonderful story told of the late Edward Heath? A reporter asked him if it was correct that, on hearing of the ousting of Margaret Thatcher as Leader of the Conservative Party, he had said 'Rejoice, rejoice'. "No" said Ted Heath, "What I actually said was 'Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice'."

I think we have an opportunity to say two and a half 'rejoices' in our campaign to rid The Ridgeway of non-essential motor vehicles. As you know, Wiltshire County Council has already imposed a permanent seasonal Traffic Regulation Order on the whole of The Ridgeway in the county. What this means in plain English is that recreational motor vehicles are banned from the Trail from 1st October to 30th April each year.

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

Oxfordshire County Council has now passed a similar order, commencing this coming October and applying each winter thereafter. The order will cover the whole of The Ridgeway in Oxfordshire and not just the short sections covered by temporary orders last winter. Thanks to all members who wrote or emailed OCC in support of this decision. Apparently they received 17 objections to the order from off-roaders but received 120 representations in favour of the order from lovers of The Ridgeway. A large number of these were from our members.

So rejoice for Wiltshire and rejoice for Oxfordshire. The half rejoice? For West Berkshire, where consultation on a similar approach is underway. Should this be approved, then about 36 kms of the Trail will be subject to a seven months per year winter ban on recreational motor vehicles each year. That leaves only 3.8 kms in Swindon Borough that will not be covered by such restrictions. Swindon Borough argues that the repairs they have made to the Trail mean that it is suitable for year round use by motor vehicles. We choose to differ and our dealings with Swindon Borough Council make it easy to see why it has been rated as one of the worst performing councils in the country. We will continue to press our case, but in the meantime why not take time to rejoice?

THE NERC BILL

Not the most attractive name for a piece of proposed legislation, you might think, but lovers of green lanes will come to be very fond of NERC when it becomes law. The acronym stands for the Natural Environment and Rural Communities, and much of the bill is taken up with the establishment of a new body (Natural England) to rationalise the work of bodies such as the Countryside Agency.

Tucked away in the bill is a section on Rights of Way. This section will bring into effect the new classification of "Restricted Byway" as defined in earlier legislation. A Restricted Byway will be open to walkers, cyclists, horse riders and horse drawn carriages. It will *not*

be open to motor vehicles. Another provision of the NERC Bill is to extinguish the traditional argument that, if it could be proved that a horse and cart had used a particular route centuries ago, it can be classified as a Byway Open to All Traffic and be used by 4x4s and motor bikes today. Taken together these two features of the bill could have some significance on The Ridgeway. Your society is working with other like-minded organisations to help bring the bill into effect as quickly as possible. We will try to keep you informed of developments.

Ian Ritchie

AGM CONTINUED

At the first committee meeting after the AGM, John Templeton was co-opted to keep up the Society's link with the YHA

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LET'S ZORB AGAIN LIKE WE DID LAST ZUMMER

Last summer's Newsletter with its query about zorbing, the sport of rolling down hills, arrived inexcusably late for one member. Instead of berating the secretary for administrative failure, she drew attention to the practice of cheese rolling, which still happens at Cooper's Hill in Gloucestershire and used to take place at Uffington when the Horse was scoured. Compared with chasing a 9lb cheese down a sixty-degree slope, zorbing is for wimps. Elizabeth Kennet also pointed to the Italian sorba – a "sorb apple", a fruit that according to Jane Grigson, makes good liqueur and poor cider, or a "blow", with its associated verb sorbare "to beat", hence sorbattere, "to make ice cream". One begins to see a connection, though it may be most like a weasel.

An American friend was as perplexed as everyone else by the word – though as a girl she enjoyed the activity.

ROYAL PATRONAGE FOR WILTSHIRE SNAILS

Since writing on snails for the last Newsletter, I have come across two vaguely relevant extracts. The first is from *Larkrise to Candleford* chapter I, where I happened on it whilst pursuing the social history of the tomato.

"The family pig was everybody's pride and everybody's business . . . The children, on their way home from school, would fill their arms with sow thistle, dandelion, and choice long grass, or roam along the hedgerows on we evenings collecting snails in pails for the pig's supper These piggy crunched up with great relish."

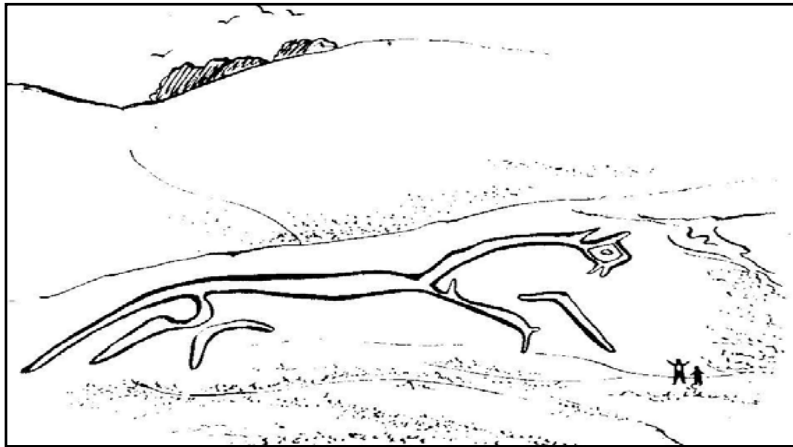
Juniper Hill, "Larkrise", is near Brackley on the Oxfordshire Northamptonshire border, miles north of the Ridgeway, but the pig was a staple of cottage economy and its appetite is much the same anywhere. Closer to the Trail, John Aubrey in his *Natural History of Wiltshire* Chapter XIII, recalls an excursion with Charles II (Charles I is a slip of the pen) and the future James II.

Snailles are everywhere; but upon our downes, and so in Dorset, and I believe in Hampshire, at such degree east and west, in the summer time there are abundance of very small snailles on the grasse and corne, not much bigger, or no bigger than small pinnes heads. Though this no strange thing among us, yet they are not to be found in the north part of Wilts, nor on any northern wolds. When I had the honour to waite on King Charles I. And the Duke of York to the top of Silbury hill, his Royal Highness happened to cast his eye on some of these small snailles on the turfe of the hill. He was surprised with the novelty, and commanded me to pick some up, which I did, about a dozen or more, immediately; for they are in great abundance. The next morning as he was abed with his Duchess at Bath he told her of it, and sent Dr. Charleton to me for them, to shew her as a rarity"

Peter Gould

ASPECTS OF THE RIDGEWAY

Twenty years ago, The Friends of The Ridgeway published a pamphlet, *Aspects of the Wessex Ridgeway*, essays by various authors, illustrated by Beryl Maile of West Hendred. Some of the content is familiar polemic or pure description, but other articles and the line drawings it would be a pity to forget, so I intend to reprint selections from time to time. If anyone wants to update or expand the information, such contributions will be welcome. The first of these reprints draws on two essays by Joan Pye, "Uffington's White Horse" and the introductory "The Ridgeway faces an uncertain future".



The Uffington White Horse is one of the best known landmarks along the Ridgeway and attracts large numbers of visitors. When you arrive at the foot of White Horse Hill, you can scarcely see this great outstretched galloping figure, almost on the hilltop, 365 feet long with a body no more than ten feet wide at the widest point. Its head is very curiously shaped with a deep notched V between the ears and a square head with vestiges of beak—like jaws. Its tail continues in a fine sweeping curve from the end of its back, very long and thin: one would not call it a naturalistic representation of a horse,

Controversy has raged amongst archaeologists and antiquaries about the horse and its history. Lit has certainly given the name of White Horse Hill to the place where we now see it, for nine hundred years, because there is a documentary record. One of the documents of Abingdon Abbey names the holder of the manor of Sparsholt at some time between 1072 and 1084 and places this manor "near the place which is commonly called White Horse Hill".

The first reference to regular cleansing of the horse to keep its shape occurs in the 17th century when we are told that inhabitants of local villages had an obligation "to repair and cleanse this landmark, or else in time it may turn green like the rest of the hill and be forgotten". A little later, in the early 18th century, Thomas Cox in his edition of "Britannia" wrote "the neighbouring parish have a custom, once a year, at or near Midsummer, to go and weed it in order to keep the Horse in shape and colour, and after the work is over they end the day in feasting and merriment". John Aubrey, one of the earliest antiquaries, thought that the White Horse had been made by the Saxon leader Hengist, but this assertion simply rests on a tradition that Hengist's standard was a white horse, and Aubrey can have had no other information. The common belief in the 18th century, which is repeated many times in descriptions of this part of the country, is that Alfred caused the horse to be cut, as a memorial of his victory over the Danes at the battle of Ashdown in 87L This tradition, for which there is no real evidence, may well have started with a local clergyman, the Rev. Francis Wise, who was one of the first people to record the shape and appearance of the horse in a letter dated 1738.

If there is no reliable written evidence to help to discover the origin of the White Horse, and from a chalk—cut figure we shall find no objects like pottery sherds or coins to help us to date it, what other methods can we use? Only the physical appearance of the Horse, which as we have seen is a very unusual one, not very naturalistic as a representation of a horse. Horses were very important to the early tribes who lived in this part of Britain before the Romans came; they were used for transport and to draw chariots in warfare,

as Caesar records. In the first century B.C. the Celtic tribes in Britain had started to use coins for trading, and some Celtic coins have horses on them with heads not unlike those of our chalk—cut horse with beaked jaws. There are also some surviving metal buckets from the Iron Age with a design of prancing horses, though the horses on the bucket carry their tails in quite a different fashion.

But what if the original design of the horse looked quite different from the slim, elegant animal we see today? The Rev. Francis Wise in his letter to a fellow antiquary in 1738 pointed out that “the White Horse is gotten higher upon the hill than formerly”. It has been demonstrated within the period that the Horse has been in the guardianship of the Department of Environment that if a cleared surface of chalk on a hill slope is neglected and not cleaned at regular and frequent intervals, the rain will wash bits of soil and debris down the chalk surface, and the grass will very soon spread upwards into this lower line of wash—down. The conservation staff working for the Department of Environment had to clear out a sizeable area at the tip of the Horse’s tail because it had completely grassed over. If this could happen in only a few years, what changes have taken place in the hundreds of years since the first cutting? A telling photograph taken by the R.A.F. in 1929 shows the impressions on the grass, body of the horse, of green turf lines like defining the outline of the horse’s belly at a much lower level than now. If this is reliable (and cameras cannot lie) it undermines any attempt to date the horse by its present curious appearance.

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The following extract from “The Scouring of the White Horse” by Thomas Hughes (first published in 1858) shows that conflict of use between antiquarian or conservation interests, and the interests of the farmers, is over 100 years old:

“This road which we are upon is the Ridgeway, one of the oldest roads in England. How far it once extended or who made it, no man knows; but you may trace it there along the ridge of the downs as

far as you can see, and in fact there are still some 60 miles of it left. But they won’t be left long I fear, Sir, in this age which venerates nothing.

“I don’t see much fear of that, Sir”, said I, “After it has lasted so long already.”

“No fear, Sir?” said he, “why, miles of it have been ploughed up within my memory. God meant these downs, Sir, for sheep—walks, and so our fathers left them: but within the last 20 years would—be wise men have found that they will grow decent turnips and not very bad oats. Well, they plough them up, and find two inches of soil only, get one crop off them and spoil them for sheep. Next year, no crops. Then comes manure, manure, manure — nothing but expense; not a turnip will trouble itself to grow bigger than a radish under a pennyworth of guano or bones. The wise men grumble and swear, but the downs are spoiled... They are all mad for ploughing, Sir, these blockhead farmers; why, half of them keep their sheep standing on boards all the year round. They would plough and grow mangold—wurzels on their father’s graves. The tenth Legion, Sir, has probably marched along this road, Severus and Agricola have ridden along it, Sir; Augustine monks have carried the Cross along it. There is that in that old mound and ditch which the best oats and turnips in the world (if you could get them) can’t replace. There are higher things in this world, Sir, than indifferent oats and d—d bad turnips.”

**Contributions to the Autumn Newsletter by
17th September please**
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Items for the website are gladly received at any time

The Friends of The Ridgeway is a registered charity (No 1107926). its objects are the preservation for the benefit of the public of all the natural aspects and features of the Ridgeway National Trail and the provision of recreational and educational facilities in the interests of social welfare for the public benefit