

NEWSLETTER

Issue 91

Autumn 2011

Notes from the Editor

As I write, the leaves of the beech trees on the chalk downs are the most spectacular range of colours that I've seen for a long time, but it won't be long before the landscape changes dramatically with frosts and strong winds bringing down all the leaves. Each season should be appreciated and from the Ridgeway we are blessed with some of the best views of our changing countryside.

This issue of the Newsletter contains a fascinating account of Ashdown House and the nearby hill fort and battle ground known as Alfred's Castle (page 9). Many agencies are joining to seek funds for an enormous stretch of chalk downland: the western half of the Ridgeway to the coast at Weymouth (page 14). Focus is on a successfully re-introduced species – the Red Kite (page 12) and new local Ridgeway Friend groups are sought. Finally, a small increase in membership fees means that those with Standing Orders are asked to alter them.



From the Secretary's Desk

It may seem to readers sometimes that the Committee's attention is wholly devoted to our exciting new project of The Great Stones Way, and that our fundamental concerns with The Ridgeway are neglected. This project does indeed take up a great deal of time, of the working group particularly, but we are careful to give on-going priority to the fundamental aims of the Association, namely the preservation of The Ridgeway and raising awareness of its value within the local and walking communities. Our current concerns remain the state of the trail, now much improved with its restricted status, except at the southern end, where we continue to press for this status to be applied; the budgetary problems of our friends in the National Trail Office, which we fear could impact on maintenance; the impending HS2 project and its potential impact on the Chilterns stretch of The Ridgeway; and the underlying uncertainties threatening the status of the National Trails in this climate of economic stringency.

Within the Committee, the essential roles of our hard-working Membership Secretary and Treasurer are well defined and efficiently delivered. We continue to look out for a candidate to take on the important role of Communications Secretary. The Vale of White Horse Local Group is blazing a trail in providing a social focus and activities for our members in its area, and we hope very much to see similar groups emerge for the other areas, most urgently for the Downs and Avon communities, encompassing the southern end of The Ridgeway and The Great Stones Way. Much of what remains falls to the Secretary to cope with. Besides the core tasks of

servicing the Committee and General Meetings, and compliance with the regulations, the main concerns are planning and development issues affecting the trail; external and internal communications, particularly our web-sites; enquiries of all sorts from members and the general public; and internal administration. Planning issues are given a high priority, and we welcome advice from members and the public of proposals that may affect the trail and its environment, and impact on the enjoyment of its users. We do what we can to lodge objections or engage in debate when this may seem useful. We also value any notices of local news and events for publicising on our web-sites, and suggestions of topics or articles. Most enquiries these days arrive by e-mail, and the contacts log kept and reported to the Committee makes interesting reading, and forms a useful record. We are always pleased to hear of the experiences or requirements of walkers along The Ridgeway, and can usually give a constructive response.

The Committee and the officers of the Association are elected to serve the membership and to respond to their concerns, and are very conscious of this responsibility. We are always glad to hear about members' interests, to answer questions and to debate issues, and we welcome constructive suggestions and of course offers of assistance and participation.

The Great Stones Way

Since the apparent break-through in early Summer that we were able to report in the last issue of the Newsletter, with a

constructive agreement with Wiltshire Council and the release of our Plain Action and Tidworth Community Area funding for the southern “Plain and Avon” section of The Great Stones Way (GSW), progress has continued, albeit rather more slowly than we would have hoped.

Our prime focus has been on this southern section, and Ian has now concluded his series of meetings with parishes in the area and agreed with them the works to be done. Meetings are now being arranged with the farmers along the Avon Valley, to settle details of the works proposed and hopefully to obtain their consent for these, and we shall be seeking new quotations from suppliers and contractors for the new kissing gates and sign posts needed. Roger Greasley unfortunately had to back down from the scheme, but we are delighted now to have Col. David Benest from Manningford, a keen walker and runner, to help Ian with the development tasks. We shall need a variation to the funding contract with Plain Action for our LEADER funds, to reflect the amended route and the extra costs of commissioning an environmental impact study, and we hope that this will have been agreed by the time that our dialogue with the farmers is complete, and to enable the works to be started in time for a spring launch of the Plain and Avon part of the route.

Meantime, Janet Hierons and Jackie Dryden are working on a short Guide for the Plain and Avon route, to meet walkers’ needs before a proper Guide-book can be commissioned for the route as a whole.



View from Walkers Hill to Pewsey Vale

For the northern part of the route, through the North Wessex Downs and the Vale of Pewsey, our focus has been on agreeing the terms of reference and the expert inputs into the environmental impact studies that we have agreed to commission. Our draft has been much pored over and amended to reflect the advice of NWDAONB, Wiltshire Council and its experts, Natural England, English Heritage and others. Wiltshire Council decided also to circulate the draft to all the parishes and Councillors affected along the route, and to seek their views, which were also taken into account – a lengthy process indeed! We have sometimes to remind ourselves and others that we are talking about public access to existing rights of way. After all this discussion we were eventually able to request proposals for the work from four consultancies, and have received their impressive proposals, which are currently under review. We expect to be able to

make a choice in the next few days and to seek LEADER and perhaps other funding towards the costs of the successful proposal, which is likely to cover both the southern and northern sections of the route. We hope that the studies will get under way in the New Year, and will focus first on the Plain and Avon section to check that there are no problems with the route in this area. A successful conclusion of the process may take rather longer in the north.

Jeff Goddard

A Walk on the Wild Side

Regular readers may recall that each year I enjoy a walking holiday with a group of old friends. This year we decided to make walking The Great Stones Way our objective. We planned to complete the trail in three days but organised as an initial half day, two complete days and a final half day – a very civilised programme for a walk of about thirty four miles.

For our first afternoon, we set off from the magnificent stones at Avebury, walked past Silbury Hill, diverted to visit the West Kennett Long Barrow and then we walked on to The Ridgeway near East Kennett. It was a warm and pleasant afternoon and a nice gentle introduction to the GSW for my friends.

The second day we walked from Overton Hill to Charlton St Peter in very different weather. We experienced really strong winds as we climbed up the Old Ridgeway to Red Shore and the Wansdyke, but the winds did not diminish our enjoyment

of the wonderful views on this stretch. They became more troublesome as we crested Walkers Hill and Adam's Grave and we didn't linger on the top for long. It was a welcome



relief to drop down into Alton Barnes, admiring the tiny church in Alton Priors and the fascinating turn stiles around the churchyard in Alton Barnes. A short walk to Honeystreet took us to The Barge Inn for lunch. This pub is now community owned and has featured in a recent BBC programme. The food

(and the beer!) was excellent and a visit to The Barge is recommended – it has a good sized car park and would be an ideal base for a circular walk taking in some of the GSW.

After lunch we walked the tow path of the Kennet and Avon canal to Woodborough, then over the railway line to Bottlesford and through a series of field paths and green lanes to the sleepy village of Charlton St Peter.

The next morning saw us climbing on to Salisbury Plain up a great path to Charlton Clumps. Once we had reached the plateau we enjoyed broad views across the Vale and easy

walking on the grass by the side of the military road. As 'big boys' we were pleased that there was a large military exercise going on with lots of impressive vehicles, helicopters and planes involved – exciting stuff to see close up. Our route then took us down to the Avon valley at Enford and we enjoyed another excellent pub lunch (a feature of most of our walks!) at the Swan. This is another community owned pub and well worth a visit for the warm welcome and good food. The afternoon was spent meandering down the Avon valley, through delightful villages ranging from the large (Netheravon) to the tiny (Coombe). After passing through Figheledean we finished our day feeling very satisfied with our progress.

The final half day saw us making our way on military tracks to Durrington, where we pioneered our own route through the open access land of Durrington Walls, an enormous iron age fort. It is sad that the ancient site of Woodhenge is not presented better and that the interpretation is not more informative. However, the GSW path to Stonehenge is probably the best way to approach this national treasure.

Initially along the line of a disused railway and passing numerous Neolithic burial mounds, you soon come to a gate opening into the Stonehenge site, with a distant view of the stones along The Avenue, the ceremonial route taken by the ancients and probably the route along which the stones were originally transported. As you will know, these days the Stonehenge circle is a disappointment to most of us. It is crudely fenced off and the car park, toilets and tourist

entrance does no justice to one of our most important historical sites. That did not concern my friends and I, however, as we shook hands and congratulated each other on a very enjoyable few days.

Having lived with the GSW for so long now, it is difficult for me to take a dispassionate view of it. It was interesting to get the views of my friends on the GSW – they thought it was wonderful and compared favourably to any of the other walks we have done together.

Ian Ritchie

Ashdown, Ashdown, Ashdown – what’s behind the name?



Ashdown House Copyright Dr Smith

Ashdown lies alongside the Ridgeway on the Lambourn Downs and its name is mainly associated with a National Trust

property, Ashdown House, a Dutch style house created for William, 1st Earl Craven around 1663, but used as the place of exile by James I's daughter Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, "The Winter Queen".

However, Ashdown appears three times in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: in 648AD, 661AD and 871AD. It was clearly a place of some considerable significance to the West Saxons. Why?

There is actually no *Down* called *Ash* and the name may have referred to the Downs between Liddington and Uffington Castles. Liddington is the site of the Battle of Mount Badon where the Britons, supposedly led by King Arthur, inflicted a major defeat on the advancing West Saxons around AD500 (see *Spring Newsletter*). In 661AD the Mercians under Wulfhere, son of Penda, "ravaged up to Ashdown" inflicting a major defeat on the West Saxons. Clearly Ashdown was an ill-fated area for Wessex.

Alongside Ashdown House lies Alfred's Castle which may hold a clue. It is unlike other hillforts along the Ridgeway. It is a very small earthwork enclosure, and is older, dating to the Early Bronze Age (2000 - 1500BC). It was later ringed by a system of linear ditches dated to c900BC, dividing up the landscape differently than found elsewhere. In the early Iron Age it uniquely had contemporary large and small enclosures. In the centre was a very large, deep pit with vertical sides and

a flat bottom probably indicating that it was an important ritual site. During the Romano-British era there was a substantial Romano-British building, a 'villa house', earlier in the local sequence than nearby villas.

Moving on to the 7th century; the nascent Wessex was on the point of extinction. Its leader, Cenwalh was the fourth king in 6 years. His predecessors had struggled for survival against a Mercia that had expanded in all directions and posed a major threat to Wessex. With Mercia in the ascendant, Cenwalh had married the sister of the Mercian King, Penda (a wise move), but foolishly in 648AD he repudiated her in favour of a younger woman (a very bad move). There are 2 versions of what happened next. According to the Anglian Chronicle "*Penda deprived him of his kingdom*". Yet according to the final (West Saxon) version, the Chronicle states "*Cenwalh gave his kinsman Cuthred 3,000 hides of land at Ashdown*". 3,000 hides would have been around 900km² - about the size of Salisbury Plain. This was the final act of a defeated king who fled his kingdom to seek refuge in East Anglia. Perhaps Ashdown was his base.

But it was not all bad news. On 8th January AD871, the great king of Wessex, Alfred, born at Wantage, led the Saxons to victory against the Danes at the Battle of Ashdown, turning the tide of war. Alfred's Castle is claimed to mark the battle

site and in the 1920's a local historian (A D Passmore) wrote *"For years now, the men digging on this estate have been finding iron spearheads and knives of the well-known Saxon forms. They are doubtless relics of Alfred's great battle."*

Ashdown may, therefore, have been remembered because so many pivotal battles had taken place there, especially the battle that brought Alfred to prominence. But there must have been something about the place that made it so central to so many events, something archaeology has yet to uncover.
Jim Gunter

Let's Go Fly....

It is no longer a rare sight, when walking on the Ridgeway to see, wheeling above you, a majestic raptor, the Red Kite. However, only 20 years ago this bird was



rare in Britain with only a few remaining in Wales. Between 1989 and 1994 red kites were introduced from Spain into the Chilterns by the RSPB and English Nature. The rolling, wooded

farmland of the Chilterns suited the birds well and by 1992 they began breeding. There are now over 600 breeding pairs in the area and the Southern England Kite Group have been able to collect 291 chicks for release in other parts of England. All these birds are tagged, with colour tags identifying the age of the bird and where they were found.

The bird is very distinctive with a russet body marked by grey and white, a deeply forked tail (distinguishing it from the Buzzard with its square, stubby tail) and a wing span of almost two metres. The female lays up to 4 eggs which take 5 weeks to hatch.



Red kites are scavengers but will also eat small live animals and invertebrates. They do not however kill lambs or game birds. The success of this reintroduced species is due to tolerance by landowners and actively feeding the birds too, which can lead to some very large flocks.

The 'core area' of Red Kites is along the eastern half of the Ridgeway, but with the continuing success of this bird, we can maybe soon look forward to watching them catch the thermals along the whole length of the Ridgeway.

Louise Tinker

*When out in the Chilterns and Ridgeway
It is often my delight
To see the strong and graceful
Flying of the Red Kite*

*I stop and watch them soar and swoop
And wish as graceful I could be
Sometimes so many flying
Are they flying just for me?*

*They watch me puff around the hills
Thinking, "One day soon she'll drop down dead"
There's enough flesh there for all our dinners
If we keep with her we'll get well fed"*

*So Red Kites so beautiful
And benign as you may look
My message to you is
I'm tougher than I look!*

(With thanks to a FoR member, Kathy Tytler for the above edited poem with a wry ending!)

"BIG CHALK"

A proposal to improve connections between chalk habitats over a large area

Big Chalk is organised by 3 AONBs, North Wessex Downs AONB, Cranborne Chase & West Wiltshire Downs AONB, and Dorset AONB. It covers the chalk downland from the Thames at Goring, south-west across Salisbury Plain to the sea at Weymouth, and encompasses the route of The Ridgeway, GSW and Wessex Ridgeway. The aim of Big Chalk is to link

fragmented habitats in order to provide benefits to wildlife and people and to help mitigate the impact of climate change. Relevant aspects of this are land management, planning, heritage, conservation, community and economic development.

The AONBs invited interested parties to a meeting in the summer to outline the purpose and history so far of Big Chalk and to discuss bidding for a Nature Improvement Area pilot grant. Over 80 people attended from a diverse range of organisations, including County Councils, Wildlife Trusts, Butterfly Conservation, RSPB, Plant Life, English Heritage, Duchy of Cornwall, Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, Defence Infrastructure, Natural England, ARK, Royal Agricultural College and independent farmers. Plenty of ideas were exchanged and at the end of the day the decision was made to bid for the pilot grant. Various suggestions were made as to a project to choose, most in favour of linking currently protected areas together, or improving an existing area. The first stage bid went in September, we await the result.

Janet Hierons

New Membership Fees

Increased fees come into effect for 2012: Individual £8, Family £15, Corporate £15, Life £80, Joint Life £120. If you pay by cheque the Renewal Form will show the new amounts. **If you pay by Standing Order please ask your bank to increase the amount.**

For the Diary

The following talks will be held in the Jubilee room of the Pump House, Faringdon at 7.30pm:

19 January: Jude the Obscure and the Ridgeway by Michael Rigg

19 February: AGM followed by a talk on Owls by Jim Brown and Geoffrey Williams

15 March: Moths and Butterflies by Michael Martin Harvey
Please book with Joyce Gardner at 01367 710743 or joycegardner@hotmail.co.uk

19 July – University of Oxford’s School of Archaeology excavation at Dorchester-on-Thames at 11am

Christine Turner of Stanford in the Vale has died. She was one of our staunchest supporters and great friend of Nigel Forward.

Correspondence for the Spring Issue should be sent to ridgewayfriends@googlemail.com by 1 February. Items for the website can also be sent in 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 and events