

**NEWSLETTER**

Issue 97

Summer 2013

**Notes from the Editor**

Poetry and walking go well together and there is to be a celebration of Edward Thomas's life and works next month. His writings which reflected his love of walking were poignantly written in the two years before he was killed on Easter Monday, 1917 at the age of thirty-nine in the Battle of Arras. Much of his wayfaring took place on the Ridgeway and Icknield Way and he loved these ancient trackways. Jim Gunter's article describes some fascinating and on-going research on the source of the sarsen stones now standing in the Stonehenge ring. Perhaps the answer to the problem will appear in future Newsletters!

Please note that those future Newsletters will not be printed but sent out by e-mail. I'm afraid that the realities of rising postage and printing costs have to be faced. We would like members who have not already done so to let us have their e-mail addresses so that we can issue e-Newletters to them in future; please notify us at [ridgewayfriends@googlemail.com](mailto:ridgewayfriends@googlemail.com). If you don't have e-mail and would like to continue to receive our Newsletters by post please let us know and we shall send copies to you. Thank you.

**The National Trails: Work in Progress**

Despite the warmest and sunniest spell for many years, possibly since 1976, your Committee has not stinted its labours, and has been making some progress towards a new regime for the preservation of The Ridgeway.

As members will be aware, The Ridgeway is managed together with the Thames Path by a National Trails Office (NTO) currently based with Oxfordshire CC in Eynsham, and a Management Group of all the Local Highways Authorities concerned with both Trails. Most of the actual work is done by an efficient and dedicated group of Volunteers. The responsible Government Agency, Natural England (NE), supervises the Trails system as a whole, reporting to DEFRA. Since 2011 the organisation of the National Trails has been under review, with the aim of a more devolved and locally responsive organisation, at, unsurprisingly, a much reduced cost. The Review's recommendations were put out for Consultation in May/June, 2012, and NE, after some delay, eventually published their conclusions in March this year, confirming that the present, reduced level of grant funding will continue, setting out revised Quality Standards and calling for new, more inclusive Trail Partnerships to be formed, with greater autonomy within the existing framework. Operation of the NT web-site has also been devolved to Walk Unlimited, a non-profit company. As



we have reported previously, while we see this as a step forward, we shared the reservations expressed by the Ramblers Association (RA). We called for a new and ambitious vision for the National Trails, and support their proposals for a new National Trails Trust to champion and support a hierarchy of local Trusts for each Trail, operating in the private sector

The door is not closed on RA's proposals, and discussions are in progress at the national level. Meanwhile, it is left to the existing, individual management groups to come up with new delivery frameworks for each Trail. At their invitation, we have put forward proposals for new charitable Trusts to be set up to manage The Ridgeway and Thames Path separately, each new Trust having a much wider membership drawn from the communities and interest groups concerned with the individual Trails. The two AONBs for the countryside traversed by The Ridgeway, the Chilterns Conservation Board and the North Wessex Downs AONB will become involved, as will RA and a broad range of other user and amenity groups, ourselves of course included. The new Trusts will focus particularly on improved integration with the communities and countryside through which the Trails pass, with better promotion and with fundraising. We propose that the existing NTO staff and Volunteers will continue largely unaffected, but hopefully with stronger support, and improved liaison with users and the local communities. Our proposals are now to be assessed in detail, with a view to decisions being taken by the end of the year.

## The Great Stones Way

While the path is open to experienced walkers, who may choose a variety of alternative routes across the Vale of Pewsey, we remain unable to way-mark the trail or to plan for any more substantial improvements, while some of the communities there maintain their objections to the project. We are seeking the help of the local Councillors (some newly elected) and the officers of Wiltshire Council to try to resolve the situation. However, we are delayed once again by a round of re-organisation and redundancies at the Council, affecting the Countryside Access department, and claiming the time of the officials concerned with our project. We remain determined to at least settle the route by the start of next year's walking season, so that we can publish a map and Guide to it, and hopefully resume way-marking and seeking new funding.

## The Stones of Stonehenge

The southern part of the Ridgeway, between Barbury Castle and Overton Hill, follows the crest of the scarp slope of the Marlborough Downs which stretch off towards the east of the trail. A diversion on to the Downs reveals a landscape littered with large blocks of sarsen, extremely hard sandstone, one of the hardest natural materials in Britain. This is the stone used in the famous prehistoric monuments of Wiltshire – Avebury Henge, West Kennet Avenue, West Kennet Long Barrow facade, and Stonehenge itself. Sarsen may have been more widely deposited across the chalk downs of Wiltshire leaving those on the remote Marlborough Downs as a reminder of an older landscape. However, the actual source of the stones for the monuments has remained a mystery, especially for Stonehenge.

The smaller (2 – 4 tons) bluestones at Stonehenge are now generally accepted to have been brought from West Wales, principally the Preseli Mountains and the Nevern Valley. A quarry site in the Nevern valley was excavated last year and produced much evidence for having been worked in the Late Neolithic period about 4,500 years ago. The origin of the larger (up to 30 ton) sarsens stones, forming the trilithons, remains unresolved.

Many consider that, being so large, they must have been brought from sources near to Stonehenge itself. However, there is no evidence for such large stones nowadays anywhere in the vicinity. This,

it has been argued, is due to the stones having been broken up for building material. Yet a building survey carried out by English Heritage a few years ago found no appreciable use of sarsen anywhere within the Stonehenge part of the World Heritage Site.

There are, in fact, no large sarsens in south Wiltshire or in neighbouring Dorset or any major spread of sarsens in the countryside. This is a totally different picture from the north of Wiltshire. It was claimed that, as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in some places it was possible to step from one stone to another for great distances without touching the ground. The Valley of the Stones on the Marlborough Downs has an estimated 25,000 of these stones, some of considerable size. They are so thick on the ground that they have acquired the name “grey wethers” i.e. sheep as they are indistinguishable from the flocks of sheep grazing on the Downs. A quick drive through the villages of the area reveals a massive use of sarsen as building material. Even churches, such as All Saints at Avebury, have huge blocks of this material as their foundations. The Victorians had a local stone cutting industry to fashion sarsens into kerb-stones for the roads as far away as the Embankment in London. Stones were also sent to repair Windsor Castle in the 1930’s and were loaded onto barges on the Kennet and Avon Canal at nearby Honeystreet . Clearly north Wiltshire sarsen stones have long been exploited from the prehistoric to modern times.

These deposits on the Marlborough Downs have, therefore, long been thought to be the most likely source of Stonehenge’s stones. The great antiquarian, William Stukeley, writing in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, suspected that Stonehenge’s sarsens “all seem to be fetcht from the [Downs] Grey Wethers, for the holes yet appear whence such were drawn”. In 1956 Richard Atkinson also proposed that the sarsens came from the Marlborough Downs; in 1961 Patrick Hill suggested that the stones came from quarries north of the river Kennet above Clatford.

However, no serious search for the stone quarries has been undertaken, in part because of an expectation that few archaeological traces would remain. In 2004, as part of the background research for the Channel 5 *Stonehenge Live* programme, I carried out a geophysical survey of one potential site. This was at Delling just 500 metres off the Ridgeway path near to the path, known as Green Street or the Herepath, down to Avebury. The hollow measured a little more than the largest of Stonehenge’s stones and expectations were high. Results, unfortunately, failed to live up to the hype. The only obvious feature found was a rabbit warren.

This summer, the first extensive search for quarries is to be carried out across the Downs. The project is a joint collaboration between various universities – Bournemouth, Leicester, Southampton and University College London – as well as freelance archaeologists. It will be mainly a non-intrusive survey, without excavations, instead attempting to identify and map as many trilithon sized hollows likely to have been areas of sarsen extraction. Scatters of broken fragments of stone in the vicinity of these hollows will be checked for evidence of how they were broken. Modern breakages usually leave tell-tale traces of metal wedges. This should help eliminate the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries from the potentially older quarries. In addition petrological analysis of the Stonehenge stones has found that some of them have inclusions of ferrous nodules and this will be used as a further means of identifying specific sarsen sources. Geophysical surveys will also be undertaken over those hollows which show the greatest potential. More intensive investigations will be left for later years.

Even if quarries matching the Stonehenge blocks are discovered, that still leaves the really big problem – how were these stones physically transported to Stonehenge over 30 kilometres to the south and with the slopes from the chalk plains into and out of the Vale of Pewsey to traverse? And by which route? More on this in a future article.

Jim Gunter

## Edward Thomas weekend

The Icknield Way Association (IWA) are arranging, in conjunction with the Edward Thomas Fellowship (ETF), a joint week-end event to celebrate the centenary of the publication of Thomas's well-known book, "The Icknield Way", and have kindly invited members of The Friends of The Ridgeway to participate. The route that Thomas describes is of course not just the modern Icknield Way between Thetford and Ivinghoe Beacon with which IWA concerns itself today, but the ancient Great Chalk route across England which we refer to as the ancient Ridgeway, and the event is likely to appeal to many FoR members familiar with Thomas's Great War poems and his other works.

The plan is for a weekend event 28th/29th September. On the morning of 28th September there will be a short, guided walk, to Deacon Hill from Pirton, at which all will be welcome, followed by lunch. In the afternoon there will be a talk by Hugh Thomson, author of 'The Green Road into the Trees: a Walk Through England'. The Edward Thomas Fellowship will then give a talk which will be rounded off by our Chairman, Ian Ritchie who will then give a presentation on the Great Stones Way. After tea, there will a showing of the Icknield Way film produced by Luisetta Mudie, followed by the IWA AGM, and a celebration pub dinner. On Sunday, 29<sup>th</sup>, there will be another morning walk on the Icknield Way, with pauses for readings from Edward Thomas's works ending with a pub lunch. IWA and the ETF have agreed to locate the event towards the western end of the Icknield Way Path so that the event will be convenient for members of the Friends of the Ridgeway wishing to participate. We are sure it will be a special and memorable weekend and hope that many of you will be able to take part for at least part of the time!

The Edward Thomas Fellowship anticipate some 20 + of their members will take part, and IWA estimate 15-25 IWA members participating, in at least some parts of the programme. It would of course be helpful to know how many members might be interested in taking part in some/all of the weekend. IWA Committee members John & Gil Boardman are organising the event in conjunction with Richard Emeny and Colin Thornton of ETF. FoTR's participation is being co-ordinated by Geoff Dare, and anyone planning to attend the week-end is asked to contact him ([geoffshashi@btinternet.com](mailto:geoffshashi@btinternet.com), or 01628629976).

For those who are interested in staying the night close by, the Icknield Way Association have provided us with details of some local accommodation:

Putteridge Bury B&B [www.putteridgebury.com](http://www.putteridgebury.com)

The Live and Let Live at Pegsdon [www.liveandletlive.co.uk](http://www.liveandletlive.co.uk)

The Lilley Arms, Lilley [www.lilley-arms.co.uk](http://www.lilley-arms.co.uk)

The Chequers, Streatley [www.thechequersstreatley.co.uk](http://www.thechequersstreatley.co.uk)

### **Proposed Programme:**

#### Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> September

10.00am-10.30am Arrival at the Pirton Sports and Social Club, our base for the day. Address is The Recreation Ground, Walnut Tree Road, Pirton, Hitchin SG5 3PX, Landranger 166 150315 [www.pirtonssc.co.uk](http://www.pirtonssc.co.uk)

10.30am-12.30pm Walk led by IWA starting at Pirton and going to Deacon Hill and back along the Icknield Way. Approximately four miles with shorter options if desired. Ending at Pirton SSC.

- 1.00pm-2.00pm “platter” buffet lunch in Pirton SSC. A bar will be available or, for those who prefer, there are two nearby pubs in Pirton, The Motte and Bailey [www.themotteandbaileypirton.com](http://www.themotteandbaileypirton.com) and The Fox [www.pirton.org.uk/thefox/](http://www.pirton.org.uk/thefox/)
- 2.00pm-2.50pm Talk by Hugh Thomson author of ‘The Green Road into the Trees’
- 2.50pm-3.10pm Talk by Richard Emeny, Chairman, The Edward Thomas Fellowship
- 3.10pm-3.30pm Talk on the Great Stones Way by Ian Ritchie, Chairman, Friends of the Ridgeway
- 3.30pm–4.00pm Tea
- 4.00pm-4.30pm *The Ickniel Way* , a film produced by Luisetta Mudie
- 4.30pm-5.00pm IWA will hold its formal AGM
- Evening: A meal can be arranged at The Motte and Bailey. A reply slip to indicate interest accompanies this programme and for those wishing to join the evening meal, menu choices can be made in the morning of the event.

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> September

- 10.00am-12.00am Walk on the Ickniel Way with readings from Edward Thomas en route organised by ETF.

**BOOKING FORM**

I / (we) am / (are) coming to the IWA annual meeting on:

- Saturday
- Sunday
- I / we would like a buffet lunch on Saturday (and will make a donation)
- I / we would like to book an evening meal on Saturday (and will be paying on the night)

Name .....

Address .....

.....

Tel: ..... Email .....

**RSVP by 21 Sept** to: Chris James, 56 Back Street, Ashwell, Baldock SG7 5PE.  
[Chrisjames56@btinternet.com](mailto:Chrisjames56@btinternet.com)

## Moulsford to Aldworth Walk – recommended by a FoR Member

### (9 miles)

Park in the recreation ground car park in Moulsford (SU 590 839) beside the A329, marked by a bus shelter and telephone box.

Leave the car park by walking along a gravel track to the pavilion, then join a track with a right hand hedge to the right hand corner of the first sports field.. Go through the hedge gap then bear left, cutting diagonally across the second sports field to the left hand corner.

Go through this gap, immediately right and left onto a path. Climb the path, passing under a pylon. After ¼ mile, turn left through a hedge gap then right towards the A417, now with the hedge to your right.

Cross the A417 with care, and pass through the metal gate to Starveall Farm. After passing the farm buildings on your left and just past a pond, turn left onto a tarmac farm track, climbing steeply towards Devil's Ditch.

After the summit, drop down along the tarmac track where it turns left; go straight on to a grassy track for 100 yards to a signpost. Here bear left uphill through woodland, then bear right and downwards towards Cow Common.

Here turn right (signed) along a grassy track, meeting a tarmac road, along the edge of Cow Common. Continue for 700 yards. Where the tarmac track divides both left and right, at a grassy triangle, go straight on to a path between two way marked posts into woodland.



Follow this path as it bears left near farm buildings and a house. It then bears right to a stile . Cross the stile and turn right through a metal gate to reach the Ridgeway.

Go west along the Ridgeway for 350 yards, then turn left on a track along the side of Streatley Warren , with marvellous views towards the Goring / Thames gap and the Chilterns . After ½ mile, bear right then turn left onto the minor road into Aldworth . In Aldworth , bear left for The Bell public house . (Closed on Mondays –does wonderful ham & beef rolls etc, but no hot food).

After lunch re-trace your steps back to the Ridgeway and to the stile beside the house. Cross the stile and take the path straight ahead (ignoring the earlier path on the right which you took on the outward trip). The new path is waymarked through woodland to the top of Deans Bottom. Leave the woodland going straight ahead, then bear right on level ground, then descend towards Unhill Bottom.

On a clear day the views here of the Chilterns, the Wittenhams, Didcot & distant Oxford are remarkable. As the path descends, ignore a crossing track, and then follow down to a left hand metal gate. Here turn right (waymarked ) onto a grassy track between fences , which takes you to the start of Unhill Bottom .

Follow Unhill Bottom back towards Starveall Farm , but just before the first farm building , cross a left hand stile and take the waymarked path , which leads across a field to a right hand fence , then to a stile . Cross the stile and turn right to the road junction at Kingstanding Hill. Cross the A417 again, and take the minor road on the right (Halfpenny Lane) for 1/3 mile.

Just before houses on the left, turn right (signed) for ½ a mile downhill on a wide grassy track towards Moulsoford. Pass a metal gate then turn right into Willow Court Lane and back to the recreation field. At a wooden gate, go across a sports field to find a hedge gap half way along the left hand hedge. Here turn left and back to the pavilion and car park.

4 miles to lunch

5 miles after lunch

9 miles total

## Lapwing

*Vanellus vanellus*

Lapwings also go by the name of ‘peewit’ owing to their shrill call, or Green Plover. I was lucky to see several pairs this spring on cultivated fields close to the chalk ridge. They are instantly recognisable by their call and round-winged shape in flight – hence the name lapwing, which describes their wavering and flickering flight. Male birds also perform a tumbling courtship flight. Male and female birds appear similar although the male has a taller crest. The magnificent crest and iridescent green and purple plumage of both birds give them an exotic appearance.



- They are a wader which breeds on cultivated land and pasture. Breeding occurs between April and July. Small scrapes are made in the ground for 3-4 mottled greenish-brown eggs. The chicks are capable of running only moments after hatching. The parent birds are highly protective of their young and will ‘mob’ other birds in the vicinity, even horses and cattle (and the occasional walker!) They can also act as a decoy by drawing potential predators away from its nest by trailing a wing as if broken.
- They feed on insects and, like the Golden Plover, prefer to feed during moonlight. Grazed and partly flooded pasture provides good foraging.

During the winter they flock on arable land and mud-flats. These flocks are most common in northern England and eastern Scotland. They migrate to far-flung destinations, as far south as north Africa, Pakistan or parts of China.

There was a dramatic decline in number of lapwing in the last thirty years and it is now a Red List species. Natural England offer grants to farmers to provide suitable non-cropped sites for ground-nesting birds, such as the lapwing, especially if these sites are close to foraging habitats.

Louise Tinker

## VALE OF WHITE HORSE Local Group:

**21 November - Roger Wyatt – a talk on Wildlife of the Ridgeway**

## Future Events:

Sunday 8 September 2-3pm, National Trust '**Hidden history: Stonehenge barrows**'.

Who were those Bronze Age people whose remains lie buried in ancient barrows? Booking 08442 491895 adults £2.

Saturdays 14 & 28 September 2-4.30pm. National Trust '**Autumn Archaeology walk**'. Stonehenge. Booking 08442 491895 adults £2.

Sunday 15 September 2pm. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust guided walk over **Fyfield Down Nature Reserve** SU159700. Sarsen stones, downland flowers, mammals and birds. (no dogs). (01249 657684, 01249 660008).

Saturday 28 Sept, 10am to 4pm. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust '**Country comes to town & AGM**' in the Market Square and Corn Exchange Devizes. A celebration of wild Wiltshire, country activities, food & cooking, children's activities and demonstrations and stalls.

**Ridgeway Conservation volunteer tasks** [ntvolunteers@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:ntvolunteers@oxfordshire.gov.uk) (01865) 810211 from Darian Jeffs of the national trails office.

Major tasks planned during August and September are surface works near Waylands Smithy, Blowingstone Hill and Kingston Lisle and near Princes Risborough.

Correspondence for the website, which can be sent at any time, should be sent to [ridgewayfriends@googlemail.com](mailto:ridgewayfriends@googlemail.com)

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.

For an update on progress on the Friends of the Ridgeway's project – the Great Stones Way, see our website at [www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk](http://www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk)  
[www.atathttp://www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk/greatstonesway.ridgewayfriends.org.uk](http://www.atathttp://www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk/greatstonesway.ridgewayfriends.org.uk)

### HOUSE HISTORY RESEARCH

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