



## Autumn Newsletter, October 2018



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### From the Chairman

Dear Friends

This summer has been one of the best on record for enjoying the Ridgeway and also, apparently, for English wine, where a bumper vintage is anticipated. But, since the last Newsletter, it has not been a vintage time for the Ridgeway and the Friends of the Ridgeway.

Issues affecting the Ridgeway have continued with various reports concerning motorised traffic on the trail. Additionally also recently a report of illegal fly-tipping continuing; the wood at the top of the hill above East Hundred has had some campers/parties in the wood by the car park leaving lots of rubbish including two plastic chairs and some cooking pans. Why oh why do people behave like this?

We must be vigilant if we are to protect the Ridgeway. The objective of the Friends of the Ridgeway has been and remains to *'preserve the ancient Ridgeway paths along the chalk downs of Southern England'* in particular from the ravages of motor vehicles.

However our ability to continue is dependent on recruiting some volunteers to help run and administer the organisation. Over the last year, for various reasons, two Committee Members have stepped down and others have been restricted in their activities by health issues. If you value the Ridgeway, please volunteer to make a small contribution of time to help so that we can fulfil our objectives.



*Volunteers work on maintaining the Uffington White Horse*

Volunteers to join the Committee are urgently needed and would be most welcome. Please don't hesitate, just email, telephone or write to me and I'll be delighted to hear from you.

We were sad to learn that Sir Adrian Swire had passed away. His support for the Ridgeway over the years has been much valued appreciated and, in particular, his backing for the Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize. His charming and

generous personnel involvement and encouragement has been much appreciated and helped to establish the Ridgeway as an artistic inspiration. He loved the Ridgeway and showed this love in generous ways.

Within these concerns, there is good news for our much-loved Ridgeway.

For many of us, the Ridgeway is a lot more than a walking trail – it is a historic monument, an archaeological treasure and, certainly for me, it is an artistic inspiration. This perception has led to us establishing the Swire Ridgeway Art Prize. It is now recognised as an annual competition and exhibition and will again be held again in 2019.

As members are aware, our preservation interests extend beyond the Ridgeway National Trail to the chalk trackways more generally, and we have a long-standing ambition to raise awareness of the ancient routes between the Wash and the Dorset coast. Plans for the Great Chalk Way, whilst slower than hoped due to health issues, are advancing. If you would like to help explore and establish this coast to coast track, we would be delighted to hear from you.

Summer is over and we are into the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. And then, of course, the festive season so let me wish you a happy Christmas and the peaceful New Year.

With all best wishes  
*Anthony Burdall*

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### **Motor Vehicle Stakeholder Working Group**

In 2017 the Motor Vehicle Stakeholder Working Group was established by Natural England as follow up to the Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. It's task was to establish some sort of guidance or code of good practice that can be used in establishing local agreements. The act reclassified as restricted byways unsealed green lanes within the National Parks and AONBs, or forming part of National Trails. We are represented on this group; reporting after the initial meeting I observed that it was like the battle between the Capulets and Montagues.

The stakeholders group continues to limp along without reaching any agreement on any of the issues it is charged with considering. Battle has now been suspended until at least Spring or Summer 2019. Meanwhile DEFRA will consult



the highway and national park authorities on how best to implement the recommendations for reforming the traffic regulation order (TRO) process made by the House of Lords Select Committee, in its review of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. As far as the Ridgeway is concerned, this group is of limited significance as much of the Ridgeway National Trail is covered by TROs.

In their Autumn 2018 Newsletter, GLEAM (Green Lanes Environmental Action Movement) noted that the Select Committee wanted TROs to be used *'more widely and more flexibly to address some of the evident ongoing problems on green lanes'*. This was to be *'the first step in any new approach'*. The Select Committee said that the Government should secure *'better value, greater flexibility and applicability in the use of TROs to manage problems resulting from "green-laning"'*. The Government are reported to want *'to ensure that green lanes are suitable for purpose and can be used by ever more people'*. We hope this means that the Government has realised that the purpose of green lanes is not to provide a playground for off-roaders. Off-roaders' activities deter walkers, horse riders, cyclists, carriage-drivers and the disabled. Instead, green lanes should provide safe and tranquil access to the countryside for non-motorised users.

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### Motor traffic in World Heritage Site

There has been a suggestion that we should investigate the possibility of the Ridgeway being granted World Heritage Site status. With this thought in mind, my eye was caught by a Guardian article headed 'Ban 4x4 off-roading in Lake District, campaigners say'. This is at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/13/ban-4x4-off-roading-in-the-lake-district-campaigners-say> The Lake District is the UK's newest World Heritage Site and it is alleged that motor traffic in national park threatens world heritage status.



A patch of land in the Lake District once owned by Beatrix Potter and described by Alfred Wainwright as "the loveliest in Lakeland" is being ruined by 4x4 drivers who are threatening the world heritage site status of the national park, according to campaigners. They say cars and motorbikes have devastated farm tracks, churning up soil and exposing the bedrock beneath, leaving them impassable to farm traffic.



The problem is acute in a one-mile square of land just north of Coniston Water. World Heritage Watch, a global non-governmental organisation that advises Unesco, passed a resolution to try to protect the site because it said the world heritage status of the Lake District as a whole was being "violated".

Unesco has been asked to make the Lake District's continued inscription as a world heritage site dependent on action being taken to prevent further damage caused by the vehicles. "The disturbance and destruction unquestionably caused by 4x4 vehicles is certainly not in conformity with the values which the Lake District stands for: serenity, harmony, tranquillity, nature conservation and traditional rural ways of life," said the WHW chairman, Stephan Dömpke. "The purpose of world heritage site status is the protection and conservation of sites for which an outstanding universal value (OUV) has been defined." Dömpke said if action was not taken to preserve the OUV in the Lake District, Unesco could choose to revoke the inscription, awarded in July last year.

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## The Great Chalk Way



*From the coast of Dorset along the Ridgeway to the coast of Norfolk*

The Friends of the Ridgeway Association's objective is to work for the preservation of all of the ancient Ridgeway tracks, by promoting public awareness and enjoyment of this unique and important part of our heritage.

We continue to campaign for the protection of the whole of the ancient Ridgeway, working with the Ridgeway Partnership and others to promote its value to the whole community as an essential part of everyone's life and heritage; and to represent any concerns about the Ridgeway to those responsible for its maintenance. We seek to engage people living near to and using the ancient Ridgeway in activities that spread knowledge and appreciation of its wealth of historic, artistic and environmental features.

Our long-term aspiration is to work with other Associations and well-wishers to achieve the creation of a coast-to-coast recreational walking/riding route, including disabled access, along the line of the ancient Ridgeway braided tracks between Norfolk and Dorset. We call this route The Great Chalk Way. This article is the first of several that will aim to summarise our progress towards this long term goal. The existing Ridgeway National Trail, formed in 1972, forms less than ¼ of the Great Chalk Way as a whole. So we have much work to do to establish the full coast-to-coast route of the Great Chalk Way.

Our aims for this route are:

- To utilise existing rights of way;
- To maximise the route's scenic beauty;
- To maximise the route's use of key historical landmarks;
- To be true as possible to the historical route utilised throughout history.

The initial step has been to identify fellow travellers that share these aspirations for the creation of this Great Chalk Way and to form a joint working group to drive our efforts towards establishment of this route. To date we have engaged with:

(a) The Icknield Way Association. An advocacy and protection group for the ancient Icknield Way. They provide knowledge and support to identify the route from the northerly end of the Ridgeway National Trail at Ivinghoe Beacon

(b) Ian Ritchie. Ex Friends of the Ridgeway Chair & Ridgeway Partnership Chair & author of The Great Stones Way route across Wiltshire. Ian provides knowledge and detailed route finding help for the southerly route from Avebury across Wiltshire and Dorset to the coast.

(c) Tim Lewis. Ramblers Footpath Secretary for Wiltshire. Tim also provides detailed knowledge of Wiltshire and Dorset to assist in the definition of this southerly route.

At this early stage we are very much in the preliminary stage of route planning. The central section of the route will be the Ridgeway National Trail.

South of the Ridgeway National Trail we are proposing the existing Great Stones Way route south from Avebury (actually The Sanctuary) to Old Sarum near Salisbury. Consideration is being given to routing the walk through Avebury village and also including Silbury Hill. Beyond Salisbury we are in the process of active route finding across Cranborne Chase to link with the Wessex Ridgeway in Dorset near Tollard Royal. Several days have already been spent walking alternative routes. From Tollard Royal to the Dorset coast we propose to utilise the existing Wessex Ridgeway.

North of the Ridgeway National Trail, we are proposing the existing Icknield Way route north from Ivinghoe Beacon to Thetford. From Thetford north to the Norfolk coast we are still in the desk/map based route finding phase but would wish to include ancient monuments along the way.

These are still early days in this long term project and no route is yet set in stone. If you have a passion for the establishment of The Great Chalk Way with local knowledge please get engaged by contacting us via our website at <https://www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk/contact-us/> .

I look forward to providing further updates as this exciting project as it moves forward.

*Andy Greenhalgh*

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### **The Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize 2019**

The Friends of the Ridgeway are delighted to announce that the Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize will again be held in April 2019.

The aim of the competition is to bring The Ridgeway to life not only as a long distance trail but as an artistic inspiration, and to show The Ridgeway, its history and environs, in all their aspects throughout all seasons. The theme of the competition is 'Spirit of the Ridgeway'.



There will be an exhibition of works submitted for the competition as part of the Ridgeway Friends Day. It will be open to the public on Saturday 27 April and Sunday 28 April 2018 in the Thomas Hughes Memorial Hall, Uffington (Broad Street, Uffington, Oxfordshire, SN7 7RA), located in the centre of the beautiful and historic rural village of Uffington in the Vale of the White Horse. The Ridgeway Friends Day will be on Sunday 28 April 2019 which will include our AGM as well as the arts prize giving. Definitely a date for the diary – Sunday 28 April 2019.

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## 2018 Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize winner

The winning entry for the 2018 Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize, after much debate amongst the judges, was a written work 'Time Travelling'.

The number and standard of the written entries was outstanding with several pieces commanding attention. Clover Stroud commented that every single entry had real merits and picking a winner was a very difficult job. Ultimately, 'Time Travelling' by Alison Jane Green, was chosen as winner of the written work category. Clover said *"I felt that Alison combined both a vivid sense of the geography and history of Europe's oldest road with a sensitivity and lyricism that I found extremely moving. Indeed I was moved to tears by the final paragraph, and reading her entry gave me a strong sense of what it FEELS like to travel the Ridgeway, conveying the singular journey through time and space that walking this incredible environment can leave one with"*.

### TIME TRAVELLING

At breakfast this morning, a small porcelain dish of words has been carefully secreted amongst the home-made honey and preserves. The intention is to pick a literary portent, without looking first, and live the day accordingly.

Preamble, forerunner, what you will, assumed original meaningfulness on arrival yesterday. I walked nine or ten miles past white horses of both the living and chalky types just to be where the Ridgeway begins, but it may as well have been journey's end in this world. With unexpected serendipity, my hostess takes me to close-at-hand woodland where the source of sacred water has been uncovered. Into this, I'm encouraged to dip my weary feet. Later, we visit an enormous yew tree whose trunk has divided in two, leaving a space to hide within the bark. It all seems perfectly natural which, of course, it is. Thus, the dish of words comes as no surprise and my compliance even less so.

My word is 'surrender'. I don't understand what it means.

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With Milk Hill to the rear, I commence my ascent of the Ridgeway on what will become the hottest day for many years in England's living memory. But I am beginning my trek to somewhere away from living memory, into a surprisingly remote landscape that even the lowland, thyme-flavoured, time-forgotten sheep have forsaken. For them, the herb infused chalky grasslands are preferable. You know where you are with a piece of pasture; in every sense. The incline is almost unnoticeable, unless you happen to be walking up towards the first and most important of Albion's astutely named highways. There are a few sporadic clumps of trees and bushes ahead but the horizon beyond is a clear straight line bisecting what lies below and above. Even so, the huge sky remains an integral part of the all-enveloping landscape.

It occurs to me that, already, I am no longer an intruder and I momentarily rest on the ground at the point where the Ridgeway crosses the Wansdyke Path. Just another old girl alongside those two ancients. I feel about a million miles away from this morning's honey and preserves; from my home and from anyone I ever consciously knew in what I thought was my time. Here, a moment becomes an interminable measure of nothingness and the opportunity to stay awhile evolves into philosophical reverie: can people who have been wrapped in the pattern of a landscape hold it, unknowingly, in perpetuity for their subsequent incarnations? Do folk who choose to walk into the unknown unconsciously guard something more than a passed-down memory or even an instinct of the Otherworld? My Ridgeway is a paradoxical highway: both unimaginable but simultaneously obvious as it stretches across the topography of middle earth offering a tempting confusion of numerous tentacles and trackways leading to other ridges and routes.

Nonetheless, on entering the beech and conifer woods, I become distracted and confused. The veteran trees, baring their ancient scars from a lifetime of battle, sport intricate bark patterns providing a place called home for fungi and insects and small mammals; inexplicably, they make me anxious. On my map, I mark the place where, earlier, I sat and rested: Red Shore. But what to make of the unexpected darkness of the ancient trees wherein I feel just the tiniest bit alone? This is Britain's oldest road and the noises emanating from within the overhanging branches sound as if they might belong to something that's been here since long before the way was first forged.

Just as I'm reflecting on the sense, or otherwise, of my lone journey, I'm suddenly able to mark the next place of importance on my map: the place where the lucky feather lays waiting. For looking down, I find a beautiful unseen hawk has left me a kindly remnant of his passing. I thread it into my hat and almost immediately the feather weaves its miraculous spell: the woods close over behind me and I emerge into a vast and untroubled open landscape. I have stepped through a portal into the sun-soaked hidden past and I wonder whether my gasp has been noted by the spirits that roam hereabouts.

Walking along Cow Down, it's difficult to digest what this Otherworld offers. The land is strewn with long barrows and tumuli. Sarsen stones decorate the fuzzy fields and tiny pathways wind up and down and round and about like intricate embroidery. Borders are embellished with old plants: cow parsley, amaranth, brown and green grasses, ragwort and a sprinkling of coralroot. And in the distance, like the proverbial jewel in this precious crown of innumerable spoils, rises the majesty of Silbury Hill. Finally, I understand the meaning of that scrap of paper in the porcelain bowl for there is nothing to be done except surrender to the magnificence of it all. Later, I discover that a recent theory suggests the process of construction of Silbury Hill was probably more important than the end result; which seems rather like my walk along the Ridgeway.

It seems apposite to end my journal recording here, somewhere in nowhere. But, I deviate and tag along behind countless other travellers who, walking for eons through this countryside, have temporarily left the Ridgeway to journey towards Avebury. For the Ridgeway, like our short and indeterminate lives, is not a straight and orderly line: it's a track with important diversions. I cross the road from Londinium to Aquae Sulis and cut through a gap in the hedge that the Romans missed. Did those not-so-ancient intruders forge a path, as quickly as they could, away from the all-powerful signs of the past? I skirt around the perimeter of golden barley to find myself walking bravely alone down the Avenue. There are no visible souls here: just five thousand year old ravens perched, like sentinels, on the stones of the past. It's like Silbury, it's like the Ridgeway: it's the procession which holds the meaning.

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Further down the track

*'...there was a main sight of strange old things up there on the hill, besides the White Horse; and though he didn't know much about how they got there, he was sort of proud of them, and was glad to pay his pound or two... to keep them as they should be'. (Hughes, The Scouring of the White Horse, 1859)*

I'm on the Ridgeway once more. What is reputedly the oldest road in the country has become an enticing, demanding magnet that I am unable and unwilling to dislodge. I travel many miles by car just for the joy of standing on the old country. I am as an exile returned: one of a nameless diaspora dreaming of a not-quite-forgotten home. But, even in the now-time, in this incarnation, I am not completely new to these parts: something has lodged itself immovably within the memory that has been generally interfered with over a lifetime. When I was a very small child, nearly sixty years ago, I was taken from my primary school to see the White Horse at Uffington. Despite the annual outing being an intensely anticipated event, I have no recall of places we visited in other years. In truth, I only really remember two things about the trip to what was probably never referred to as the Ridgeway. The first was the profusion of wild flowers, especially the shy cerulean harebells startled by the intensity of their neighbours, the sapphire cornflowers. The second was the horse itself which, in those infantile days, never looked like a horse in my small eyes but, more romantically, as an elongated dragon stretching its fiery way across the hill.

Today, as I walk towards Wayland's Smithy, I am once more embraced by timelessness. It seems like a cliché but why seek another word or expression when this is the power of the Ridgeway? For a long while, I am all alone in the morning sunshine, just another solitary traveller on a route well-trodden. I am happy to be alone. I feel privileged to have this all to myself, especially as the Ridgeway seems permanently overseen by the sun on my travels. Somewhere down in the valley are the unseen dreaming spires of Oxford: a city ancient and enduring in itself but somehow new when compared with the agelessness of the track I tread. Unexpectedly, a man runs out of the past accompanied by a dirty Neolithic dog. 'Good morning', I greet him happily but the exhausted man has run through so many years he can only lift a vaguely acknowledging hand as he passes by.

Wayland was initially apprenticed to the trolls who, as everyone knows, were masters of metal craft. Wayland was a quick learner and soon outshone his bosses by becoming the best smith in the western world. Legend has him living in caves and burial mounds all over Europe, secretly repairing metal objects for gods and kings. Clearly, this is nonsense because when you see his Oxfordshire smithy, which comprises a chambered long barrow constructed 5000 years ago, you just know this is THE place. Perhaps it was more obviously accessible in the past to those who trod the route in the company of animals needing repair courtesy of the master. Today, the smithy is hidden within a verdant copse some little way from the Ridgeway. In fact, the few modern visitors tramping the route this morning seem to be ignoring the signpost. These loud Sunday folk are spaniel-ridden and drowned in Barbour as they trudge a path that, to them, apparently avoids a church or any sense of spirituality.

Well, white horses for courses and all that stuff, and the way is free to all denominations, and those of none. Discrimination is an unknown quantity up here. Me, I've come to see the past and Wayland's Smithy epitomises everything the Ridgeway chooses to offer in the way of atmospheric sideshows. Mind you, today's peaceful environment belies a far more violent age. The latest research on bone dating here has overturned previous theories surrounding Neolithic life which, it transpires, was short, sharp and horribly brutal. More recently, a tradition of depositing coins in the cracks between the stones was all the rage — a sort of 'ritualistic narrative' as one folklorist claimed. I think it sounds a rather nice thing to do but the practice has been latterly discouraged to save the unseen wardens the job of coin removal. I feel there's something missing from this story. Possibly a sufficient number of wardens.

I turn tail and walk up and along the Ridgeway towards the White Horse. Saving the best for last, I'm appalled to find a change in the weather. I don't know why — after all, this is England and from nowhere come black clouds full of rain. Finding a still dry stump, I take shelter under a hawthorn and retrieve my notebook. It's another delight of the Ridgeway that one can simply sit in the rain recording one's journey without hindrance or judgement. 'Writing your memoirs?' a passing stranger asks. Well, as a matter of fact, yes, I don't say. I just smile benignly. No matter: the shower passes and the sky is big enough to hold the promise of imminent sunshine as I continue on my way. A flock of pretty sheep have pushed themselves against the fence. Shorn to the extreme, they are seeking shelter from the wind. I stop to speak to them when, to my left, I see the red kite sweeping and soaring. It's such a joyous moment. I've seen buzzards and the small birds that took rest amongst the hawthorn but, concentrating on prehistory, I've forgotten to look for today's nature. Now, away from the hedge-lined track, in the vast openness of the White Horse Hill and Uffington Castle, nature and history merge into nothing less than what we might call the spirit of the Ridgeway.

In the village where I'm staying, and where the horse is continuously celebrated, I discovered Thomas Hughes' informative little tract so I know all about the sideshows of the sometimes long-ago, sometimes recent, nineteenth century that took place on Uffington Castle. Villagers and travellers and gypsies, alongside the squire, would sport their feasting, games and general reverie after a collective cleaning of the horse. Today, it's a windy hillfort keeping its secrets and the lives it has witnessed safe as it rests quietly. People may place whatever meanings and interpretations they want on the Uffington White Horse but still they flock here in the hundreds and thousands. Tribes and governments have come and gone; beliefs and values have disappeared, yet still the horse remains, surveying the landscape over which it reigns supreme.

On the way down, I see the red kite again in the distance and stand for some time in contemplation hoping it will come close, but it's busy over Wayland's Smithy. Finally, I sit on a bench near the car park looking back at the horse and watching more visitors trudge up the hill towards it. Except that no-one is really trudging. Two grandparents come through the gate with a small child aged about three years old. 'Can you see the horse?' asks Grandpa. The small person looks around, anxious to please but clearly looking for a live animal. 'Over there, on the hill', says Grandpa. The boy sees it and all the emotions in his little world pass across his face in a millisecond: 'It's there, it's there', he cries pointing excitedly. And just at that moment, when all of us have been busy looking elsewhere, the red kite soars from the grass where it has hidden less than twenty feet in front of me. And all the emotions in my small world fly over my head and it makes me cry.

*Alison Jane Green*