

THE RIDGEWAY

PART ONE

The problem with the Ridgeway is that it doesn't seem to obey the rules. The official long-distance path starts at Ovebury Hill and end at Ivanhoe Beacon. But when you are up on the walk it seems as if the Ridgeway has different plans. There are a multiple of directions that the track could take you. That's not to say the Ridgeway per se is badly sign posted or anything like that. It's just that I always feel that it would be easy to get distracted and end up taking a different spur of the ridge or going further in a particular direction. The Ridgeway seems to know where it is going and that you could walk along it in multiple directions.

That's probably one of the appeals of walking the Ridgeway. Its physical attributes: the geology and geography that lead you along. And along the way it opens up its history to you, its natural history as well as its past, and of course there is no getting away from the chalk and flint.

I'm starting at Streatley. And heading south. I will explain why in a moment. So, I'm going to refer to this as the southern section of the Ridgeway. The northern section up to Ivanhoe Beacon I'll leave for another podcast.

Streatley sits on a kink in the river, on the other side to Goring. The latter takes the honours for the geographic feature known as the Goring Gap.

The Gap is a literally a 'gap' in the chalk ridge.

In geological time the proto-Thames flowed north eastwards to enter the North Sea. During the ice age the Thames was held back, by a wall of ice. And a lake developed which submerged the Oxford plain. It was frozen in winter but thawed in summer. As ice piled on top of ice and pushed against the high hills, a glacial valley was cut. Carved through the chalk. When the ice age eventually came to

an end and the ice receded, the Thames adopted the new southerly route through the Goring Gap.

This meant that Goring – and Streatley – became the centre of crossroads. The chalk ridge going northeast to southwest and the Thames going north to southeast. It's no wonder that prehistoric finds have been made nearby. At this intersection of two long distance routes. The Romans came this way. There is a villa nearby and a Roman road, more a B road, a cause way, that leads to Bicester. It was also a border town so to speak. Between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia.

Our route is over the river and up the hill to get to the Ridgeway itself.

The first few miles are a climb, there's no getting away from it. But apart from that the route is easy going. It's tarmacked for a while along Rectory Road.

And yet within a mile or so takes you into open countryside with fields on both sides. The chalkiness underneath is soon apparent.

The route takes me to Compton Downs.

I am heading southward for a particular reason.

Hilaire Belloc authored a book in 1913 called *The Old Road*. It was about the Pilgrims' Way. Belloc provides lots of detail on the precise direction that the terrace way took and why it went one way rather than another.

He also recognised that the Pilgrims' Way had been appropriated by the narrative of Thomas Becket, and that the way follows a much more ancient track. *The Old Road*. A track that doesn't start at Winchester and end at Canterbury but actually starts at Dover on the coast and passes through Salisbury Plain. Belloc suggests that there are five chalk ridgeways across southern England, the extended Pilgrims' way as well as the Ridgeway I am currently following that all come together on – or spiral out from – Salisbury Plain. And therefore, the direction I am following – south from the River Thames by Streatley – is one of these tracks, that will – like the four others – take to me to the prehistoric sites of Avebury, Donnington Walls, and Stonehenge.

The landscape is scattered with tumuli of one description or another. To the right, at the junction in Roden Downs where five tracks come together, is Lowbury Hill. Despite its name it is the highest point hereabouts at just over 600 feet. It is the site of a Saxon burial, built on the site of a lonely Romano British villa. I say lonely because most sites are to be found lower down the slopes and along the Thames Valley itself.

The Ridgeway is being stalked or mirrored at this point by Grims Ditch. The earthwork is piecemeal. That is to say that nowadays it's not fully joined up but at one point during the Iron Age when it was created it would have been an impressive sight cut into the white chalk with a ditch and a wall. Probably marking the boundary between one tribe and another.

The Iron Age is the period just before the Romans arrived. From 800 BC to 100BC. It is as the name suggests associated with the development and arrival of the use of iron as opposed to the earlier bronze

This part of the ridgeway takes us through the territories of two Celtic tribes the Atrebates and the Belgae.

The Atrebates held sway over most of what we see as modern Berkshire. The tribe originated in northern France. They and their neighbours to the south the Belgae probably came across as a result of the Romans expanding their northern territories. In the first century BC, Commius was one of the leaders of the Atrebates in Europe who fought against Julius Caesar and then having lost fled to England. His kingdom was centred around Silchester - *Calleva Atrebatum* - which was to become a Roman town.

The marketplace of the Belgae or in Latin *Venta Belgarum* became the city we know of Winchester.

The Ridgeway takes you along Compton Downs where there are a series of gallops. We are entering horse racing country from here towards Lambourne. Up here the sky is big, and the wind appears unable to make up which direction it wants to be blowing from and seems to come from multiple directions.

The way takes us across Bury Down, Sheep and Cow Downs, and East Hendred Downs. The word down comes from the old English dun meaning hill. We keep going up. If you're lucky you can spot flocks of siskin up here, the odd chiffchaff and wagtail. One spring day I heard and watched a cuckoo for half an hour as it flew calling along a hedgerow. And in the summer the skylarks fly up as you walk by.

A good section of Grims Ditch is to the right of us, and there is another tumulus. It is difficult to provide any sweeping statement about the Iron Age, apart for the obvious. Iron as a technology has lots of merit. The ore is easier to find, and the end product is harder than bronze. But it does require much greater temperatures than its predecessor tin. But we can say that it saw ongoing contact with cultures and probably people from central Europe. Iron probably came this way, alongside the Tene and the Hallstatt cultures that have that unique Celtic imagery which came from mainland Europe to southern England. It was also a period of tension and battles when territories were being fought over.

The Ridgeway takes you up to Cuckhamsley Hill and Scutchamers Knob – this is an Iron Age barrow. And then in a mile or so is Segsbury or Letcombe Castle.

And then further on is the White Horse and Uffington Castle.

The White Horse is maintained and the chalk shines through. As it would have when first constructed in the 8th century BC. But imagine what the castle would have looked like when it was built probably around the same time. The size and the scale would have been impressive. Such hill forts would have required significant effort, not to say dedication, will power and organisation. Whoever decided upon its construction must have seen a real need for such a defensive work and have the ability and authority to make it happen. At its vantage point the inhabitants could have seen and been seen for many miles. This was a statement. This said I am here, and you'd better know it.

PART TWO

From Streatley to Uffington Castle the ridgeway takes you high up past numerous antiquities, such as barrows and Grims Ditch. Much date from the Iron Age period, that is from around 800 BC to 100 BC just before the Romans came calling.

As you leave Uffington Castle and walk down the hill the Ridgeway takes a major step back in time.

Not far along the track is Waylands Smithy. Discreetly off to the right of the path. This is a Neolithic long barrow dating from around 3600 BC. It is a long barrow and, unlike the Iron Age bell tombs that we've walked past, it would have been the home not to an individual but to maybe as many as 15 – 20 people. Venerated ancestors rather than a head man or woman. It would have been a place to visit at special times. Perched as it is high up overlooking what is now the Vale of the White Horse

We have this notion that things evolved in the past over extended periods of time. This they did. But that is not to say how momentous and radical some of these changes were. Changes to a completely different way of life

By the time of Wayland Smithy's construction, the old ways of hunter gathering had made way for the arrival of pastoralists. Herding of cattle and sheep. New ideas came with this change of lifestyle

Around 3500 BC there was a move to individual burials. Sometimes the deceased was provided with lots of grave goods implying that the individual and their family were high social status. The act of building a monument for a single person is also a clear indication of the emergence of inequality replacing the ethos of early Neolithic collective burials with a new individualised notion of social hierarchy.

Britain, during the fourth millennium BC, was a violent and divided island judging by the injuries on skulls found in tombs and causeways enclosure ditches. The

causewayed enclosures at Hambledon Hill in Dorset and Crickley Hill in Gloucestershire in particular show evidence of having been attacked around 3400 BC.

Were the camps and memorials along this part of the Ridgeway reflective of people at war or were they part of one large tribe?

The next outpost so to speak along the Ridgeway is Liddington Castle, also known as Liddington Camp, is a late Bronze Age and early Iron Age.

In addition to the ditch and bank it is likely that there was a palisade of wooded posts along the top of the bank. At just shy of 1000 feet it is a high spot.

A little bit further on is Barbury Castle The site was first occupied some 2500 years ago.

This is the home ground so to speak of Richard Jeffries. His book *Wild Life in a Southern County* was written in 1870's it stands the test of time as an excellent piece of nature writing. This is the opening paragraph which relates to Barbury, or maybe Liddington, which was close by to where he lived:

The most commanding down is crowned with a grassy mound and trenches of an ancient earth work, from whence there is a noble view of hill and plain....There is the happy hum of bees - who love the hills - as they speed by laden with their golden harvest, a drowsy warmth, and the delicious odour of wild time. Behind the fosse sinks and the rampart raises high and steep-two butterflies are wheeling in uncertain flight over the summit. It is only necessary to raise the head a little way and the cool breeze refreshes the cheek-cool at this height while the plains beneath glow under the heat.

Jeffries laid the foundation for J A Baker and Robert Macfarlane. For me it is a must for anyone heading this way.

During the first half of the third millennium BC the people of southern Britain seemed not to have engaged in any visible trade exchange with the continent. All of this changed in the middle of the millennium with the arrival of the Bell Beaker people. From Europe they came with the knowledge to work bronze as well as distinctive new burial practices. The eponymous bell beaker alongside the body. They were expansionists. Hungry for land and wealth and the precious mineral tin and copper and gold that they needed for their craft and trade.

Their arrival heralded the Bronze Age.

The official route heads down to Avebury Hill but there is a short track that takes you to Avebury which is so worthwhile .

I always find that it is a surprise when I come upon Avebury. I know where it is, and I am expecting the sight of the stones as you turn along that small, gravelled path. But it always surprises me nonetheless

Avebury is a Neolithic henge monument containing three stone circles, around the village of Avebury in Wiltshire, in southwest England. One of the best-known prehistoric sites in Britain, it contains the largest megalithic stone circle in the world. It is both a tourist attraction and a place of religious importance to contemporary pagans.

Constructed over several hundred years in the third millennium BC, during the Neolithic, or New Stone Age, the monument comprises a large henge (a bank and a ditch) with a large outer stone circle and two separate smaller stone circles situated inside the centre of the monument. Its original purpose is unknown. But it could be that the simple act of creating such an awe-inspiring monument – much like nearby Stonehenge – was justification enough. Particularly in the light of cultural changes from hunter gathering to farming from stone to metal. The Avebury monument is a part of a larger prehistoric landscape containing several older monuments nearby, including West Kennet Long Barrow, Windmill Hill and Silbury Hill.

All of them are easily accessible on foot – even if there is a bit of road walking. Silbury is phenomenally impressive and the Sanctuary, across the busy road, is peaceful and reflective. This is an outstanding area.

The southern track from Streatley to Overbury is just fifty miles. There are plenty of car parks along the route which can break up the journey, so the full length is easily doable in chunks so to speak.

The walk started at the Goring Gap and literally antediluvian times. Romans came this way. Celtic tribes, invaders from the continent in the form of the Beaker People, and then Neolithic tribes came together to build giant monuments.

This particular Ridgeway comes from the north. To the east is the Old Road, The Harrow Way from Dover via Farnham. To the south and west there are routes to the rich tin mines of Cornwall and the trading ports of Dorset.

As I said, the Ridgeway has a tendency to lead you on, and while it is not difficult to follow the signposts, sometimes there is an inclination – a feeling nothing more – that a certain turning or track off to the left or the right might prove worthy of investigation. And you take that turning or make a note of it to look up on the map and return another day the road as they say goes on and on

Thank you for listening – I hope it has either inspired you to take the walk or has provided a bit more of an understanding the history and geography of the walk itself.

There are a couple more podcasts available to listen to if you're interested as well as my book on the Pilgrims' Way.