

Ridgeway Trail: Magnificent Walks, Enchanting Towns And Villages

By: ITM London

It was once a route used by travellers, herdsman and soldiers. Today the 87 mile Ridgeway National Trail takes walkers through ancient landscapes over rolling downland to the west of the River Thames and through secluded valleys and woods in the Chiltern Hills to the east.



Blewbury - tranquil village

The walks pass through or are close to enchanting towns and villages with historic churches and market places, museums and tourist sites.

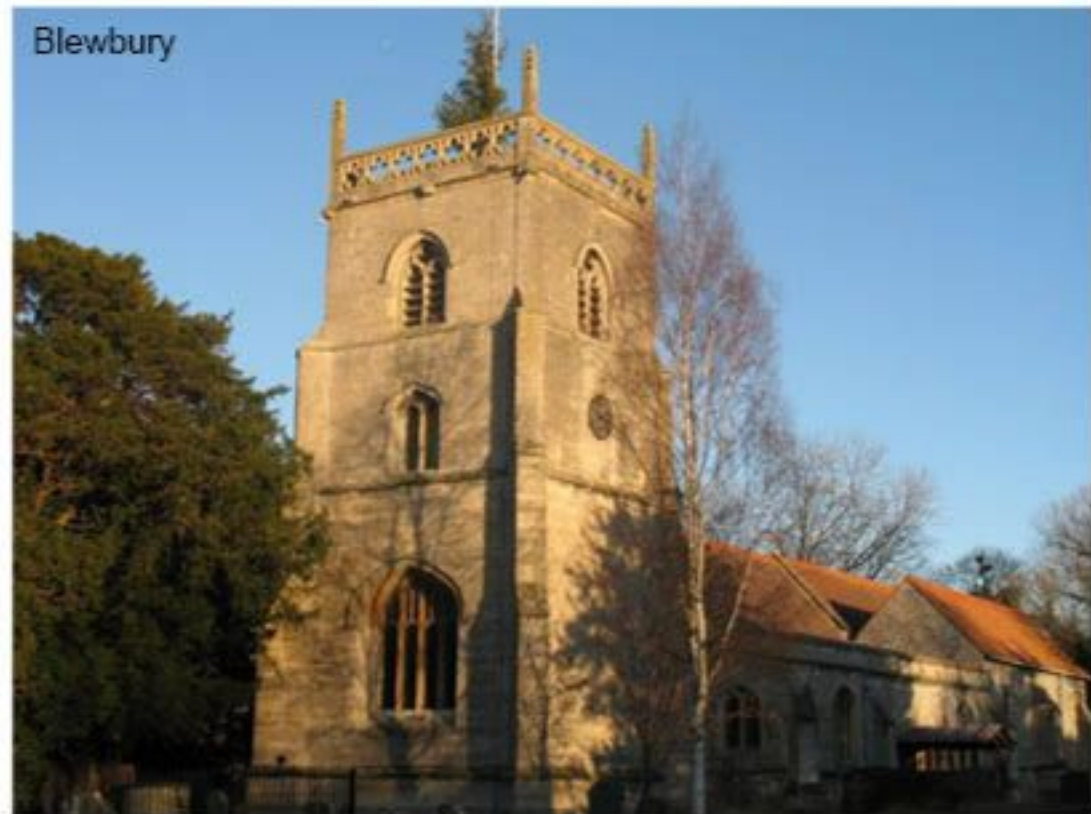
The Ridgeway is one of only 15 National Trails in England and Wales. It is the oldest road in the country having been in existence since Neolithic (New Stone Age)

times some 5,000 years ago and is surrounded by numerous prehistoric sites.

Starting in the Avebury World

Heritage Site it travels for 87 miles (139km) in a north-easterly direction along a chalk ridge, bisected at roughly the mid-point by the River Thames and finishes

Blewbury



in an Iron Age fort on top of Ivinghoe Beacon. To the west of the Thames there's the open, rolling and remote downland of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and to the east it's in the more wooded and intimate

landscape of the Chilterns AONB.

Much of this walk is through Ewelme Park established in the late 14th century and surviving for over 250 years, almost 100 of which as a Royal Deer Park. By Tudor times it was over two miles

Chiltern Hills



Chiltern Hills



Chiltern Hills



wide from east to west and almost a mile deep covering 895 acres (362 hectares) of land. The Ridgeway cuts through the centre of it.

Local enthusiast, Clive Buckley,

has researched the fascinating history of the park and summarises its history: 'Created on land originally owned by Geoffrey Chaucer's son, Thomas, and forfeited to the Crown for treason in the reign of Henry VII, for a time

Entrance to Ewelme Park



Cottage in
Blewbury



it was looked after by one of Anne Boleyn's alleged adulterers. Henry VIII gave it to his sister, Mary Tudor, and her husband the Duke of Suffolk. It then came back to the Crown and passed to Elizabeth I. Her favourite, the Earl of Essex, was a visitor before his execution. It subsequently passed to James I then Charles I, before being sold off and dis-parked.'

At the start of the walkway is the fascinating World Heritage Site in Avebury. In the 1930s, the pretty village of Avebury, partially encompassed by the stone circle was the site of the excavations of archaeologist Alexander Keiller. In re-erecting many of the stones, Keiller uncovered the true wonder of one of the most important megalithic monuments in Europe. The fascinating finds from his

excavations are on display in the 17th-century threshing barn and stables galleries of the Alexander Keiller Museum, where interactive displays and activities for children bring the landscape to life.

The North Wessex Downs is a large grassland area, grazed by sheep and rabbits. It is famous for its local wildlife which includes rare butterflies such as adonis blue and the silver-spotted skipper. Plants such as the early gentian,

dwarf mouse ear and burnt orchid can be found here. The area is also known for its chalk streams with healthy fish stocks of perch, chub and trout. The Kennet River, one of England's most important chalk streams, runs through the area. Some 45 miles long

it is the largest tributary of the Thames and in summer months contributes up to half its flow.

The historic market town of Thame is close to the walkway and ideal

Stone circles at Avebury



Historic Thame



The New Town Hall, erected on Site of Old Hall in 1887, to commemorate the Jubilee of the Reign of Queen Victoria.

for discovering the beauty and tranquillity of the area. Tuesday is the day for the popular street market. The town has many historic sites among them the Greyhound Inn where John Hampden, a hero of English civil war died of wounds received in the Battle of Chalgrove Field.

Near the high street is the local nature reserve – 27 acres ideal for rambling, picnicking and bird

watching. Cuttle Brook runs right through the reserve providing a wildlife corridor linking different areas and offering habitat for kingfishers and water vole as well as many other resident and visiting creatures.

The market town of Wantage is home to the Vale and Downland Museum. Described by the Museums and Galleries Commission as a model

community museum), it attracts about 45,000 visits a year. The museum entrance, Squires Room, Downland Kitchen and offices are in a converted 17th century cloth-merchant's house - a fine example of local vernacular architecture. Behind it are the visitor facilities, in a 20th century extension with wooden crucks spanning two floors. The main gallery is also partly 20th century but includes the 18th century Hunt's Barn.

Blewbury is another charming village along the walkway. It was the centre of a large Saxon estate

which is shown by 10th century charters to have covered the parishes of Blewbury, Aston Upthorpe, Aston Tirrold, North and South Moreton. The village is well known for its, now unusual, thatched cobb walls of Saxon origin. The Tudor Hall Barn was one of Henry VIII's hunting lodges. In the 1930s an Oath of Allegiance to Oliver Cromwell, signed by John Fuller, was found hidden between two beams at the Barn.

Street market in
Thame



Ivinghoe Beacon



Kennet River



Vale and Downland
Museum

