

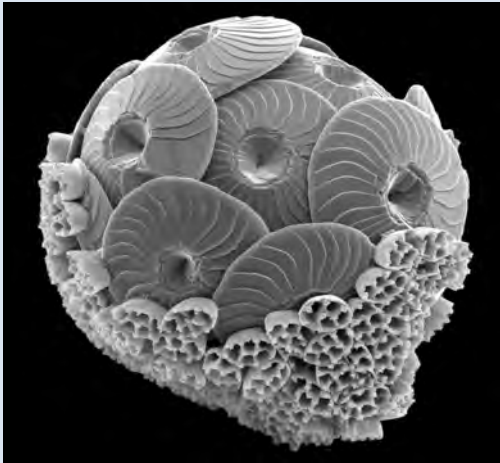
# Chalk Links in the North Wessex Downs

## “Chalk Links” Fact Sheets:

Geology groups across the region have produced a series of fact sheets explaining how the underlying chalk affects other characteristic features of this unique area including landscape, soils, land use, industry, hydrology & archaeology.

Other fact sheets in this series can be downloaded from: [www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk)

## FACT SHEET: CHALK AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ART AND LITERATURE



The chalk that makes up the landscape is made up of these coccolithophores. About half a million of these coccolithophores would fit on a pin head!

*Ever since I remember them the Clumps had meant something to me. I felt their importance long before I knew their history. They were the pyramids of my small world.*

Paul Nash, Outline

### What is chalk?

Much of the North Wessex Downs is underlain by chalk. Chalk is a soft white limestone which contains layers of flint. It consists of minute calcareous shells which are the remains of plankton that floated in clear, sub-tropical seas covering most of Britain during the Upper Cretaceous, between 95 and 65 million years ago.

### What shaped the landscape we see today?

Following the deposition of the chalk in the North Wessex Downs there was a period of uplift and the land was gently folded. This was caused by plate tectonic movement when the African plate collided with the European one.

It was followed, from 60-45 million years ago, by erosion and, in some parts of the area, deposition of sands and clays.

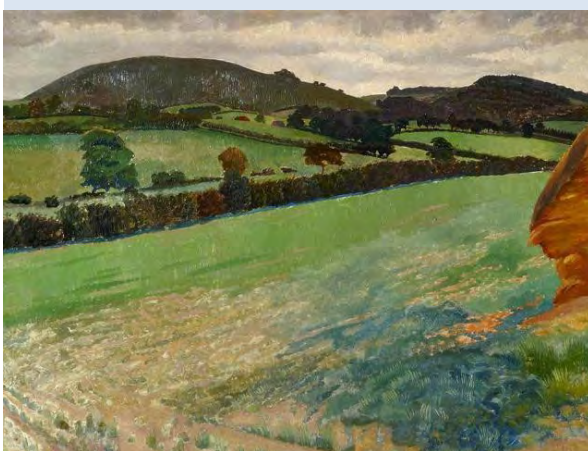
During the last 2 million years, when ice covered parts of northern Britain, the North Wessex Downs were subjected to repeated freeze thaw events. When the ground was frozen, water could not penetrate and so rivers down cut into the chalk. This, and the increased water flow of the time, is what has caused many of the dry valleys.

Chalk is a soft rock and produces a gentle, rolling landscape which Richard Jefferies (19th Century) likened to waves on the sea.

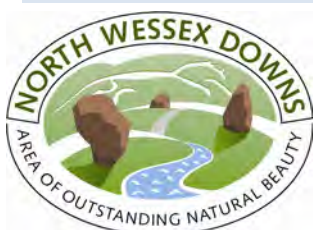
### Artists influenced by the chalk

The landscape influenced prehistoric settlement and some of the sitings of monuments etc take advantage of this. Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) spent most of his life in Cookham in the Chilterns but there are several paintings of the North Wessex Downs around Burghclere and Beacon Hill. Other work includes the series of 19 paintings influenced by the Great War which are in the Sandham Memorial Chapel, Burghclere.

Other artists include Eric Ravilious (1903-1944), who painted the White Horses at Uffington and Westbury as part of a series intended for illustrations in a book. Paul Nash (1889-1946) had a special affinity for the Wittenham Clumps which he first encountered as a teenager. He was immediately caught by their atmospheric shapes and mystical associations and called them ‘a beautiful legendary country’.



Beacon Hill, 1939. Stanley Spencer.



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Window designed by John Piper which has a dedication to John Betjeman beneath. Betjeman lived for a while in the Old Rectory Farnborough.  
All Saints Church, Farnborough.



Tom Brown's School Museum in Uffington

*The ceremony of scowering and cleansing that noble monument of Saxon antiquity, was celebrated on Whit Monday with great joyous activity..... Upwards of thirty thousand persons were present, and amongst the most of the nobility and gentry of this and neighbouring counties.*

Taken from a report in the Reading Mercury of May 1870. Thomas Hughes wrote of this.

## Chalk and literature

Numerous authors have written about the area and perhaps the most obvious recent novel is 'Watership Down' (1972) by Richard Adams. Watership Down is part of the chalk escarpment near to Kingsclere and Adams lives nearby. From the top there are views over several counties.

Closer to Swindon the view from the top of the chalk escarpment influenced Richard Jefferies (1883):

*'By the time I reached the summit, I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and annoyances of existence. I felt myself, myself.'*

Thomas Hardy visited and knew the area around Wantage and the northern part of the AONB. Arabella's cottage in Jude the Obscure is in Letcombe Bassett and Fawley is depicted as Marygreen.

John Betjeman (1906-1984) spent much time in the North Wessex Downs and the lines about the Upper Lambourn summarise the landscape well:

*Feathery ash in leathery Lambourn  
Waves above the sarsen stone  
And Edwardian plantations  
So coniferously moan  
As to make the swelling downland  
Far-surrounding, seem their own.*

Many other authors have been influenced by these surroundings including Agatha Christie who is buried at Cholsey, Jane Austen, who spent much time in the area and writes of the landscapes in many novels, and Thomas Hughes who based the semi autobiographical 'Tom Brown's Schooldays' at Uffington where he had lived.



White Horse Hill, Uffington

White horses and other figures are common on chalk landscapes.  
(See Factsheet on Archaeology)

For more information on:

Writers : Cader-Cuff, E 1999. *Walks with writers (Old Berkshire)*

Loos-Page, M. 2008. *Walking the North Wessex Downs*, Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society

Jefferies, J.R. 1883. *The Story of My Heart: An Autobiography*, London: Longmans, Green, & Co.

Paul Nash: <http://www.nashclumps.org/>

Berkshire Geoconservation Group <http://www.berksgeoconservation.org.uk>

Hampshire Important Geological Sites via [berksgeoconservation.org.uk](http://berksgeoconservation.org.uk)