

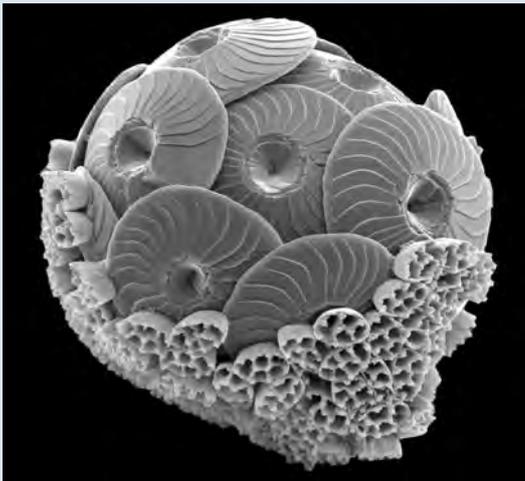
Chalk Links in the North Wessex Downs

“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

FACT SHEET: CHALK AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE HORSE RACING INDUSTRY



The chalk that underlies the soft turf of the Downs is made up of these coccolithophores. About half a million of them would fit on a pin head!

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.

Chalk is a highly porous rock and therefore free draining. Over most of the downs the soils are thin and alkaline giving rise to characteristic chalk grassland.

Why is chalk grassland good for gallops?

Racehorses have been exercised on chalk grassland for centuries. This is partly because of the free draining nature of the soil which means that the ground does not get too ‘heavy’, although today all-weather gallops and a mix of woodchip and grass are used in addition to just grass ones. A good place to view a variety of gallops is near Hangman’s Stone just outside Lambourn. The grass itself is a variety which can be left slightly long and ungrazed. It forms a springy network of shoots, forming a mat, which is better for the horses to train on.

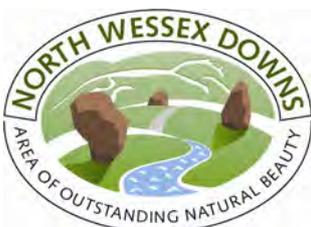
How long have racehorses been in the area?

Horses have been bred and trained in Britain for millennia, but serious systematic breeding did not start until the late 17th century when there was a need to improve horses for the cavalry. Three Arabian stallions were imported between 1690 and 1733 starting with the Byerly Turk, formerly a charger in the Battle of the Boyne. All thoroughbreds descend from these three. From 1750 to 1803 Lambourn and many other places on the downs had their own racecourse. Steeplechasing started in the mid 19th century and the National Hunt Committee was founded in 1866. Formal training establishments with professional trainers are a product of the 19th century. By 1840 William Ford was training from stables in Lambourn High Street. In the 1860’s George Oates is listed and Charles Jousiffe was at Seven Barrows in the 1890’s. In 2007 there were 103 businesses associated with horse racing in the AONB.



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Racehorses at Lambourn. Horses like these exercise on the chalk downs.



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All weather gallops are now common across the North Wessex Downs.

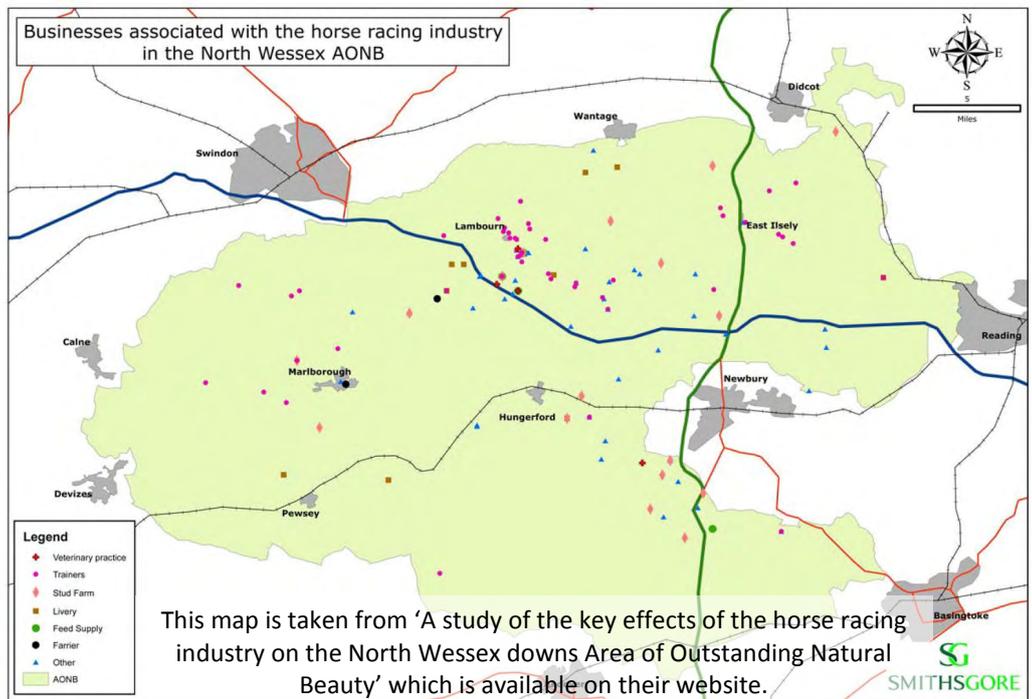
Modern gallops

The smooth, firm, sheep-grazed turf of the downs was found to be ideal for racing horses. However modern racing requires horses to be worked every day and this has resulted in the construction of *all-weather tracks* both for training and racing. The track is excavated and a stone foundation laid. This is covered with tarmac and then oiled sand. A machine is used to provide differing surfaces, a soft texture for heavy jumping horses and a firmer surface for lighter flat racing horses. The surface is porous and dries rapidly whereas the turf gallop could freeze or dry hard. The grass gallops are managed by topping to keep the grass about 4" (10cm) high. They are often species rich but the plants are short. A gallop near Compton is bright yellow with dense cowslips in spring.

Early race meetings were very local and at Wantage in the 1750s it was decreed that 'no booths or sheds to be erected, or any liquor to be sold by any person on the Downs, but by the inhabitants of Wantage and Lambourn'. Lord Craven donated much of the prize money.



Beautiful cowslips and other low growing flowers are common on areas used as gallops.



Racecourses and stables in West Berkshire

The map above shows those businesses related to the horse racing industry. At one time there were many racecourses scattered over the area including at Lambourn, Wantage, East Ilsley etc. Now there is only one with a small number of point to point courses. The change came when it was feasible to transport horses away from their stable area for races. In many places that was because of the arrival of the railway but in the case of Lambourn horses were taken by road to Newbury until the late 19th Century.

The valley of the River Lambourn provides a good transport route. This chalk stream is a winterbourne stream which means that at certain times of the year, when the water table is low it has no water in it (see hydrology factsheet).

A good source of information is Boyd. D (1978) *The Running Horses. A history of racing in Berkshire from 1740* Berkshire County Libraries, Reading.



The downs above Lambourn.

For more information on:

Berkshire Geoconservation Group www.berksgeoconservation.org.uk

Racing around Lambourn visit the Lambourn Trainers Association www.lambourntesting.org

North Wessex Downs AONB 'A Study of the key effects of the horseracing industry on the North Wessex Downs AONB' www.northwessexdowns.org.uk