West Berkshire Countryside Society

West Berkshire Countryside Society was formed in January 2012 by merging four long-established environmental groups. These were *The Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys*, *The Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group, The Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers* and *The Pang Valley Barn Owl Group.* Since then the *Kennet Valley Barn Owl Group* and the *Lambourn Valley Barn Owl Group* have joined us.

Our remit is to continue their work of promoting and improving the landscape of West Berkshire by practical conservation work and by introducing people to the countryside, its work, history and wildlife, through the medium of talks and conducted walks – of which this is one.

Members of **West Berkshire Countryside Society** currently pay a £15 annual subscription for individual and family membership to provide a financial resource. Those members who wish to, make up volunteer working parties to undertake practical conservation tasks.

Non-members are very welcome to join our conservation tasks and conducted walks for which we make no charge. Non-members are also welcome at our talks for which we make a small charge.

If you would like more information about our activities or would like to join us and help with our work, please visit our website:

www.westberkscountryside.org.uk

References

Victoria County History Berks.
West Berks Historic Environment Record
BBOWT *Where to go for Wildlife*
Dr G. Osmond *Personal Communication*
Dunlop & Greenaway *Around the 3 Valleys.* 2011
Dyer, James. *Southern England: an Archaeological Guide.*
Wymer, JJ. *Excavations of the Lambourn Long Barrow, 1964*
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West Berkshire
Countryside Society

DOWNS WITH BARROWS

A Walk around Lambourn parish, starting and finishing at Lambourn Seven Barrows Nature Reserve

About 3.5 miles or 5.5 km.

Ordnance Survey Explorer Map
170 – 'Abingdon, Wantage & Vale of the White Horse' will be useful

There are two modest hills on this walk

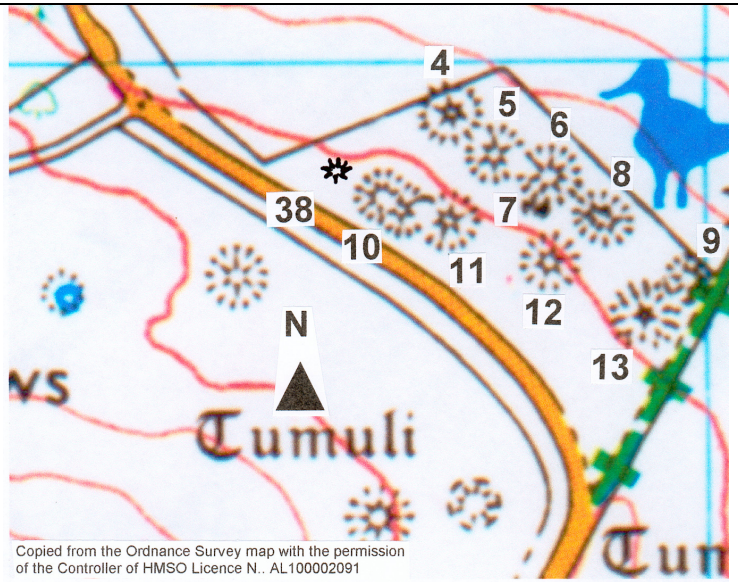
This walk looks at the relationships between the geology, archaeology, botany and landscape history. What plants and objects are there and why they are there.

Neolithic and Bronze Age Barrows.

Farming started in Britain in the Neolithic Period (New Stone Age) from 4000bc to about 2000BC. It is not certain whether the farmers were new immigrants or whether the idea itself was imported. However these people started to clear the landscape and seem to have tackled the chalk hills first. They buried their dead in **long barrows.** In southern and eastern England these were simply long narrow mounds where peoples bones were buried at the higher end. In the west of England stone chambers were built inside the mound to store the bones. They were used over several hundred years and ceremonies appear to have been performed in a court at the lower end. **Round barrows** first appeared in the late Neolithic Period and became the standard in the Bronze Age (2100BC to 700BC). They were the burial places of important individuals who were sometimes cremated and their ashes buried in a pot. The significance of the different types is not known but women were usually buried under disc or saucer barrows where the central mound was lower. Barrow burial was not practiced in the Iron Age, but the Romans and Saxons occasionally used them. Lowbury Hill, just north of Compton, means *the barrow at the fort* and a Saxon barrow was built there for a Saxon aristocrat in about 620AD.

Racehorses on the Berkshire Downs.

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 the horses for the cavalry. Three stallions were imported and all thoroughbreds descend from them. The Byerly Turk came in 1690, the Darley Arabian followed in 1704 and the Godolphin Barb in 1733. The Stud Book recording pedigrees started in 1791 and the Jockey Club was founded in the 1750's. The first races were private matches between owners. Usually four races were run over 4 miles each, the first to win two races won the match. Later single *dash* races became more popular. Charles II set rules for matches, called King's Plates, aimed at encouraging the breeding of stronger horses. From 1750 to 1803 Lambourn had its 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. By 1976 Lambourn had 23 training establishments. 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 and covered with tarmac. Over this oiled sand is laid and a machine 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.



Plan of barrows + key to type

4 Disc barrow
5 Bowl barrow
6 & 7 Bowl barrow and small barrow
8 Double barrow
9 Bowl barrow
10 Double barrow
11 Bowl barrow
12 Bowl barrow
13 Disc barrow
38 Saucer barrow

carrot, thyme, basil, cowslips, bird's foot trefoil and bedstraw.

9. Encroaching scrub. The downland is an artificial landscape maintained by grazing. When grazing stops scrub encroaches.

10. Old road. This track is shown without hedges on the 1761 map. Note the boundary banks and the species poor hedges. Look for hawthorn, blackthorn, wayfaring tree, hazel. Some fairly old oaks. Lye Leaze has bluebells and common polypody. Other animals make paths! Look for badger runs and a sett.

11. The Ivy Problem. Note the dense ivy in the hedges. It prevents light reaching the leaves and thus kills the host. Ivy is a serious threat to trees and bushes in Britain.

12. The Hangman's Stone. This is clearly an ancient sarsen marker. It may mark the site of the local gibbet but I have not found any references.

13. Old road. This again is on the 1761 map and is shown without hedges. The modern hedges are species poor. Note how deeply the road is sunk and the size of the lynchet that has built up against it.

14. Borehole. This monitors ground water levels for The Environment Agency. In the 1970s a system was built to recharge streams from wells in times of drought..

Chalk downland. Chalk is a rock made up of the skeletons of billions of tiny marine algae deposited about 100 – 7 million years ago and compacted by the massive pressures of muds deposited above them. It contains layers of flints which are buried sea beds. Plants and animal remains were buried and rotted leaving cavities. Water percolating through the chalk picked up silica and deposited it in the cavities. Flints are casts of sponges and teeth and sometimes the droppings of marine animals.

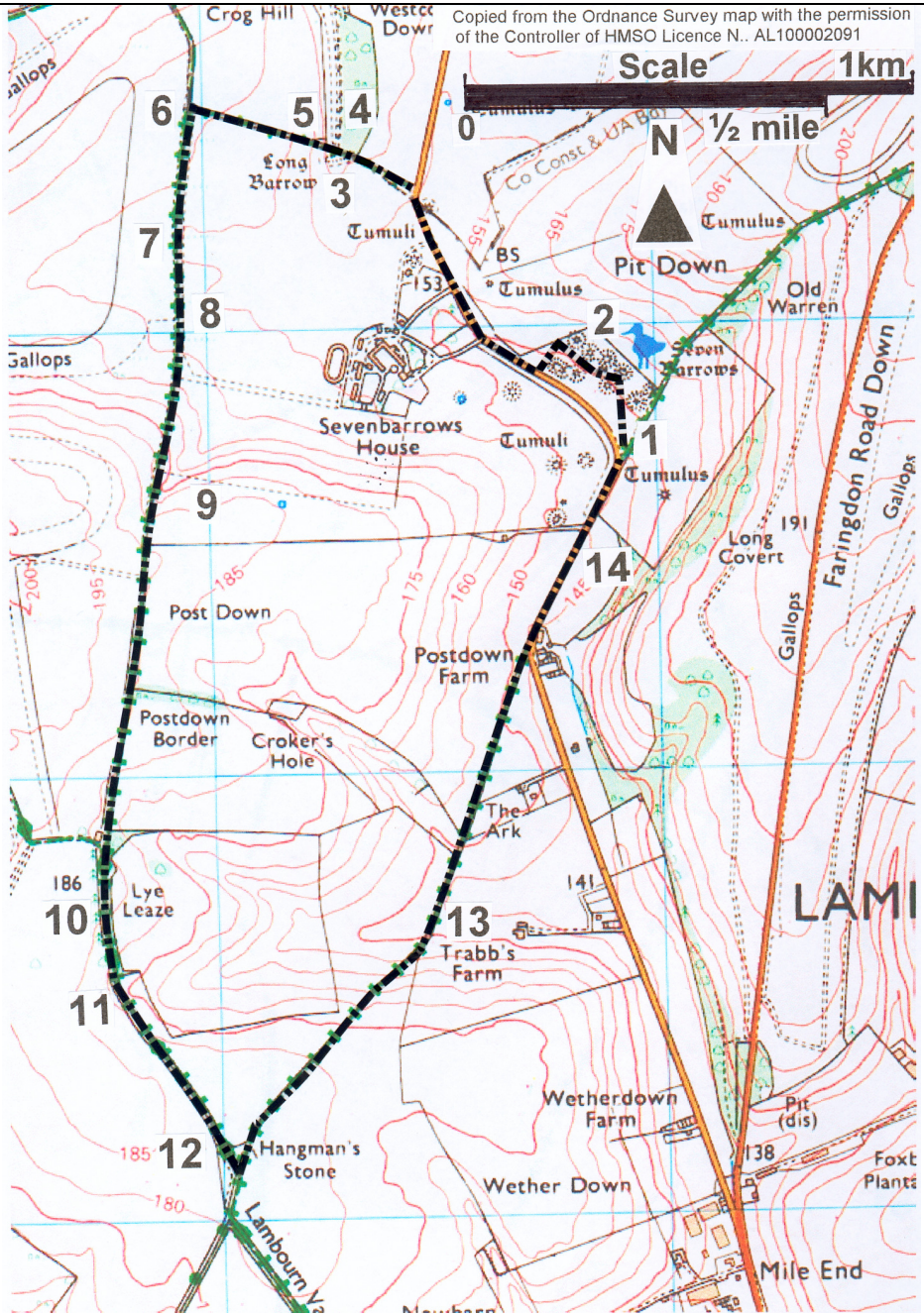
Dry valleys. These were formed at either end of the various Ice Ages. The ice caps never reached this area but the chalk was frozen to a considerable depth and this prevented rain and snow melt sinking in. The water ran off carrying broken ice with it and had great erosive power. It carved out the valleys but when the permafrost melted the water sank into the ground leaving the graceful valleys.

Lambourn. This is an ancient area. The chalk downlands seem to have been some of the first areas cleared by Neolithic farmers when agriculture reached southern England about 4000BC. This whole area is rich in pre-historic and Roman sites and was obviously densely populated and extensively farmed. The name is first mentioned in The Anglo Saxon Chronicle under the date of 553AD but this should not be taken too seriously. It is frequently mentioned in the 8th,9th and 10th centuries and the land was willed by King Alfred to his wife. It may mean *the stream where lambs are washed* but may also derive from a pre-celtic word whose meaning is now lost.

Domesday Book (1086) tells of three manors with about 124 families farming about 1000 acres of arable land. There were almost no woods, only enough for 10 pigs. This matches the landscape of the 1761 map. Fields concentrated in the valley and un-hedged tracks over the open downs. The land was enclosed in the late 18th and early 19th century and parts ploughed during World Wars I & II. Some gallops have not been ploughed for a hundred years.

1. The Nature Reserve. This covers 13 acres (5.3hectares) of chalk grassland. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and is nationally important for both for its wildlife and the archaeology. Because of the barrows it has never been ploughed and it is an example of the grassland that once covered these downs. It is managed by BBOWT for the owner. The grass is mown in spring and late summer and the barrows are cleared by volunteers. Rabbit burrowing is causing damage to the barrows and this may mean that the reserve must be fenced. In addition, an invasive grass (Tor Grass – brachypodium) has entered the area. Sheep will not eat this and it may have to be grazed off by cattle or, preferably, Dartmoor ponies.

Over 150 species of plant have been recorded on this Reserve. In spring and summer look for:- rock rose, horseshoe vetch, kidney vetch, harebells, devil's bit scabious and clustered bellflower. The rare saw-wort lives here. The rich plant population results in a matching



richness of butterflies. Chalkhill blue butterflies lay their eggs on the horseshoe vetch, the brown argus uses the rock rose and the small blue the kidney vetch. The marsh fritillary colonised the site in the late 1980's and the green fritillary is sometimes seen.

2. The Round Barrows. ***These are Scheduled Ancient Monuments and it is an offence to damage them in any way.***

Although known as 'The Seven Barrows' , there are actually about 40 barrows in the area. They were built in The Bronze Age (2100BC-700BC) and the mounds were the burial places of individuals, although secondary burials were sometimes added. No one knows the significance of the various styles, other than that women were usually buried under disc or saucer barrows. However, they must have taken a lot of work to build and indicate a large population with surplus labour available. Several of them were excavated by a local antiquary, Martin Atkins, between 1850 – 58. The finds were meagre, usually only a pot of cremated bones.

3. The Long Barrow. ***This is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and it is an offence to damage it in any way.*** This was fully excavated in 1964 by John Wymer of Reading Museum and the finds are in Reading Museum. It was dated to the Neolithic Period (4000BC-2000BC) and is therefore older than the round barrows. It was thought that it was built at a sacred site where the highest spring in the valley occurred and that later the water table dropped and the sacred area moved down the valley to the area where the round barrows were built. This seems unlikely since the site is on a ridge. The barrow was a long narrow mound with a line of sarsen stones along its axis, and ditches along each side. A sarsen stone is lying in the hedge. A wall of turf from the ditches contained the bank edge on each side. Usually chambers were included in which the bones of many individuals were stored, but here there was only a rough stone cist at the north end with a crouched burial of a 40 year old woman. She had a bracelet of dog whelk shells and was already suffering from osteo-arthritis. The barrow was ploughed in the Iron Age and Roman period. The original land surface was protected by the mound and it showed that the landscape had been lowered by 2'6" (75cm) since the mound was built.

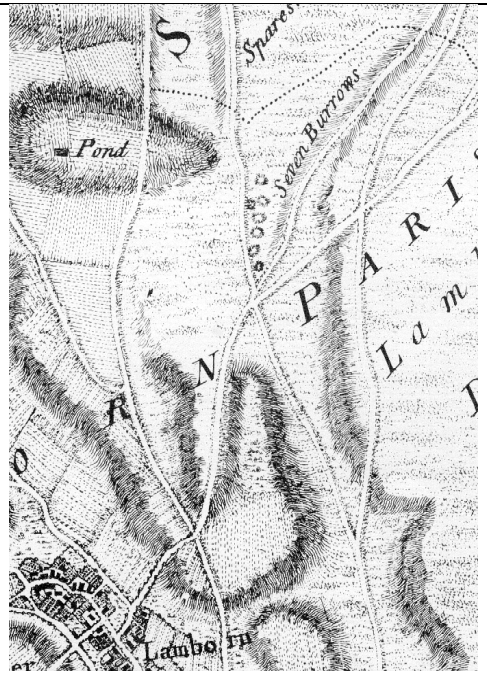
4. Beech wood. There were no woods anywhere around here in 1761. The modern woods were planted as shelter belts and to supply firewood. These beeches have been coppiced.

5. Sunken lane. The erosion being caused by traffic on this track was the reason for the excavation.

6. Seven Shires Way. This is a 234 mile Long Distance Trail organised by the Oxfordshire Ramblers Association. It runs around the perimeter of Oxfordshire using Public Rights of Way. It starts at Moreton-in-Marsh and is designed to take 21 days.

7. Artificial surfaced gallop. This surface allows horses to be trained at any time of the year.

8. Poor flora. Note how poor the flora is compared with the Reserve. Look for: knapweed, yarrow, cow parsley, plantains, salad burnet, wild



The Seven Barrows area in 1761


Lambourn Seven Barrows from the air


The Hangmans Stone

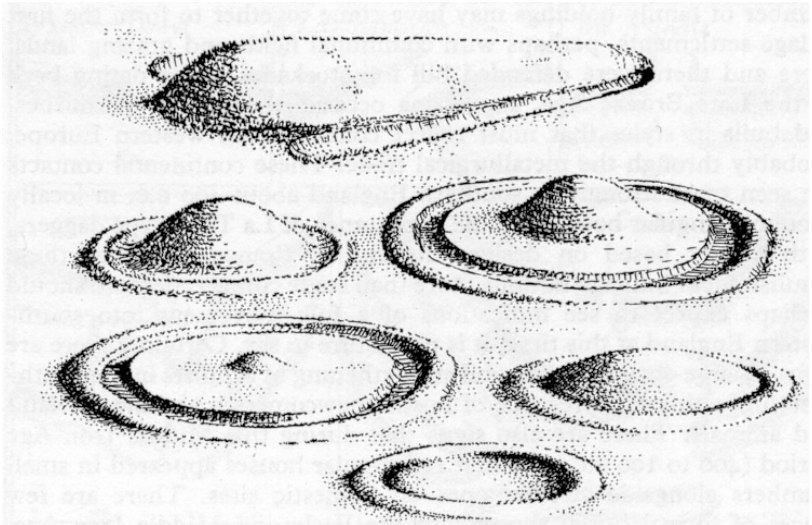


Fig. 3 British barrow types: long, bowl, bell, disc, saucer and pond

Acknowledgement to J.Dyer *Southern England: an Archaeological Guide*