

Review: Middle Ridgeway

This new book on The Ridgeway between Avebury and Streatley offers a fresh perspective and new insights into this much-loved landscape. The title refers, I'm pleased to note, to the middle section of the whole ancient Ridgeway between East Anglia and Dorset, not the shorter National Trail. This is not just another guide-book with route descriptions and pretty photographs, but a serious and scholarly exploration of the distinctive ecology of the chalk escarpment, with reference to land use and natural history records over the last two hundred years. The authors, Patrick Dillon and Eric Jones, both distinguished environmental historians who have an intimate understanding of the Ridgeway Country, set out to present an account of how the "ecological island" of the high chalk downs has been shaped by the interaction of land use patterns and the local ecology. Starting with the basic landform and earliest settlements they focus particularly on the influence on the landscape of agricultural prices and techniques, with the demand from the London market affecting the changing balance between plough and grassland, land ownership and occupation and the impact of country sports, specifically on bird populations. The evolution of the local agricultural economy, with its crafts and local manufactures, the large-scale droving, markets and fairs, and the patterns of fields and enclosures are well explained and illuminated. While much of the analysis will be familiar in its broad outlines to many readers, there are many new insights and the narrative is well supported by quotations and references to a broad range of local historians and naturalists. The text is also brought to life by illustration



by scenes of Ridgeway landmarks by artist Anna Dillon, Patrick's daughter, who is well known to many members. Published by Wessex Books of Salisbury, the book is handsomely produced, and furnished with an excellent bibliography and biographical notes. This is definitely a book that repays a thorough reading and that should find a place on the shelves of anyone with an interest in the English countryside and its evolution, and in the Ridgeway in particular.

You can purchase your copy at the White Horse Book Shop in Marlborough, and other good shops, or by e-mail at order@middle-ridgeway.co.uk. Price is £16.95 + £2.80 postage and packing.

