

The Middle Ridgeway and its environment by Eric Jones and Patrick Dillon.

Wessex Books, Salisbury, 2016. Illustrated in colour with 20 paintings by Anna Dillon. 144 pages. ISBN 978-1-903035-48-1.

This book presents a 'descriptive study' of the principal ecological and economic changes from prehistory to the present day which have formed the landscape of the North Wessex Downs, focusing on the Middle Ridgeway from Streatley in Berkshire to Avebury in Wiltshire, together with its adjoining landscapes and parishes. The text is authoritative not just in terms of the writers' academic expertise, but because their personal knowledge of, and engagement with, the area has been virtually life-long. The autobiographical appendix details provides impressive evidence of this. Anna Dillon, Patrick Dillon's daughter, explains the development of her interest in the downland topography as an artist, and the painters who have influenced her.

Primarily aimed at the general reader, the text is without footnotes and detailed scholarly apparatus, but the reader is introduced to numerous writers, such as John Aubrey, Gilbert White, Thomas Hardy, Thomas Hughes, Alfred Williams and Richard Jefferies, who over the years have contributed comment – historical, economic, archaeological and literary – on the North Wessex Downs and its environs. For those whose acquaintance with the area has hitherto been restricted to leisurely scenic walks merely with the aid of a guidebook, the book will be a revelation and a stimulus to further reading and study. The student who wishes to acquire a knowledge of the area which is more broadly based than conventional lines of academic study will also find the book an excellent introduction to the subject. It is a very informed and informative book – thoughtful and challenging – and significantly extended by the illustrations. In their deployment of strong flowing lines and vibrant colour, Anna Dillon's paintings convey a sense of the landscape's primeval energy and power.

The first chapter argues the area's 'relative remoteness' and identifies it as 'an ecological island' of flora and fauna which represents a distinctive community. The authors suggest that remarkably it still possesses some of what must have been its 'ancient landscape beauty'. The ensuing chapter on 'Prehistory and Early History'

is broadly chronological in its description of the underlying geology of the Downs and its early inhabitants, and is thematically related to the main body of the book. The central chapters, on 'The London Market', 'Ploughland and Grassland', 'Land Holding' and 'Countryside Sports', concentrating on the most recent centuries, discuss the environmental and economic changes which have had the most impact and for which there is both primary and secondary documentary evidence. The text generally is endowed with great interest in terms of its locally based anecdotal evidence: the carter's lad who died when his wagon became stuck in a snow drift high on the Downs; the drovers' dogs who were accustomed to happily finding their own way back to Wales while their owners journeyed home by sea; the traditional management of water meadows by men called 'drowners' and 'floaters'; the impact on grassland species by various kinds of livestock – to give just a few examples.

The book concludes with chapters on 'The Wildlife Legacy' and 'Retrospect and Prospect'. The penultimate chapter, concentrating as it does on ornithology, will be of particular interest to bird-watchers. The final chapter discusses the impact of the radical changes in agricultural methods and the pace of these changes in terms of their sustainability. It ends with a blunt warning concerning the Ridgeway in relation to the current focus of leisure and sporting activities which are unsympathetic to other users and lacking in any real appreciation of the area's amenity.

The book's content and organisation bears a certain resemblance to a study in which Professor Jones was involved during the writing stage and which, as the author himself gratefully acknowledges, greatly encouraged: this is Colin R. Tubbs' *The New Forest, an ecological history*, published in 1968. Tubbs' book was not aimed at the general reader, though the author hoped that its interest would not be confined only to ecologists and environmentalists. Tubbs concludes with a summary warning of the possible impact of the area's proximity to city dwellers, the ease of access for the motorist, and more particularly the leisure seeker, heedless of the effect of incursion on flora and fauna and indifferent to the preservation of peace and tranquillity. It seems that Jones and Dillon's motivation to write *Middle Ridgeway* may have been partly based on similar concerns. They conclude by noting: 'As Colin Tubbs wrote long ago on the pressures on the New Forest, another great south country environment, it may well be that economic loss and some restriction on the degree to which new demands can be satisfied will have to

be accepted if it is to retain its peculiar character. One thing is certain. It cannot be all things to all people for all time. Nor can the Middle Ridgeway.'

The final very useful note on 'Organisations, Literature and Further Reading' begins with a paragraph on the North Wessex Downs as a designated 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. This modern development in the management of areas with much to offer scenically is unexplored in the text, and might usefully have been included, though perhaps the authors' felt that this was outside the scope of a discussion which is essentially historically based, and whose principal achievement lies in inculcating perspectives in terms of changing land use over time.

The reader is left wondering at the recent contests to which environmental lobbyists, with the support of members of the public, have had to resort – not always successfully – apparently in the default of the effective implementation of the provisions supposedly guaranteed by statute legislation: the housing development at Coate, for example, which lies next to the AONB North Wessex Downs boundary; and further afield, but also affecting AONB southern downland, the building of the Falmer stadium.

Meantime the great swathe of farmed land stretching across southern England from which modern agricultural methods have driven birds, flowering plants, invertebrates and insects in quantity is still with us, the dearth of the last two fauna being of particular concern, as Jones and Dillon observe, because of their position at the base of food chains.

Janice Lingley