

Pewsey Ridge Walk

**Wansdyke and
before ...**

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The long ridge of downland north of Pewsey has stunning views to the south over the Vale of Pewsey with Silbury Hill and Avebury visible to the north. There are numerous ancient sites dating from Neolithic to Saxon times showing how this landscape has been of great importance throughout the ages.

Avril Porter, National Trust Guide at Avebury, led a full day circular walk of 8 miles in June 2012 starting from the Knap Hill car park above Alton Barnes. About 20 hardy BACAS members were there and prepared for the worst that the elements could throw at them. The early summer had involved weeks of rain and on this day the forecast was again bad, but we were lucky...the rain held off until we just got back to the car park!

Heading west, the first stop is at Adam's Grave, a distinctive long barrow on the skyline 60m long and 6m high. Remnants of the entrance remain and when excavated was found to contain four skeletons. Dated at around 3000BC it looks across eastwards to the causewayed Neolithic enclosure on Knap Hill. Further west, we pass the Alton Barnes White Horse figure (cut in 1812AD) to reach Milk Hill, Wiltshire's highest point at 295m. The adjacent Tan Hill, famous for its horse fair held on St Anne's Day in August from 1499 to 1932, has been found to be just 26cm lower! The ground here was covered with yellow rockrose but the bad spring weather had delayed the orchids that are usually plentiful.

We soon come to Wansdyke stretching impressively along the ridge with the bank up to 4m high and ditch up to 2.5m deep. This huge earthwork, thought to have been built between 400 and 500 AD, runs for over 40 miles from Savernake Forest to the Severn Estuary. Most parts are now indistinct but this eastern side is the best preserved stretch. Its length and the lack of intermediate forts probably made most of it indefensible. As such, its purpose may have been as a border control between the Saxon tribes of that time. An Iron-age fort is visible to the west at Ryebury Hill with associated fortifications.

Figure 1

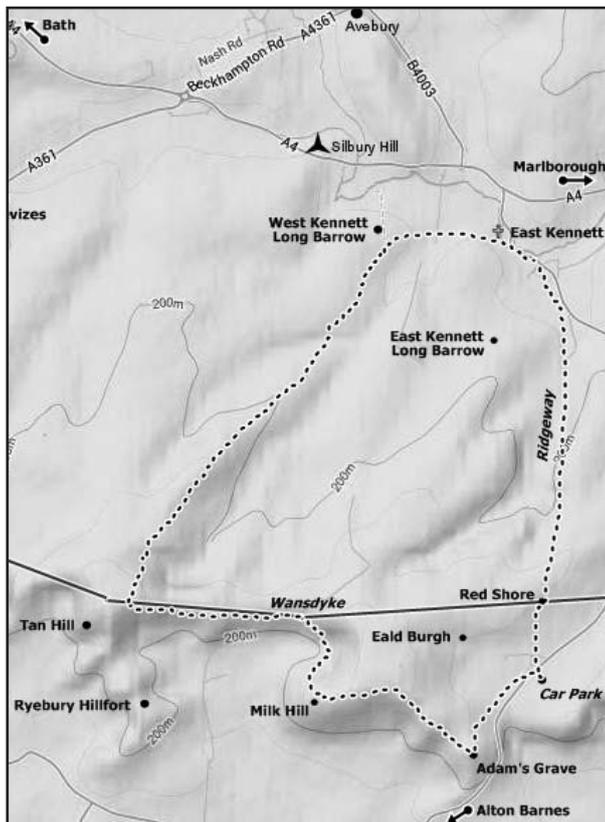
Members of the Bath and Camerton Archeological Society observing Wansdyke.





Figure 2
Silbury Hill.

Turning north on our walk we can see Silbury Hill poking up within the surrounding folds of the countryside. The Avebury Henge is hidden but the low profile of Windmill Hill is visible beyond. Bronze Age barrows are everywhere and indicate the sacred nature of this area to early people. We descend slowly towards the West Kennet Long Barrow on a ridge just south of Silbury Hill and close to the Swallowhead Spring, the source of the River Kennet. The huge sarsen stones blocking the Eastern entrance are very apparent on this barrow, which at 100m in length is a huge construction, second only to the nearby East Kennet Long Barrow. Some cremations and the partial remains of at least forty-six individuals were found jumbled inside the five chambers. From recent AMS (Accelerated Mass Spectrometry) radio-carbon dating, both Windmill Hill and West Kennet's earliest bones are from 3650 BC.



On through East Kennet village, visiting the largely rebuilt Victorian church of Early English style, and then heading south again we climb the Ridgeway back towards the car park. This ancient trackway runs from Wiltshire along the Berkshire Downs to Ivinghoe Beacon and on to East Anglia. We can look across to the East Kennet Long Barrow, aligned north to south, shrouded in trees and apparently unexcavated. Looking back to the north, Silbury Hill remains visible and we can now make out the Sanctuary, the site of a wooden henge predating the stone henge, and the Avenue leading to Avebury. On the crest of the hill the Ridgeway passes through the Wansdyke at Red Shore, the site of two battles in 592AD and 715AD recorded in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle. West of here lies Eald Burgh, a collection of earthworks and the likely site of a Saxon settlement. Unfortunately tall grass hid this from us.

From the Wansdyke at Red Shore it is a short five minute walk back to the Knap Hill car park. The walk was relatively easy and took us from 10:30am until 4pm with many stops. All food and refreshment should be brought with you as no shops or pubs are passed.

Figure 3
Map of the walk.