

## **Riding High along the Ridgeway**

*By Emma Bowyer*

On Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2019 my friend Charlotte and I set out with our horses Floyd & Maddy to ride the Ridgeway National Trail. Travelling through some of the most glorious country in England, the Ridgeway has always been high on my 'places I want to ride' bucket list. It's an ancient and mysterious landscape of chalk figures, hill forts, long barrows, rolling downland, vast sweeping valleys, native woodlands, idyllic villages, Skylarks, Lapwings, Red Kites, Hare and amazing panoramic vistas, that people have been travelling since prehistoric times.

I had spent several months planning the details of the trip and we had been cramming in extra riding wherever possible to prepare the horses and ourselves for the consecutive days of long mileage with heavy packs.

The day of departure dawned; we were dropped off at the start, a car park just off a busy road. We stood there in the mid morning sunshine, our tack and kit littered the ground around us, abandoned on the side of the road with the biggest grins plastered across our faces. We were finally here and we had a whole week of nothing to think about except our horses and 100 miles of exciting new country to explore!

### **Day 1**

#### **Overton Hill – Ogbourne St George, 12 miles**

We left Devon at 6:30am to drive to the Western end of the Ridgeway at West Kennet in Wiltshire where we unloaded the horses, loaded them with panniers and set off over Overton Hill towards our accommodation for the night at Cunetio Riding, just past Ogbourne St George.

The day was beautiful, the sun was shining, the horses felt great, everything was perfect. We past the Grey Whethers or Sarson stones, climbing up to skirt the Marlborough downs, the vivid yellow fields of rape and its distinctive fragrance a continual feature along the route.

The views were phenomenal all day, with vast sweeping landscapes opening up below us and red kites riding the currents above. We crossed a road, then up to the impressive Iron age hill fort of Barbury castle, it's not difficult to imagine stepping back in time here. Long canters on lovely ground until we reached a picnic area where we stopped for lunch. The path continued on wonderful springy grass tracks with immense views all around, the horses were very happy to move up a couple of gears and we had some lovely long canters, eating up the miles to our first stop.

We stayed with Heather and Mike Flippance at Cunetio Riding ([www.cunetioriding.co.uk](http://www.cunetioriding.co.uk)). Hidden away down a rabbit warren of stoney tracks lies the aptly named Warren Cottage. Heather could not have been friendlier, and after settling our horses into the paddock behind the house she sent us to the garden to enjoy the last of the late afternoon sun with a bottle of wine whilst she prepared a delicious three-course supper.

### **Day 2**

#### **Ogbourne St George – Sparsholt Firs, 17 miles**

Day two found us doing an extra mile or so amid the maze of tracks to find our way back onto the Ridgeway. The stunning scenery and amazing views continued. Beautiful footing allowed for more canters. We rode past a field with about 30 cobs in it on the way up Liddington hill. They came crowding over to the fence to view these strange looking horses loaded with panniers. Past Liddington castle and down to a short road section before climbing up over Charlbury hill where we then diverted to The Royal Oak pub at Bishopstone for lunch. The horses were hot and thirsty and the staff kindly filled buckets and allowed them into the pub garden for grass. The food was nice and the people very friendly.

We continued on past Uffington castle and white horse hill, site of the Uffington White Horse (the oldest hill figure in Britain) to the West you can see Dragon Hill, the traditional scene of St George's victory over the dragon and then on a short way to the Neolithic burial mound known as Wayland Smithy. This is a wonderful place, it has a really peaceful, serene air that made us want to linger. Legend has it that if you leave your horse tied outside overnight (with suitable payment of course) when you collect it the next morning it will have a new set of shoes. Luckily my husband is a farrier and my mare had been shod before we left so I didn't need to test the legend out. I'm not sure what the resident farrier would have made of Charlottes scot boots; I don't think they existed 5000 years ago!

Night two found us staying at Down Barn Farm, Sparsholt Firs. This was probably our most memorable night, it is a stunning location, however the proprietor, Penny, is quite frankly the rudest woman I have ever had the misfortune to meet. She had one poor young woman in tears within minutes of arrival and had we had any other option we would have left there and then. It was very clear she viewed all guests as a major inconvenience. I would strongly advise seeking alternative arrangements in this area. I have since spoken to several other people who have stayed here over a 10-year period and all had similar terrible experiences so I think it unlikely we had just caught her on a bad day!

*A neighbouring B&B has since been recommended and can be found here - [www.hillbarnbedandbreakfast.co.uk](http://www.hillbarnbedandbreakfast.co.uk)*

### **Day 3**

#### **Sparsholt Firs - Blewbury, 19.5 miles**

We packed up and headed out in record time, we were very keen to put as many miles as possible between us and the woman at Down Barn Farm, who's demeanour had not improved at breakfast. Once we had a few miles behind us we began to relax and enjoy the fabulous scenery. Another lovely sunny day of endless canters, passing numerous racehorse gallops along the way. We diverted to East Ilsley for lunch at the Crown and Horn pub. The food was lovely and the staff were very friendly and again provided us with water for the horses. We met a lovely couple who were heading up onto the Ridgeway to scatter their Aunt Janet's ashes, I can appreciate why she had chosen the spot! We had a long conversation about horseback travel and it turned out they had recently returned from a riding holiday in Africa. Back up onto the Ridgeway and we followed wide chalk paths, now surrounded by mostly arable rather than grazing land. Our accommodation was in the town of Blewbury, the horses had a

paddock at Blewbury equestrian centre and we had a self-contained apartment on the other side of town at Woodbury B&B, both of which were lovely. The owner did pass comment he was thinking of installing a corral or two at the back of the B&B (which we obviously encouraged) so worth checking this out for future trips!

#### **Day 4**

##### **Blewbury – Ibstone, 26 miles**

Yet another beautiful day! Left Blewbury at 9am and rode back up onto the Ridgeway amidst bustling racing yards. Followed the Ridgeway down through Streatley main street and crossed the twin bridges over the Thames into Goring. Lots of beautiful properties and some puzzled looks from people sitting outside cafes enjoying the sun. Here the Ridgeway becomes a footpath (although still some fragmented sections of bridleway) so we picked up the Swan way, crossing several busy roads, over chalky arable fields where the earth was like concrete and down narrow hedged paths which reminded me of the corridor in Alice in Wonderland, seemingly getting narrower the further along we went. We stopped for a pack lunch at a nice grassy spot and knocked on a door where a kind gentleman allowed us access to his outside tap to fill my collapsible bucket several times for the very thirsty horses.

A few miles on quiet lanes then lead us into a woodland which had a cross country course running alongside the bridleway, sadly our heavily loaded packs did not allow for cross country jumping.

A friend of ours, Jess, who lives nearby cycled out to meet us here, this allowed me to put my maps away and enjoy the scenery as we followed Jess along some lovely woodland tracks, through scenery that will be familiar to anyone who watches Mid Summer Murders or has seen Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and into Ibstone where the heavens opened and we all got completely soaked for the first time on the trip (which is really good going for me as normally the weather is appalling from start to finish whenever I plan a long ride). We spent the night at Cholsey Farm Riding who offer guided rides and horse holidays in this beautiful area. It was perfectly set up for our needs, self catering accommodation and a lovely paddock. Jackie and Ted could not have been more helpful and it was lovely hearing about their own adventures, having recently returned from a riding trip in South America.

Jess picked us up and we had Supper at the Chequers pub, it's getting more expensive (and colder) the further East we go and with wine at almost three times the price of our local in Devon it was another early night for us!

#### **Day 5**

##### **Ibstone – Longwick, 17.5 miles**

We left Ibstone at a leisurely 10am. Rode across Ibstone common, past the mysterious standing stones and retraced our steps back towards the Ridgeway. We popped out the end of a woodland track right next to the busy M40, a small amount of roadwork on a fairly quiet road took us to a byway through a nature reserve and onto grassy tracks all the way to Chinnor. I took a wrong turn in Bledlow and ended up doing an extra 4 miles on a busy road where a woman helpfully wound down her window whilst passing and shouted 'what are you doing?!' well what a daft question, obviously enjoying a relaxing ride through

rush hour traffic.

Back on route we found some nice tracks skirting farmland into the back of Longwick. I rang the B&B for directions where we were instructed to follow the sign to Aylesbury at the roundabout, we duly did so, however after about 2 miles on the fastest road I have ever had the misfortune to ride on I got a feeling things were not as they should be, so we pulled into a narrow lane and I called the B&B who then came out to find us. It transpired the owner was not as familiar with the road signage as he had initially thought and we should have followed the sign to Kimblewick instead. He was very apologetic and I had a sinking feeling we were going to have to dice with death for a third time today and ride back up the road from hell but on closer inspection of my map it turned out the lane I had pulled into was actually a byway which turned into a bridleway which came out on a quiet lane opposite our accommodation, huge sigh of relief! We set off up the bridleway, the first gate was too heavy to open horseback so I hopped off and soon realised why as when I pulled the latch the dang thing dropped off its hinges and onto my foot, which elicited a few choice words. We eventually found our accommodation, great relief! It was a really lovely, high end B&B, beautifully decorated. The owners were very friendly and again couldn't do enough for us. Breakfast was amazing and I would highly recommend staying at Chadwell Hill Farm, however check and double check your route before getting into Longwick, it is possible to reach the B&B via quiet lanes and not run the gauntlet of the horrendously busy roads as we did.

I was especially proud of our wonderful horses on this section, considering they both live in rural mid Devon and don't see much traffic they didn't once falter with lorries roaring past them just a few feet away at 60mph. It really humbles me the way they trustingly march on, no questions asked.

## **Day 6**

### **Longwick – Wiggington, 17.5 miles**

Really looking forward to getting away from civilisation again. We rode out of Longwick, through Monks Risborough & onto quiet lanes towards Wendover following the Icknield way riders route. We crossed a couple of fairly busy roads then onto woodland tracks up to Whiteleaf hill. The views up there were amazing, we lingered for a short time, taking photographs and soaking up the peace. Mostly we are back on the Ridgeway today. My Sister was meeting us later as the horses were staying at her friend's house and then she was acting as our chauffer and dropping us at my friend Lucie's place in Berkhamstead where we would stay tonight. We decided we would stop at Wendover woods café for a bit of lunch, my sister informed me there were picnic tables on a grassy area here, perfect for horses! Turns out it is a no horse zone, we didn't find this out until we were actually at the café, where the poor chap (I assume on visitor health and safety duty) rushed over to inform us of this fact. Sadly by this time we were surrounded by children, dogs, bikes, buggies and many others who seemed to think we were part of the entertainment, one lady even asked me how much the pony rides were, I briefly considered the monetary gain in this venture but a quick glance at Maddy, my horse (who is not a people person) confirmed that she would never have forgiven me! The poor guy looked rightly worried by the realistic prospect of our horses inadvertently stepping on a member of their new fan club, so we (politely) fought off the horses admirers, stationed the horses out

of sight behind some trees and persuaded him to let us stay long enough to grab a bite to eat (which frustratingly took well over an hour). After which we had to be escorted by a lady in high vis through the crowds at the visitor epicentre via 'Go Ape' and back to the bridleway. I would not advise this as a sensible horseback lunch stop!

Back to the Ridgeway, along some lovely quite, people-free tracks across fields and woodland and into Tring park which led us directly into Wiggington village and the horse's accommodation for the night. A relatively easy day of riding on varied terrain. Mixed emotions tonight as tomorrow is our last day, a mere 5.5 miles and we would arrive at our final destination - Ivinghoe Beacon.

### **Day 7**

#### **Wiggington – Ivinghoe Beacon, 5.5 miles** (plus 4 more to our accommodation)

I felt very sad saddling up this morning, knowing that it was for the last time. We left Wiggington around 9:30 at a leisurely pace, neither one of us in a hurry for the ride to end. We crossed the A41 flyover and then the road into Aldbury and followed the bridleway past our final nights accommodation with friends at Brightwood and up into Ashridge forest. We rode through lovely bluebell woods, up to Bridgewater monument and past the national trust café and visitors centre. As a child I would spend whole days up there exploring on my pony and perhaps bump into one or two dog walkers all day, now as we rode through at 10am on a Sunday morning there were already hundreds of people bustling about.

We continued along a stone track, over a wooden bridge, crossing the ancient drovers path and eventually we emerged from the woodland to spectacular views towards Ivinghoe Beacon. We could see the Ridgeway footpath on our left as it climbed over Pitstone Hill, crossing open chalk downland and eventually joining the path we were on. Down across a road and then it was just a steep hundred yard canter to the top where my sister and her husband met us with celebratory wine, we had pictures and took in the view and talked about the utter awesomeness of the weeks ride we had just had getting here.

The horses seemed to know their job was done and were on their toes for the first time all week as we turned back along the path we had taken to get here and followed it down to the village and our accommodation. We decided not to drive back to Devon on the Bank holiday Monday and instead gave the horses a rest day in the field. We joined some old friends and family at the village May Day celebrations and I got caught up on 15 years worth of village happenings, a thoroughly fitting end to a wonderful adventure.

Now off to plan the next one.....

**I would like to say a huge THANK YOU to everyone who supported us and helped us out along the way and also to everyone who donated to my chosen charity – Ride High, I'm delighted to say that at the time of writing the total is £733.75.**

**Our total mileage for this ride was 103.**

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