

## Perspectives on Chinnor

### Secrets of the hills

It would be easy just to take for granted the Chiltern Hills above Chinnor, but they still contain a host of ancient, hidden features tucked away out of sight. These range from the remains of Neolithic barrows located on, or close to, the ridge, to sunken ways, old chalk pits, the old Westdown Steps and artefacts like Bledlow Cross lower down the slope.

For those of us who were lucky enough to have grown up in Chinnor in the last 50 – 100 (!!!) years, the hills were a natural, largely unsupervised but safe, adventure playground and much more was accessible to us earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than is now. The hills are now much more densely wooded than at most times in the last couple of hundred years, more areas are fenced off as private land and many of the ground features have now become completely hidden from view.

### **Barrows**

There are 3 “bowl” barrows or burial mounds on the hill which form a line with a fourth further east above Bledlow. These are believed to date from between the Late Neolithic period and the Bronze age (between 2400 – 1500 BC). Two are combined to form a double barrow which is accessible from the main footpath along the ridge across the Plain (the open area on top of the east end of Chinnor Hill), although it is now scrubbed over and not too easy to see. It has been excavated in the past and has been “robbed out” (to use an archaeological colloquialism) over the centuries. There is also a single barrow in the woods above Westdown Farm that is, unfortunately, on private land and not accessible.

### **Sunken Ways**

These are paths that may have started off as surface paths but over time, have been worn by human and/or animal passage and water run-off, into steep-sided valleys. There are three or four significant valleys much like this hidden in the woods above Chinnor and Wainhill, leading from the top of the hill down to the Ridgeway.

Sunken ways might originally have been used as funeral ways up to the barrows on the ridge. It is also highly likely that they were used by the “bodgers” for transporting logs and for bringing chair legs down from the hills into the village. There are also stories of them being used by troops in the Civil War and of skirmishes there – hence the local nickname of one - Blood Valley.

The most easterly way is probably the shallowest and least well-defined and leads from the hill to a point above Bledlow village.

The next to the west leads from the east end of the Plain down to the old Leather Bottle pub at Wainhill and is the closest to Bledlow Cross.

“Blood Valley” is the next: it is the longest and the most extensive sunken way above Chinnor and runs from the end of Hilltop Lane (the car park) to cross the Icknield Way near Wainhill. It then continues downhill past old chalk pits into Upper Wainhill.

Yet another follows a line down the hill beside WestDown Farm to the top of Donkey Lane beside what was commonly known as the Horseshoe.

It may well be that the line of Hill Road was once a similar sunken way, at least in part, before the modern road was constructed. The 1885 maps and the current Chiltern LIDAR project show a complex of sunken ways alongside Hill Road/Chinnor Hill and further down the scarp slope. The main way appears to start above Wild Wood on the road to Spriggs Alley and travels through what is now private property to re-emerge onto the main road in the vicinity of the Chinnor Hill Kennels site.

At the Goose Neck, another sunken way follows a line diagonally west from the line of the road downhill towards Crowell, joining the Upper Icknield Way at the entrance to the nature reserve above on the Icknield Way. These ways have clearly not been used for decades but stand out quite

clearly on the maps and are likely to have had major significance at some time in the past. These are, however, now on private property and are not accessible.

On Crowell Hill, to the west of Hill Rd and starting at the right angle bend in the Spriggs Alley road are yet more sunken ways that also drop to meet the Ickniel Way above Crowell. Not all these ways are public footpaths and, once again, many are likely to be entirely, or partly, on private land.

### **Old chalk pits**

There are numerous old chalk pits scattered across the hills, most now overgrown and hidden in the trees, but quite often close to the sunken ways. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the development of mechanisation with the cement works, chalk was extracted widely and, amongst other things, was used to make an early form of cement and to condition soil. Flint, which occurs widely distributed in the chalk, has also been “mined” over the years and used to make road beds. There are 3 old chalk pits on Hill Road, another on the Gooseneck (The Stone Ground), another on the Plain at the top of the sunken way to Wainhill and more beside the Upper Ickniel Way where the path drops to Wainhill. Most are really only now identifiable as depressions in the ground with one or more steep side. In addition, many more smaller examples can be identified on the old maps.

### **Westdown Steps/100 Steps/Jacobs ladder**

Much of the area on the hill on both sides of Hill Road is private and inaccessible to the public although there is one particular footpath, accessed by a series of steps originally called Westdown Step, but now known locally as the “100 steps” or “Jacob’s Ladder”. The steps and footpath start from a point on Hill Road just above the chalk pit and opposite the old Chinnor Hill Kennels site, and the path runs through a section of sunken way to emerge at the corner of Hilltop Lane and Red Lane. This certainly serves to cut off the Goose Neck corner for walkers but is still a very steep climb. The steps certainly existed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are still in fairly good condition to this day, although their exact origin is obscure.

### **Bledlow Cross**

Bledlow Cross is very obvious from old photos of the hills but, although it still exists, it has become grassed over and is now fully obscured by trees. Its origins lie in the mists of time but it is one of four Scheduled Ancient Monuments on “our” part of the hill. It is, in fact, just in Buckinghamshire by about 100m as the County boundary runs down the sunken way towards Bledlow village.

It is a simple, but sizeable, square chalk cross, measuring about 70ft (23m) from end to end, and has been scraped out of the hillside to expose the white chalk. There are suggestions that cleaning (or “scouring”) over the years, means that it is now about twice as big as it was in 1827. (see [Bledlow Cross \(hows.org.uk\)](https://www.hows.org.uk)).

From past photographs it was obviously maintained on a regular basis and was clearly designed to be a prominent white mark on the hillside. This possibly marked an access route up to the barrows on the ridge, but it has obviously now been neglected for quite a long time.

It is still fairly easily accessible from the sunken way near the old Leather Bottle on the Ickniel Way although now almost invisible until you are on top of it.

Happy hunting!

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