

# Ashbury Parish Neighbourhood Plan Evidence Base

## 4. Our Rural Landscape



Prepared by the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

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*Note: the credited individuals are the original authors of the respective sections but their original work has been edited & formatted for presentation purposes.*

## INTRODUCTION

As the title suggests, this appendix deals with the rural areas of the Parish, areas that represent the bulk of the Plan area. While as far as possible it is factually accurate, it is not intended to be a source of definitive evidence but rather to provide the reader with a short overview of the Parish's history, biodiversity & usage and in doing so to show how these characteristics are inextricably linked. In other words it is intended to inform both local residents & the wider public of the importance of our rural landscape and why this inevitably influences our Plan policies.

Section 1: serves to 'set the scene' in as much as it provides a resume of the Parish's history dating back as far as the Neolithic Period, the important topography that is so influential to current usage, and the landscape features & sites the protection of which we as residents are adamant need to be safeguarded in order that they may be enjoyed by generations to come.

Section 2: concentrates on the biodiversity & ecology of the Plan area, a great deal of which results from the chalk springs that are to be found at a number of locations along the escarpment leading up to the downland in the southern area of the Parish. Much of the biodiversity in the Parish is already protected, while other areas have been designated Conservation Target Areas [CTA's], and in establishing an Open Space policy our objective is to contribute to safeguarding the area's biodiversity.

Section 3: reflects on the Parish's allotments that are a result of the benevolence of the Parish's major landowners since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The land which accommodates the allotments has been privately owned throughout their existence, but was made available for 'home cultivation' by the Craven family, and while the ownership has changed twice, each subsequent landowner has continued to make the land available to Parish residents, and currently this is due to the benevolence of Compton Beauchamp Estates.

Section 4: deals with the usage of our landscape and is arguably the most relevant to the future of our Parish. While farming may no longer be the main employer in our Parish it will inevitably have the most tangible impact on the appearance of the landscape as is illustrated by the planting of woodland in the AONB in particular. It is also to be applauded that the authors identify the need to maintain & improve our footpaths as this chimes with the stated views of many local residents and visitors that wish to continue to enjoy the history of our Parish and the beauty of the landscape.

## I LANDSCAPE EVALUATION OF RURAL AREAS

This appendix offers a bird's eye view of the Parish of Ashbury with an emphasis on the historical use of the land and on its cultural heritage.

It aims to highlight aspects of prehistoric remains often overlooked because of their remoteness from the modern world. The past poor treatment of local monuments points to the urgent need for better curatorial protection in the future.

### Topography

The parish boundaries form a long narrow band running NNW-SSE. The terrain divides into two halves; the flat open clay farmland in the north and the elevated undulating chalk downland to the south. The village of Ashbury is on the escarpment spring line in the centre of the parish with Ildstone to the west, and the hamlets of Kingstone Winslow immediately to the north and Odstone to the east.

At its northern tip, parish territory starts below Cranfield University east of Shrivenham. Travelling south by southeast as the crow flies and starting in a small field just east of Shrivenham, we cross the Shrivenham/Longcot lane then the old Kennet Canal. This is now an overgrown ditch but a project for its restoration is at the planning stage. Further south the Great Western Railway London to Bristol line bisects the parish. Engineered by I.K. Brunel on his seven foot gauge track, the service began running through the parish in 1840. Today, modern trains running on welded rails hardly disturb the rural peace, and will be quieter still once electrification of the line is completed.

We then enter the heart of open clay farmland so typical of the Vale of the White Horse. Once marsh, it has long been drained and, due to good maintenance for the last sixty years, it remains fertile for arable crops. In the past horses provided the only motive power on our roads and almost half the grain grown in the fields of the Vale of the White Horse would have been oats grown as fodder.

The farmlands here are almost flat at around 90 meters above sea level. To the east, beyond the parish, the land drains North-East into the River Ock, running along the Vale of the White Horse. However, the springs rising in the middle of the parish at the foot of the downs, including those at Ildstone, drain directly north joining the River Cole west of Shrivenham and, continuing north, pass between Highworth and Coleshill and thence into the Thames near the Trout Pub at Lechlade.

As we continue south from the railway line, the conspicuous feature is the skyline of the North Downs rising up from the valley plain. This marks the escarpment at the centre of the parish. The land rises a further hundred meters above the vale and ultimately to the highest point of the parish, where the ancient burial mound called Wayland's Smithy stands on a prominence on the 217 meter contour. The north face of the escarpment creates a visually bold feature many miles long. Along its northern lip runs the prehistoric track of the Ridgeway (see below).

At the bottom of the escarpment the springs emerge from the porous chalk downs. Here we find the main human settlements and also the zone of richest farmland. For about sixty years until after the Second World War, watercress had been grown commercially in tiered beds fed by the pristine chalk springs. Half way up the escarpment runs the B4507, called the Upper

Road locally, linking to other spring line parishes winding in and out of the combes between Swindon and Wantage. In the centre of the parish to the east of the village of Ashbury at the foot of the Ashbury Combe and alongside the Upper Road lie the allotments (see section 3 below).

The B4507 marks the northern boundary of the land designated AONB (see Appendix II below). Above the road, erosion from the end of the last ice age has moulded the chalk downs into the combes -- picturesque valleys and basins with their characteristic grasslands. These are now managed by the National Trust to preserve the eco-system through an appropriate cutting regime and also to protect against the wear and tear of the many visitors. An aerial view would reveal a sinuous form in plan and also in section, but at a smaller scale, with natural horizontal furrows descending the slopes in tiers. This is particularly apparent at Kingstone Combes. Some of the steeper and narrower combes are inaccessible and filled with trees and remain valuable refuges for wildlife, including some rare birds and chalk-loving native plants.

### **The Ridgeway**

South of the B4507, at 200 metres above sea level, lies our historic "motorway", The Ridgeway. This ancient track runs along the whole ridge of the North Downs from Hertfordshire to Avebury. It was a prehistoric highway of great economic and cultural significance from the Neolithic period through the Bronze Age (8000BC to 2000BC) and remained a drove road up to the late nineteenth century. It is maintained today as a route for walkers.

Beyond The Ridgeway, the terrain remains open with wide vistas of large fields bounded by narrow strips of modern woodland. Its historical land use for grazing has given way to more arable cultivation. Improved farming technology allows crops to be grown successfully on the thinner and drier soil over deep chalk.

### **Ashdown House**

The ground then gently declines southwards. The feeling is one of remoteness with few signs of habitation. The one feature to interrupt this rural vision is the grand site of Ashdown House surrounded by woodland. It is first glimpsed from a distance down one of its broad and formal *allees*. The house was built from 1662 for William, first Earl of Craven, as a hunting lodge for Elizabeth Stuart, the sister of Charles I and the Queen of Bohemia. It is now owned and leased out by the National Trust and covers forty acres. Described as a 'full-size dolls house' because of its simple design as a large cube capped with an elegant roof surmounted with a cupola, the property is landscaped in a formal baroque style with four vistas or *allees*, one opposite each face of the house, radiating from it and cutting through the woodland. The west face leads to the B4000 whence the house will be most familiar. At this point, as an undisturbed geological feature, the land is scattered with a relic field of weathered sarsen stones (as they are known locally; technically silcrete - concreted quartzites). A breath taking feature in a beautiful open green and pastoral valley.

Ashdown House is flanked by three woodlands: Hailey, Middle and Upper Wood. With their ecological niches and bluebells in the spring, these add greatly to the value of the landscape.

Some of the woodland predates the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 and Upper Wood is an SSSI.

Adjacent to Middle Wood and not far from Ashdown House lies Alfred's Castle, built on a prominence with open, unspoilt views to the west and south over farmland and light woodland. The Castle has little to connect it with King Alfred, even though he was a visitor to this region. It was probably constructed in the Bronze Age as a hill fort, with sarsen stones set into the embankments for reinforcement. According to artefacts found on the site, it later had Romano-British occupation.

In the far south west of our parish territory, reachable only on foot, unheralded and possibly unexamined, are many more prehistoric settlements, barrows and tumuli.

### **Waylands Smithy**

Waylands Smithy is the most important long barrow in the area and has been designated a Scheduled Monument since 1882. It is a chambered burial tomb, 56 meters long and trapezoidal in shape. It is certainly the oldest monument in the Parish, with its earliest traces dating back nearly five thousand six hundred years. Its earliest form was a chalk-covered mound containing a timber tomb. Around two hundred years later it was enlarged and shaped roughly how we see it today and it housed bones of the village dead for many centuries. Around 4,800 years ago a vertical stone slab retaining wall was installed around the mound. The name, Wayland's Smithy, formerly Weland Smith, is a Saxon label attached many thousand years after its inception. Nevertheless, it captures a legend (which has its origins in Sicily) of the smith who would the next morning supply the iron goods requested, if the correct money was left out for him the night before. The local version speaks of the smith magically shoeing horses overnight. Iron currency bars were indeed found in the barrow but without other evidence with which to determine that it really was used as a smithy. However, nothing precludes this possibility.

A possible etymology for Kingstone Winslow may be traced from Wayland's grandson, Wigun, who could have had a burial mound or "low" named after him to form Wigan's Low/ Winslow. The "Kingstone" element seems to have been added simply to dignify a humble hamlet, probably by the Abotts of Glastonbury in the ninth century.

### **Historical aspects**

The present Parish of Ashbury has a long history of human occupation. The long strip shape of the parish is typical of the settlements found all along the escarpment; they are spring line villages, enjoying a healthy water supply and surrounded by good farmlands, both below the springs and above them on the downs. In the Parish of Ashbury the settlements of Ildstone, Ashbury, Kingstone Winslow and Odstone all owe their existence to these factors.

This reliable water source comes from rainwater on the downs filtered through the porous chalk to form underground streams which emerge as springs where they encounter the harder base stone of the escarpment. As a perfect complement to these water sources, the farming community had access to both the lowland meadows of clay farmland in the vale, and, to the south, on the higher land above the springs, to the less fertile downland pasture, which was ideal for sheep grazing. If the soil became sodden during winter the farmers were able to work

the higher ground and, in periods of relative drought, they could concentrate on the low meadows.

From the ninth or tenth century the spring-fed streams sustained up to four water mills in the parish, Upper Mill and Lower Mill in Kingstone Winslow; North Mill to the east of what is now Zulu Farm; and one, possibly associated with the Manor House, just to the north of it at the head of the former cress beds. Two of these mills were mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 and two remain today but are no longer operative. Upper Mill has a large and attractive millpond embraced by mature trees with a long southerly view rising up through the combe to the open downs. The Lower Mill house at the time of writing is undergoing careful restoration.

These facts of geography determined the life of the parish from ancient times. Then, during the industrial revolution, people moved off the land and into factory towns creating the beginnings of urban expansion. Although there are now more houses in the parish, the present population of the Parish of Ashbury is broadly similar to historical levels. Until after the First World War, families were very much larger. A dozen occupants in a two-bedroom cottage would not have been uncommon.

When these settlements were first founded, this region would have been among the most densely populated in the country. With New Stone Age sites connected by the Ridgeway such as Wayland's Smithy, nearby Uffington Castle to the east, with the White Horse and Dragon Hill; and in the other direction, to the southwest, Avebury and Stonehenge, we can see that Ashbury was in the middle of the cultural activity of the period. The Ridgeway would have been an open route between these sites in almost any weather, whereas the valley or lowland paths would have quickly become impassable in wet weather.

The archaeological evidence in our landscape attests to settlements around Ashbury covering all historical periods. Farming began locally in the Neolithic Age, especially the rearing of pigs as a supplement to hunting. The area shows much evidence of Neolithic to early Bronze Age flint tool manufacture, including flint 'cores' and the discarded flakes struck from them, created when making stone blades or scraper tools. There is evidence of three Roman farms: at Odstone Combes, where a large acreage of Romano-British field system has been discovered; on the top of Ashbury Hill on the road towards Lambourne; and near the B4000 by Ashdown House. In Kingstone Winslow there are recent finds of medieval pottery and of Romano-British and Roman grey-ware from the earliest times of Roman Britain.

### **The Settlements and Local Architecture**

The presence of the spring line villages is evidence that such places have always been a good place for individuals and families to thrive and they still are! The continuous occupation of the parish from the Stone Age right up to today, centring round the springs, shows that local resources were always sufficient to sustain a small and healthy farming population. Work was possible whatever the weather, with deer hunting and grazing on the upland and arable cultivation and pigs in the lower fields.

The houses in these settlements were built from local materials: chalkstone on hard sarsen foundations (the same stone as at Stonehenge). The sarsens came straight out of the top layer of local fields and the dense chalk stone known as clunch from local quarries. These made sound and durable dwellings which were kept warm and dry by roofs of thatch. This

vernacular architecture survives in abundance, although many of the house walls are now concrete rendered, obscuring the pattern of clunch on sarsen. Pevsner, the architectural historian, described these villages as “clunch and sarsen spring line settlements”. They appear quaint to the modern eye but must have been familiar to local residents for a millennium and probably longer. As bricks became cheaper in the eighteenth century, they began to be used for the corner edges of the buildings and the surrounds of window openings. Evidence for this is visible on many of the houses and garden walls from that period in all settlements in the parish. The garden walls of this type (clunch, sarsen and brick) are to be found notably in Idstone.

The grandest domestic building in Ashbury village is the Manor House, which the Abbot of Glastonbury developed in 1488 from an existing, possibly 9<sup>th</sup> century dwelling. It became one of a series of rest houses used by the Abbot when travelling between Glastonbury and London, Oxford or Canterbury. The Manor also shows the vernacular construction using well-finished, buttressed chalkstone walls. The interior contains fine carved timberwork.

The settlements within the Parish of Ashbury must be preserved in their vernacular glory and they will become in the future even more treasured reminders of a bygone England. This heritage element can be upheld by sensitive maintenance and even restoration of the original features, such as by removing the concrete render from the naturally porous chalk outer walls. It would also be appropriate to recommend replacing window frames and doors when necessary with the original style wood carpentry and not modern plastic.

There are lessons to be learned especially from mistakes made by our forebears. Two prehistoric stone circles have been demolished within the Parish, one in Ashbury village (removed in 1851 for use as road building materials) and a second near Kingstone Winslow, where a field name bore the meaning “one containing a stone circle”. More recently, large stones were removed from Wayland’s Smithy by farmers with tractors after WW2. Until 1965, a small but significant standing stone with legendary connections to Wayland’s Smithy stood for millennia at Snivelling Corner just north of Kingstone Winslow. These losses to our heritage show what slight regard has been shown for our prehistory before now and yet the Thames valley and the Vale of the White Horse is so rich in New Stone Age monuments that archaeologists talk of it as a prime Neolithic Landscape.

The overall character of the settlements is dominated by the old vernacular chalkstone and sarsen cottages with later infill buildings. Apart from the Manor and a few significant old farmhouses the spirit of the villages is quiet, small scale and traditional with farming and farm labour having shaped the housing needs of the rural population. Whereas the need for farm labourers has dramatically declined in the past forty years, the appearance of the Parish landscape nevertheless still reflects the traditional land use of arable, dairy and sheep grazing (see Appendix III below). The social infrastructure including its school, pub, shop and village hall sustain the present modest population. The pattern of housing for centuries has been to replace individual decayed buildings with new ones made from local materials. There is a good recent example of this at Chapel Cottage in Kingstone Winslow, which would stand well as a model for subsequent building.

To remove or obscure any part of this landscape without due understanding of its broader context -- its connectedness to other monuments -- will do irreparable harm. A group of volunteers within the Parish of Ashbury is already looking for ways to maintain, restore and

enhance the assets of the local landscape. Greater population pressure in would clearly exacerbate the wear and tear on these monuments and landscape features. There would be serious heritage risks in any significant (non-infill) increase in the building stock in the Parish. More local education delivering understanding and respect for the whole landscape, its history, the natural environment and the monuments and buildings is desperately needed to preserve our heritage.

## II BIODIVERSITY AND ECOLOGY

Base reference 1:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/planning-and-biodiversity>

### Overall character

Chalk spring-line community, located at the crossroad of Shrivenham-Lambourn and Wantage-Swindon. Both roads are notable for the unique landscape views offered to drivers, walkers and cyclists while travelling through the parish. The Wantage-Swindon road defines the AONB boundary through much of the Parish. Woodlands, grassland and water bodies are all included in the Vale, some of which are under environmental protection which varies from limited (LWS) to strong (SSSI).

The water has historically provided valuable economic resources and now remains as a valuable isolated biological resource as well as remaining a contributor to the River Cole and hence the River Thames towards the north.

### Existing protection for biodiversity sites

Most of the biodiversity potential within the parish is already protected by biodiversity designations (see below: AONB, LWS, SSSI). One valuable area remains unprotected: a strip of land to the North of the Wantage road and which separates Ashbury and Kingstone Winslow. This contains the pond and brooks (see Upper Mill Pond below)

See below for types of designated sites with greater or lesser protection

Waterways and bodies of water have legislative protection. Agriculture is restricted near to waterways and ponds and drainage hydrology must be taken into account when land is built on.

### Designated Biodiversity/Ecological/Archaeological/Historical sites in the plan area

- 6 Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)  
<http://www.tverc.org/cms/sites/tverc/files/List%20of%20Local%20Wildlife%20Sites%20in%20Vale%20of%20White%20Horse%202016.pdf>
- 1 Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)  
*reference*
- 1 Conservation Target Area (CTA)  
*see below*
- Wessex Downs AONB
- Ridgeway National Trail  
*Managed by The Ridgeway Partnership with Oxfordshire Country Council (OCC) as the lead partner*
- D'Arcy Dalton Way  
*A walk of 65 miles through W Oxfordshire linking the Oxford Canal Walk, Oxfordshire Way, Thames Path & Ridgeway.*
- Wayland's Smithy

*English Heritage/NT*

- Alfred's Castle  
*English Heritage/NT*
- Ashdown House

See Vale Part 1 Topic paper 9 for Allotments, CTAs, Ridgeway, Biodiversity offsetting, rights of way, open spaces, Berkshire downs CTA, Equestrianism

### **Conservation Target Areas**

From the Oxfordshire BAP report <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/oxfordshires-biodiversity-action-plan> :-

What are Conservation Target Areas?

There are 36 CTAs in Oxfordshire. Their aim is to restore biodiversity at a landscape-scale through the maintenance, restoration and creation of BAP priority habitats.

The CTAs contain 95% of the SSSI land area in Oxfordshire and 74% of the Local Wildlife Sites. Each CTA supports one or more of the 20 UK BAP priority habitats found in Oxfordshire. They cover 17% of the land area of Oxfordshire but contain 85% of the mapped UK BAP priority habitat and 83% of all records of UK BAP priority species. There are maps, statements and targets for the CTAs with active partnerships working in them, coordinated by ONCF's Biodiversity Project Manager.

Ashbury parish includes part of the Berkshire downs CTA ( see map and descriptions <http://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Berkshire-Downs-Escarpment-CTA.pdf> )

### **Landscape Views**

From Vale Local Plan part 1, Western Vale Sub-Area Strategy:

*The North Wessex Downs AONB extends across part of the Sub-Area and this area will continue to be protected because of its high quality landscape and setting in accordance with Core Policy 44.*

Note that Ashbury is the only village on the Wantage-Swindon road and of all the villages in west Oxon, development here is most likely to strongly impact the AONB, BAP CTA and views to and from these designated areas.

- View from pond to coombes/AONB and vice-versa
- Views from Shrivenham road at intervals towards AONB
- View from Station Road corner to Coombe through open space between KW and Ashbury
- Views to AONB & across Vale from Idstone Rd
- Views across allotments to Coombe from Wantage Rd
- Views from top of Ashbury Hill across Vale to Coleshill ridge and beyond

### **Open spaces**

The allotments are privately owned but have been maintained for (50 years?) and protect the

only view into the coombes from the Wantage Road.

Spaces between the main settlements are significant in retaining the character of the area and also contribute to preservation of the landscape views.

The single major publicly owned open space is the land at Wixes Piece and it is also one of the pieces of land maintaining the settlement separation between Ashbury Village and Kingstone Winslow. There are covenant restrictions on this land. Any future public spaces should take into account landscape views as in and around the AONB these are most valuable as a public rather than private resource. Unfortunately this was not done with the Wixes Piece estate.

### **Settlement Separation**

Ashbury Village and Idstone

- Fields either side of the Swindon Road

Ashbury Village and Ashdown Estate (wide separation within the AONB)

- Land to the West of the Lambourn Road

Ashbury Village and Kingstone Winslow

- Field to the North and East of Pound Piece
- **Field to the East of Wixes Piece (also important to views)**
- Open space to the South of Wixes Piece **protected**
- Field to the East of the open space

### **Upper Mill Pond**

Upper Mill Pond is in the private ownership of the Compton Beauchamp Estate which owns a significant amount of land in the Parish. The pond currently has no commercial use although historically was very valuable.

#### *Features*

- Fed by springs at the upper end
- Traditionally dredged to reduce silt build-up
- Traditionally maintained to limit growth of willow and alder which line the edges and define the border
- Surrounded by woodland on the banks
- Home to a long-established badger colony on the eastern bank
- Public footpath runs above the western edge
- Ancient oaks bordering the footpath and species such as the earth-star fungus *Geastrum triplex* has been found.
- Seen as a valuable feature of the village by parishioners who would like to see it maintained as a village resource.
- Current condition: in need of much maintenance to reach its potential for wildlife and aesthetic function.

Crucially, the pond is a key point along the landscape view from the Coombes LWS within the AONB and is part of a wildlife corridor, mainly composed of fields and a small number of private

gardens. The pond is of great significance but it does not have any formal recognition. It should be enhanced and protected as the main source of several kilometres of chalk brooks which are still home to breeding water mammals and birds including protected species such as water voles..

The landscape view is currently obscured by 30-40 years tree growth - mainly willow – but this could be restored to the situation seen in 1980s photos. The green corridor also defines the separation of Ashbury from Kingstone Winslow. Silt build-up has made the pond eutrophic which limits aquatic wildlife and also restricts the wildlife value of the down-stream brooks which until about 1998 included the increasingly endangered and protected native white-clawed crayfish.

#### **Other references**

<http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/habitats/chalk-streams>

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/living-landscape/water-wetlands/chalk-stream-conservation>

<https://www.wwf.org.uk/where-we-work/places/uk-rivers-and-chalk-streams>

<https://www.buglife.org.uk/advice-and-publications/advice-on-managing-bap-habitats/chalk-rivers>

<http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/wcm/connect/occ/OWLS/Home/Oxfordshire+Districts/Oxfordshire+Districts+-+Parishes/Vale+of+White+Horse+Parishes/Ashbury/>

[Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre \(owls@oxfordshire.gov.uk\)](mailto:owls@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

### III THE PARISH ALLOTMENTS

Unusually, the Ashbury Allotments are on private not local authority-owned land and plot holders pay a rent direct to the landowner, since 1988 the Compton Beauchamp Estate (the Penser family).

The allotment site is in the most beautiful spot with magnificent views towards the Ridgeway. The wildlife on the site is very diverse and active: rabbits, rats, voles, moles and a range of other small mammals, frogs, newts, common lizard, honey bees, bumble bees, pigeons, ravens, blackbirds and a wren. There is a host of insects.

#### Background

The current 2,000 acres of land belonging to Compton Beauchamp Estates is a small part of what was until the early 1950's land owned from Ashbury to Newbury by the Craven family. The Craven family had owned this expanse of land since at least the 1700's. It became common practice from the 1840's onward for landowners to provide land for 'home cultivation' usage near to populated areas.

The site has been in active use from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and possibly earlier. Several laws made during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1908 and 1925) required Local Authorities to allocate land for 'home cultivation'. Since landowners had already made land available for an allotment in Ashbury, no Local Authority allocation of their land was needed or made. Ashbury Parish Council, therefore, have no responsibility for the allotments.

The laws also laid out that a 'ten pole' size (250sq metres) was an acceptable size for an allotment site. In Ashbury the size of the allotment site was very much larger than this. The original site was spread on both sides of the B4507 and was part of the field that faces the Ridgeway, now used for cattle.

#### Usage of the site over the 20<sup>th</sup> century

- The size of the whole allotment site is smaller today only because of reduced usage by plot holders. However, the individual plot sizes remain much larger than usual. Each individual plot measures on average 450ft by 50ft.
- From the 1950's until the end of the century, several Ashbury families grew food for home consumption and each rented several plots on the allotment site. Others use a single large size plot. Some are currently vacant.
- Several of these plot holders (now in their late 60's, 70's and 80's) keep chickens on their plots.

#### Current operation, constraints and restrictions

2 longstanding plot holders are delegated by the current Estate office to oversee the management of the allotment site.

Their responsibilities are minor and include:

- Allocating on request a vacant plot to local residents (within the boundary of the Compton Beauchamp estate).
- Providing contact details to the Estate office so that annual rent can be collected
- giving help and advice, when requested, about growing crops and the soil conditions

- Ensuring that the communal grass path and edges into the allotment site are kept mown (the task is shared)

There is one water tap that supplies the whole site and the water used is paid for by the Estate office

The site is not secured and each plot holder uses a gated entry to their plots, though access is very easy regardless of this. There have been thefts of sheds and tools over the last 18 months.

### **Recent Developments**

- In the last 2 years, several requests for a plot were made by those moving into Wixes Piece and who wanted a smaller more manageable size plot. A corner plot facing the Wantage road was divided into 4 or 5 plots. One of these plots was also taken by a couple living in Kingstone Winslow. Each new plot holder has had to clear, weed and fence their own plot. Each plot size is now akin to what constitutes a usual council-owned site plot size.
- Another resident in living in Wixes Piece wanting a much smaller space than the smaller plots has been allocated a polytunnel space on one of the older plot holder plots – as he and his family have less use and time for using their whole plot.
- Traditionally this site has been male-only plot holders. Over the last 3 years an increasing number of women now rent plots as well a number of younger male and female plot holders.
- Bees are kept on one of the plots rented by 2 villagers
- Methods of growing on the plots are now more varied and range from the traditional rotivation and manual digging of the soil to the use of raised beds; from the use of chemicals to prevent or control insect damage to use of a varied ecosystem (wildlife pond on their plot) based on organic principles; from storage of crops to last the year to selling the produce fresh in the shop.

The land has extensive coverage of bindweed and couch grass and because of the overgrown plots the weed seeds spread easily with the winds across the whole site.

So some features of the site do make 'home cultivation' a difficult challenge. This in part explains why more are not coming forward to take on any of the unused sites.

### **The Future**

Compton Beauchamp Estates is committed to the ongoing use of the land for an allotment site and have said this will continue for as long as there is demand.

For continued use of the site as the older generation stop using their plots, which is conceivable within the next 10 years, some reconfiguration of the layout of the plots is likely to be needed. This should probably include the creation of more plots of a manageable size in order to attract new users.

Other options for allotment site use are emerging across the country such as the creation of a community-run space.

## IV THE EVOLUTION OF LAND-USE IN THE PARISH

The Earls of Craven purchased most of the land including the Manor of Ashbury in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their estates covering parts of Idstone, most of Ashbury, all of Compton Beauchamp and parts of Uffington with their tenanted farms remained intact until it was all sold in 1957. Exceptions to Craven ownership were: Rectory Farm Idstone owned by the Church Commissioners since the 1850's; College Farm Ashbury; and Common Farm Uffington.

The chalk loam soils either side of the Ridgeway have been cultivated since Roman times but the soils of the high downs of the Icknield Series colloquially referred to as "black puff" only came into cultivation during the Second World War. This was in response to our need for more home grown cereals to feed the nation with phosphates and potash being applied to improve productivity.

### Livestock

Before the high downs came into cultivation these unproductive soils were grazed by sheep, with flocks also being fed roots grown on the better soils near the Ridgeway to improve their fertility. Many of the tablet memorials in the churchyard are a reminder of the "golden fleece". Until the 1990's every farm also had a herd of milking cows: in Ashbury at Manor Farm, College Farm and Les Halliday's herd at Wixes Piece; in Idstone at Rectory Farm, Lower Idstone Farm and Idstone Farm; and at Zulu Farm, Kingstone Farm and Odstone Farm. There were never cows at Compton Beauchamp. Today nearly all this livestock has gone. There are very few sheep, no pigs or poultry. The only surviving dairy cows are kept at Hardwell Farm, Knighton and a small herd at Lower Idstone Farm. Some beef cattle remain at Rectory Farm and there is a small herd of Dexters attached to Manor Farm, Ashbury.

Consequently, most of the land is now farmed as arable without livestock. Increasingly, sewage sludge from Bristol or London and imported chicken muck are used to augment artificial manures to maintain soil fertility without livestock.

### Employment

Our farms now support very few paid employees. This trend is likely to continue with ever larger agribusinesses running our farmland. One consequence is that the width of modern farm machinery can at times cause delay to traffic and problems within the small roads of our villages. In 1970 Manor Farm, Ashbury would have had a labour force of 15. It was said that at Ashdown House in 1910 there were 100 estate employees including choristers of Lady Craven's choir in the chapel. Former farm workers cottages now house families that work away. The former Bunces and R & P Engineering companies in Ashbury still have a significant work force but many employees are not local and travel into these jobs. The dairy premises that existed at College Farm and by Wixes Piece have been developed to residential use. Looking ahead, it is conceivable that that changes of use may be sought at Kingstone Farm, Lower Idstone Farm and at Zulu Farm.

## **Footpaths**

The network of footpaths and rights-of-way have not materially changed over the years. Legislation and the public desire for access to our beautiful landscape have retained our historic paths. Landowners sometimes find altering a right of way to adapt to modern needs so challenging that the attempt is eventually abandoned. There is a strong case on safety grounds to improve the footpath access from Ashbury Village to Idstone. The present footpaths above and below the road are unsuitable for those pushing a pram, or are in a wheelchair. Ideally the Idstone Road footpath should be extended beside the road to Idstone Hill with pedestrians able to cross the road there into the hamlet of Idstone so avoiding the dangerous bends.

## **Woodland**

What has changed our landscape immensely is the increase in woodland and tree planting. Inspect the historic pictures hung in the Ashbury Village Hall and you will see development and tree planting has had a marked impact on views and vistas displayed there. During David Astor's ownership of the Compton Beauchamp estate in the 1960s many woods were planted to alter the aspect on the high downs, particularly beyond the Ridgeway.

## **Index of Farm Holdings**

- Rectory Farm including Zulu farm (780 acres). Owner: Church Commissioners. Tenants: R.W. Green 1973 – 2011, O.R. Green 2011 onwards.
- Lower Idstone Farm (c100 acres). Owner W. Ball, purchased in the 1950's from the Church as sitting tenant.
- Ashbury Farms including Manor and Berrycroft Farm and land at Ashdown (c800 acres). Owner: Spence family, mostly purchased as sitting tenant at Craven dispersal 1957.
- Kingstone Farm (c500 acres). Owner: Compton Beauchamp Estates, purchased from David Astor c1980 who purchased freehold at Craven dispersal 1957. Tenant: Ashbury Farms.
- College Farm, Ashbury. Owner: Reade family, purchased from Magdalen College, Oxford c.1926. A few fields remain close to Ashbury. Some recent sales to Compton Beauchamp Estates of c90 acres west of Ashbury Hill.
- Compton Beauchamp Estate including Odstone and Compton Farms. Owner E. Penser, purchased from David Astor c1980 who bought at Craven dispersal 1957.
- Hardwell Farm, Knighton (c500 acres). Owner: Compton Beauchamp Estates. Tenant: A. MacIntosh and Son.
- Idstone Farm. Owner: Charles Peplow
- Ashdown House Estate. Woodland and fields (c400 acres, including roadside field scattered with sarsen stones). Owner: National Trust, gifted by Cravens 1957. Tenants: R.W.Green (roadside fields 35 acres), A. MacIntosh (30 acres), Dawn Cunningham- Read (50 acres behind Ashdown House).