

**FWP81**

**THE RIDGEWAY INCIDENT  
in the long hot summer of 1995:**

**a case study on the interface between research and management**

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We now turn to another incident in rather more detail, using it both as metaphor and for its own intrinsic interest (see FWP 30 for formal report. This text is essentially as per 1997 monograph). It happened quite unexpectedly while this text was in the writing. By plunging into practicality at the 'sharp end', we hope to begin to stimulate thoughts about possible correlations between theory, academic knowledge, the sort of event which can actually happen, and some principles and practices of good management in future. Divisions between theory and practicality, between research and good management, between academic concerns and the so-called 'real world' are, we believe, false. Indeed, our argument goes further and asserts that such contradistinctions exist only in the minds of proponents - and mainly in those of managers rather than academics, - and actually lead to bad management as a result. Much is already good, it should be said, about the present situation at this south west corner of the Marlborough Downs but too much of what ideally should be involved within a model of conservation management seems as yet either too particularistic or too unfocussed. As a result, little spats like this incident on The Ridgeway in the long hot summer of 1995 arise: a case of 'road rage' with a difference.

On Monday morning, 5 June, 1995, contractors began work for Wiltshire County Council on the Ridgeway immediately south of its intersection with Green Street on Overton Down, 2.5 kms. east of Avebury. The contract was to lay c 700 m. of limestone hardcore in a mechanically-dug trench 3.2 m. wide and c 0.25 m. deep (Pl. 00). The objective was to improve the surface of The Ridgeway, in many people's minds 'the oldest road in the world' and technically both a By-Way ( and therefore the responsibility of the Highway Authority, here Wiltshire County Council) and a National Trail (promoted by the Countryside Commission, whose Trail Officer was employed by Oxfordshire County Council). After considerable official and bureaucratic comings and going, confrontation on the ground (Pl. 00), and the deliberate involvement of the media, the work was stopped, uncompleted, on Thursday 8 June. This was to allow time for further consideration of the operation and its implications. The contractors behaved impeccably throughout.

Then and later, considerable public interest in the incident was evinced, and it was debated in both Houses of Parliament (insert Hansard refs). During June/July, two archaeological assessment reports were quickly prepared (get proper bibliog ref for TWA one; the other is Fowler *et al.* 1995), and various meetings, public and otherwise, were held. The contract was subsequently completed but without a mechanically-dug trench. By the end of the year, considerable progress appeared to have been made in bringing greater understanding to the issues involved. In particular, the idea of changing the legal status of the Ridgeway within the area of the World Heritage Site from 'Byway' (and therefore accessible by wheeled vehicle) to 'Bridleway' (accessible only to human and equine pedestrians) was being openly discussed. (Get up to date on this, written 8 months ago - pjf viii.96)

Fairly obviously, the work being collated and written up for this monograph in June, 1995, meant that a great deal of relevant data about the Ridgeway area, especially that part within the World Heritage Site (*below* p. 00), was conveniently to hand, though known only to a few academics. That it was not already in the public desmesne was almost entirely the result of a failure to produce a definitive publication by the present writer (the 'almost' is a minor caveat, inserted because quite a lot of information specifically relevant to the Ridgeway was in 1995 only recently available to research as a result of air photography in the immediately preceding years: a fact, but not an excuse). If ever anyone, academic, politician or layman doubted the paramount importance

of prompt archaeological publication, the incident on the Ridgeway underlined its necessity. Archaeology, and perhaps other field sciences, have been a bit slow to recognise that, whether or not results from the field are of academic or scientific value. With the intensity of land-use on the confined surface of Britain, the chances are high that someone other than an academic is going to need the information for land-management purposes sooner rather than later.

In this particular case, archaeological and historical research results from the downland of Fyfield and Overton Downs were of immediate and direct relevance to the archaeology of the Ridgeway. The Ridgeway technically formed the western boundary of the project's study area on these Downs; but it was a boundary already being crossed in the preparation of an air photographic map of the whole area (fig. 2.00), including the 'corridor' of the Ridgeway from Wick Farm to the R. Kennet. By chance, the map had been ordered to be ready for June, 1995, and, by good management, it was.

With this map as an authoritative base, the team preparing this monograph diverted for twelve days from its main task in order to make the Project's information and landscape understanding available to all those concerned with the Ridgeway. To a brief agreed with English Heritage, a **Ridgeway Assessment Report** was prepared specifically limited to the length of The Ridgeway within the Avebury World Heritage Site (Fowler *et al.* 1995). The brief included 'some comment on current management prescriptions' as well as a detailed appraisal of the archaeology and history of the Ridgeway along the length in question which, of course, included the stretched already damaged by the roadworks. The appraisal included fieldwork, documentary and archive research and, briefly, some analysis and display of some data using G.I.S. (fig. 00).

The following is the 'executive summary' at the front of the Report:

*'The Ridgeway* in its present form is a formalisation between fences, largely during the C19/20, of what may well have been an ancient route SW-NE across southern England. Any such route would not have been confined to narrow limits so the present line is unlikely to be prehistoric in any proper sense except by chance and in short stretches. Today's Ridgeway therefore represents an old cross-country route which, over time and not necessarily continuously, followed many different tracks.

The stretch surveyed here is definitely not a prehistoric road. Throughout, the Ridgeway cuts across a complex, highly-developed older landscape which had fallen out of use by the middle of the 1st millennium AD. During the next centuries, an estate boundary line developed along its line. In the 10th century, land charters referred to the 'Herepath' ('army road' or 'highway'), the earliest firm evidence for the existence of any sort of 'way' along what the 20th century calls the Ridgeway. It is still a parish boundary a millennium later. It is also a By-Way and National Trail, used for local access and recreation by people in vehicles, on motorcycles, on bicycles, on horse, and on foot.

The length of Ridgeway examined here forms the last, or first, 4.5 kms. of the Trail, dropping (from N-S) from the northern end of Overton Down 3.5 km. NE of Avebury to Overton Hill at the Ridgeway's intersection with the A4. It also lies entirely within the Avebury World Heritage Site. This accolade for the area was earned for its archaeological and cultural values, of which the Ridgeway is undoubtedly an expression. Part of this length passes through a conservation landscape managed in the public interest by respectively English Nature and The National Trust. English Heritage has a responsibility for the area as a World Heritage Site, and is directly responsible for numerous Scheduled Ancient Monuments near the Ridgeway. The whole area also lies in the North Wessex Downs AONB.

The thrust of this study is archaeological and historical. The amount of data is almost overwhelming, but is briefly catalogued. A new map based on air photography is at the core of this appraisal. It authoritatively documents, and significantly changes perception of, the cultural landscape to which today's Ridgeway is a late addition. The quality of what is on and in the ground; the historical significance of the area; and the sensitivity of the whole to a range of interests and pressures are beyond doubt. Yet the area has a wonderful story to tell at the heart of Britain's landscape. The length of Ridgeway in question is in effect a continuous archaeological site existing as a corridor lying on and cutting through an extensive cultural landscape of undoubted international significance. That landscape is now documented, demonstrable and to a considerable degree explicable. Any change involving land disturbance on or adjacent to the Ridgeway has a high probability - indeed a near certainty, - of raising archaeological implications. The archaeological damage already done by the mechanical excavation to lay hardcore in June, 1995, is documented. On archaeological and historical grounds, wise and well-informed management of this length of Ridgeway would positively seek to avoid any disturbance to or alongside it, especially in the context of the World Heritage Convention (1972). For alternative courses, archaeological mitigation to current criteria and professional standards could well cost in the order of £100,000 per Ridgeway kilometre.'

Hard-won research data and academic understanding are beginning to cohabit there with practicalities, with politics awaiting both around the corner. The *Report's* main academic conclusion, as it is one of those here, was that:

'the RCHM AP map, by plotting the whole, provides a graphic demonstration that the 'humps and bumps', the banks, ditches and lynchets ... are but part of the picture. The missing half that we cannot now see at ground level was nevertheless once there as upstanding features; and is still there as 'ghosts' in the topsoil and often substantial features cut down into bedrock ... we can now see that the well-preserved remains on Overton and Fyfield Downs are complemented by cognate evidence west of the Ridgeway; and indeed that the Ridgeway passes over a landscape of which it was unaware and of which it is no part.'

Because of the much-loved and well-entrenched myth about The Ridgeway being 'The Oldest Road' and a 'prehistoric trackway', we felt it necessary to emphasise in a document which was primarily intended for non-archaeological eyes that the present line of The Ridgeway simply could not be prehistoric:

'... NO RIDGEWAY EXISTED WHEN THIS 'OLD' LANDSCAPE WAS FUNCTIONING AND CERTAINLY NOT ON ITS PRESENT LINE OR ANYWHERE NEAR IT ... There was no room or need for it in the tidy, enclosed landscape of the Bronze and Iron Ages\*; nor in the early Roman period ... so we can be fairly certain that no Ridgeway ran through this area of downland during an intensive phase of occupation and farming over the two thousand years c 1500BC-AD500.'

[\*This was written before our realisation that much if not all of the downland landscape was pasture in the last centuries BC when theoretically The Ridgeway could have come into being across an open landscape, see pp. 00-00]

Of particular archaeological and media interest was whether the road-works of June, 1995, on The Ridgeway had really done any archaeological damage; and whether completion of the

contract would cause any or further archaeological harm. The evidence, on the AP map and on the ground, was quite unambiguous. Fifty intersections of the Ridgeway and specific archaeological features existed along the length of Ridgeway in question. Every one was located and examined (fig. 00), producing the following quantitative result:

Intersection with earthwork remains in Ridgeway width	:	27
.....possible e'thwk. remn's.....	:	10
No visible remains.....	:	6
Cut by `June `95 works`.....	:	7
	---	
		50

The 'intersections' examined were of course between the modern Ridgeway and the field boundaries and tracks belonging to the pre-medieval landscape. Taking together the 37 certain and possible survivals of earthworks in the Ridgeway width:

- 29 are field boundaries
- 6 make up the two sides of 3 trackways
- 1 is a prehistoric linear ditch and later trackway
- 1 is a Roman road

Assessment of the significance of these remains drew very heavily on the archaeology known from fieldwork and excavation alongside The Ridgeway on the grassland of Overton Down. Similarly its historical significance was argued on the basis of research largely already done, though some new fieldwork and documentary analysis was done specifically for the *Assessment Report*. For example, an indication of the nature of The Ridgeway Assessment Area in the C10 AD was provided, as inferred from Saxon Charters (*above* Chap 14, p.00). In view of the interest in The Ridgeway's antiquity or otherwise, particular play was made of the idea that it may have emerged as the 'mearce', or common boundary, 'a breadth of land on the boundary' between Saxon estates (*above* p. 00). We felt bound to point out that maps of c 1800 do not show any Ridgeway, and that The Ridgeway so familiar today as a fenced track is a very recent development through an increasingly enclosed and cultivated landscape (*above* p. 00). This doubtless caused some surprise and disappointment, not to say disbelief, in some quarters. Similarly, it seemed proper to point out the 'late' appearance of the name 'The Ridgeway' (*above* p. 00). Questioning the age of The Ridgeway really is to tamper with a heritage icon, and of course heritage is as much about feelings and the 'wished-for other' as it is about facts and actual things (as discussed *passim* in Lowenthal 1985, Fowler 1992).

The *Report* next rather nervously addressed some aspects of the then current situation in which official bodies, by starting the road-works on The Ridgeway, had so obviously made a 'heritage mistake' by one set of criteria in seeking to 'improve' a National Trail by another. Familiar issues raised by tourism, visitor management, access to monuments and the countryside - such were touched on, but emphasis was firmly placed on Avebury as a major monument at the centre of (part of) a World Heritage Site (*below* p. 00).

The *Report*, together with much else, was being considered by interested parties from July, 1995, onwards, a period during which consideration of the future and conservation management of the Avebury area seemed to intensify. The 'incident on the Ridgeway', together with others immediately preceding it up to 1995, seem to have had the affect of a catalyst. Whatever happens to that *Report* and its recommendations, it is now most unlikely that heritage issues will disappear from the Avebury landscape in the foreseeable future. Indeed, perhaps the most important development is a wider recognition that 'heritage issues' are a basic part of the Avebury area's heritage, issues which are combustible, complex and, far from being the obscurantist pip-squeaking of an antiquarian clique, are quite as politically and professionally challenging as public health and education.

Facets of these issues have very much not just continued but have blown up during 1996 into a more or less continuous bru-ha-ha. We therefore turn from the particulars of The Ridgeway to some aspects of a landscape of conservation and its heritage management over the area as a whole. We look in particular at the concept of World Heritage to which plentiful reference has already been made, and argue that it is as a World Heritage Site that the future of the Avebury area lies, including the whole of Fyfield and Overton Downs.

APPENDIX

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# Facsimile Cover Sheet

**To:** Gill Swanton  
**Company:** Frenetic  
**Phone:**  
**Fax:** 0167 2861 689

**From:** Peter Fwoler (as per SMR)  
**Company:** Disruptive  
**Phone:** 0191 232 1056  
**Fax:** 0191 232 1056

**Date:** 18. vi. 95  
**Pages including this cover page:** 3

Gill:

Thank you for informing me of the special meeting of the Avebury Forum on 20 June to deliberate on the Ridgeway. I cannot come, and would not have done so anyway. At this juncture, you really must first and foremost sort this out locally, because of, not despite, the national and international dimensions of the issues at stake. For present purposes, I am an `outsider`, one who was a most reluctant participator, as you know, in recent events. I hated in particular having to act as we did in a quite unnecessary confrontation situation i.e. by activating the media, but once my `bluff` was called with the decision on the Wed. to restart the road-building, I do not think we had any option. There would, after all, be 700 m. of new road for the Forum to contemplate now instead of 300 m., grotesque though it is to have to take solace from such figures.

\*I do not know about you but personally I have subsequently had no qualms about doing what we did: what was happening was clearly `wrong`, and so incredibly so that one had to suspect as a result of bureaucratic cock-up. Kirby effectively admits both points in his letter of 9 June. Such was the speed and inappropriateness of this development, our priority just had to be to stop it as a prelude to talks, rather than the other way round. I much admired your very fair account of events in your letter of invitation to the Forum. You might like to know that I have written up my own, fairly detailed version, not for publication yet, in the form of a diary of a never-to-be-forgotten week which I hope will never be repeated. My photographs, colour and b & w, before, during and after, are also vivid.

\*At the risk of appearing to interfere, could I just observe:

1. Certain myths about the nature of the work and the state of the Ridgeway at the time are already tending to appear. Forum members who have not yet visited the site should therefore know as matters of fact:

a. that the length of Ridgeway immediately south from Green Street i.e. from the northern end of the contract southwards, was NOT at all badly rutted before work began. Erosion and wear and tear had already removed much of the topsoil; flints, 'layer 2' ubiquitously hereabouts as you know, made an adequate surface. This observation is proven by the fact that, at this northern end of the contract, the digger bit down into the Chalk subsoil which, as I thought everyone knew, lies immediately under 'layer 2' flints over much of the Downs. The only 'bad' bits of Ridgeway on this length (with one possible exception) from the point of view of a daring Trabant driver lie S of where the work was stopped, where patches of lush vegetation and a humus overlay suggest the softer fill of buried features into which wheels have sunk. Until proved otherwise these 'soft spots' have to be regarded as potential archaeological features, but my point here is really that, even if the premise is accepted that the Ridgeway needs to be improved for through vehicular traffic, lengths on this contract did not need to be savaged in the way that they were. If, as Kirby says, the policy is that 'hard surfacing will only be carried out in areas where the trail is severely damaged', then the direct opposite of that policy has been implemented in this case and, as a result, 300 m. of Ridgeway which were not by any stretch of the imagination 'severely damaged' have now been reduced precisely to that state. And then people ask us why we got annoyed! This was a very silly mistake of a pretty high order of incompetence....

b. that the story that the work was being done for 'maintenance' is completely untrue by normal standards of observation and truth. While in a narrow technical sense it might somewhat implausibly be argued that the work was for 'maintenance' purposes if you accept the premise that the Ridgeway has to be surfaced, in fact a new single-carriageway road was being built - members should be in no doubt about that, - within the fences of the Ridgeway. Hundreds of tons of freshly quarried limestone were being dumped as hard-core, crushed and surfaced - let no-one be misled by the claim that the work was justified by the need to carry out 'maintenance work'.

2. One of the strongest points to emphasise now is the complete disparity between the treatment of one part of the WHS, Avebury, compared to the highly sensitive treatment, costing millions of £s of taxpayers' money on the other part of the same WHS, Stonehenge; and the way that the latter reflects the policy trend in the management of WHS in many parts of the world now to avoid building or taking new roads into WHS and indeed to downgrade and even withdraw existing roads from WHS (I'll talk about this at your Oct. conference)

3. The authenticity and historical/heritage value of the Ridgeway, esp. in a WHS, must surely lie in the FACT that it is, **and always has been**, a 'green road' i.e. an unmetalled pedestrian track, for cattle, sheep and people, with room for them all to graze and gaze (and some of it was not fenced until this century). That historicity, of form, appearance and function, irrespective of when the Way came into being, must surely take precedence over contemporary (and, who knows, temporary) devices such as a designation as a National Trail; and over bureaucratic prescriptions for its treatment, appearance and use which follow from that very recent designation. It is of course a designation which has absolutely nothing to do with the Ridgeway's historicity or its significance in and to a World Heritage Site.

4. My own belief is that, while the archaeological damage done on the contract so far cannot be undone (and if there is any justification for all the fuss made about 'flint scatters' in the Stonehenge environs, what a disaster on the Ridgeway!), both as a point of principle and to restore the appearance, nothing less than removal of the new road so far and, as far as possible, the reinstatement of the Ridgeway to its former appearance and constitution are essential objectives, sooner rather than later.

5. A very significant aspect of the Ridgeway's historicity is of course that it is documented in one and partly in TWO 10th century charters, respectively for West and East Overton (respectively belonging to Wilton Abbey and the Bish. of Winchester), along the stretch either side of the Green Street cross-roads. The Ridge Way (and NOT Green Street, *contra* OS and practically everybody else) is indeed the 'Herepath' so-named in these late-Saxon Charters, 'the people's way' along which the boundary of the Charters moves from landmark to landmark. Ian Blackwell and I, as

part of our current study, now know these boundaries in some detail and can locate most of the landmarks. That was a thousand year-old boundary, AT LEAST, that was being sliced last week, the spoil being dumped on the E side where the Saxon features are for much of the stretch S of Green St. and where exist(ed), from later times, I presume, many of the boundary stones marked on the OS 1885 25 inch map. The main point here, of course, is to add to the sensitivity of the Ridgeway, over and above the presence of conventional archaeology (tho` what do we make of AS charter refs to `burials` which we can locate precisely on the ground, where nothing is visible? - just let the `maintenance` work of merely `hard-surfacing` slide past and hope that nothing happens?)

6. May I end on a very positive note, following from 5. *above*? As you know, with colleagues I am currently deeply into the minutiae of Fyfield and Overton, inc. the Ridgeway: we have the data at our fingertips (inc. all that from SMR kindly made available by colleagues there, + fieldnotes by OGS Crawford, your good self and other all-time greats etc.) and a familiarity with it and the landscape in a way which one seldom has the opportunity to acquire (for an EH monograph). I have therefore suggested to Gill Andrews, the manager of our FYFOD project for EH that, if EH so wish Ian Blackwell and I could, and would be willing to, divert for 2-3 days just to focus on the Ridgeway and its adjoining land with a view to producing a short but I would hope authoritative report on its archaeology and history at least for the stretch from Green St. - the Sanctuary. We are emboldened to propose this in addition because in mid-July we will receive from RCHM an up-to-date AP map of our study area, including either side of the Ridgeway from Wick Farm - The Sanctuary, which we have commissioned as part of the Fyfod project. About a month from now, then, as it happens we will have together about as much information as anybody could want for assessing the archaeology of the Ridgeway along at least the length through all or most of the WHS. It seems a stroke of good fortune, so there is the proposal. I have not yet had any reaction from EH but if this idea is not acceptable, then we will of course be only too pleased to hand over all our data to someone else in due course, but we will not be able to do so until after we have finished Fyfod since we are using it daily.

pjf