

A Visit to the Lambourn Valley.

BERKSHIRE DOWNS AND WHITE HORSE HILL.

AN excursion to the Berkshire Downs and the Vale of the White Horse was enjoyed by a number of members of the Reading Literary and Scientific Society, and the outing proved one of the most delightful ever held in connection with that organisation. The arrangements were in the capable hands of Alderman E. O. Farrer, who had the efficient assistance of Mr. F. M. Bunce, the Hon. General Secretary, and the party had the advantage of being under the guidance of Mr. George W. Smith, who has an intimate acquaintance with the district visited and is deeply versed in its historical and traditional lore. No one who explores this locality—all too little known to Reading folk—could hope for a better guide, philosopher and friend than Mr. Smith, and on this occasion his descriptive comments, his apt quotations from Berkshire ballads, and the information he was always willing and able to impart in answer to inquiries greatly enhanced the pleasure and usefulness of the outing.

Leaving Reading at 1.30 p.m. by char-a-banc and car the party drove to Newbury, noting many points of interest on the way and catching glimpses of Kingsclere and Inkpen Beacon in the distance. Leaving the Bath Road at Newbury, and passing on the right Donnington Castle, the site of the second Battle of Newbury fought in 1644, the party entered the beautiful Lambourn Valley, and for some miles kept in close touch with the picturesque stream which gives this valley its name. They drove through quaint old-world villages, where motor vehicles seemed altogether out of place and where even the humblest buildings had the charm that only the mellowing hand of time can give—amongst them Boxford, with its late perpendicular church; Welford, beautiful in situation, with its ancient manor house and circular-towered church; East Shefford, where a Saxon cemetery was discovered; West Shefford, East Garston, Eastbury (with its well-preserved wayside cross and 15th Century pigeon house), and then Lambourn itself.

At this last-named village a halt was made in order to visit the very fine church, which is mentioned in a charter of King Canute about 1032, and the adjoining almshouses, which were founded by John Estbury. The inmates of these almshouses are required to attend a service in the church every morning at 8.10 o'clock—a curious survival from the days of compulsory church-going. In the wall around the churchyard are a number of the “Sarsen” stones or “Greywethers,” quantities of which were afterwards noticed on the Downs. These are naturally concreted remains of a bed of sand, overlying the chalk, the softer sands and clays having been denuded. On resuming the drive the road lay past Ashdown Park, built for William, the first Earl of Craven.

A TRUDGE ALONG THE RIDGEWAY.

A mile or two further on came a change in the programme, for those in the party—and they proved the majority—disposed for a walk over the Downs. Leaving the vehicles, the pedestrians, under the able leadership of Mr. Smith, trudged along the Ridgeway, an ancient track crossing the Downs, for a couple of miles to Wayland Smithy, a lonely tree-encircled burial place, probably dating back two thousand years before the beginning of the Christian era. The visit to this historic spot was one of the most interesting incidents in an afternoon crowded with memorable experiences. The name of Wayland Smith recalls the narrative of this legendary son of Vulcan as set forth by Sir Walter Scott in “Kenilworth,” but the real fascination of this quiet place is not dependent on the wizardry of Scott—it lies in the fact that this so-called “cave” is a chambered dolmen of the long, barrow type, belonging to the late Neolithic Age, and the contemplation of it gives rise to thoughts as to the happenings in which it has played its part in the course of the centuries. From this memorial of the long vanished past the visitors walked to Uffington “Castle,” the highest point on the Berkshire Downs—856 feet—and from this vantage ground they had a clear and comprehensive view of the surrounding country.

On the slope of the hill is Berkshire's one and only White Horse—a weird specimen, no less than 374 feet long, constituting a notable landmark—and close at hand is a lesser height, known as Dragon Hill, where, according to local tradition, St. George killed and buried the dragon. After a rest on these heights the pedestrians made their way down the slippery slopes to the picturesque hamlet of Woolstone, and here a welcome tea was served, in the open, at the White Horse Inn. After this repast, Alderman Hayward, on behalf of the members of the party, briefly expressed their thanks to Alderman Farrer and Mr. Smith for all the trouble they had taken in connection with the outing, and both these gentlemen responded, Alderman Farrer paying a tribute to the assistance rendered by Mr. Bunce.

The homeward journey was not the least enjoyable part of the day's itinerary. The route chosen was by way of Kingston Lisle, where a halt was made at the far-famed Blowing Stone, which, according to a local poet (Job Cock) "in days gone by, wur King Alferd's bugle harn," and through pleasant rural scenes to Wantage, the birthplace of King Alfred, whose statue in the Market Place by Count Gleichen was duly inspected. Thence the party, making a slight detour to take in East Hendred, drove along the Icknield Way to Streatley and on to Reading, which was reached shortly after 8 p.m. The delightful summer weather added to the pleasure of an outing which will long be remembered by those who were privileged to take part in it.