

THE CHILTERN

Jon Scourse

The old Saxon word for chalk is *chilt*. It is therefore no surprise that the range of chalk hills that flanks the Thames Valley and forms a natural barrier to the north west of London is called the Chilterns. The Chiltern Hills are an exceptional area of England and wherever you visit you will find rolling hills, wooded valleys and exceptional brick and flint villages.

The Chilterns have a rich history, with evidence of Neolithic Man, Roman occupation and a prosperous medieval economy based on wool. From the eighteenth century, the area's proximity to London made it a favoured location for the country estates of the rich, and more recently for the home-base of city commuters. Being close to the capital, it is now also a very popular setting for films and television, including *Midsomer Murders* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Although this accessibility has brought with it significant pressures, the Chilterns still offer great opportunities to explore a quintessentially English landscape. Once away from the motorways and major roads, the red kites foretell a quieter pace of life with small lanes bordered by deep beech hedges, wonderful woods and beautiful villages, most with a pub and a church. It is quite possible to just meander off the beaten track and to stumble across country houses and sudden views across the valleys.

Jon Scourse offers an authoritative view of this precious landscape, heavily illustrated with more than 200 colour photographs specially taken for this book. Although convenient, the car is not always the best way to explore. Far more can be seen by going slowly, by bike or on foot and Jon Scourse offers suggested routes so that the reader can use this book as the ideal on-the-ground guide or just as the perfect armchair memento of England at its best.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Scourse lives close to the River Thames near Wallingford, with easy access into the nearby Chiltern Hills. As a keen walker, he developed a strong interest in landscape photography and this is reflected in his work, especially of the changing seasons. His photography has included work in Tuscany, Brittany, Exmoor and the Scilly Isles, but his primary interest is the Chilterns and Thames Valley.

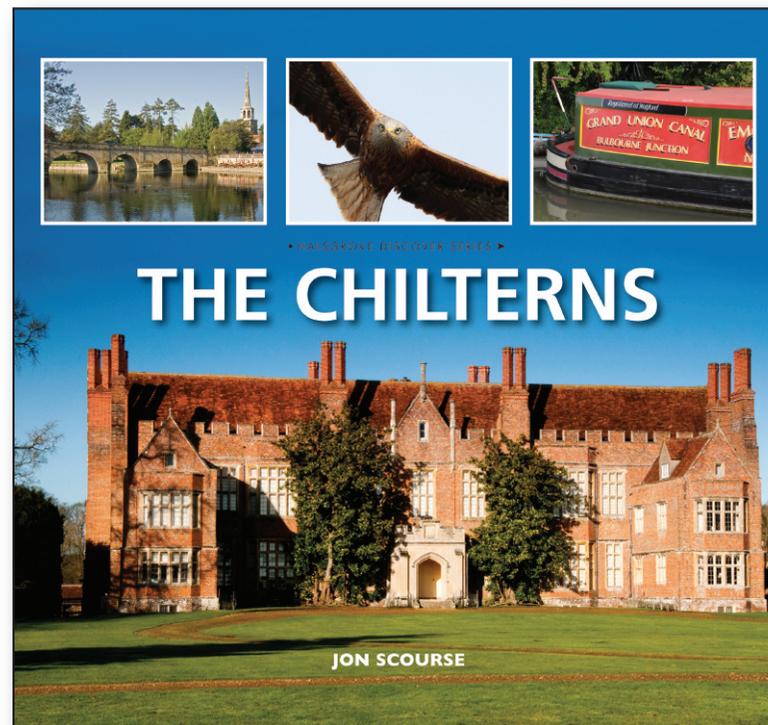
Jon started his career in the shoe industry before spending twenty years in the charity sector. In addition to his landscape photography, he continues to work as a consultant within the charity sector and is also the Chairman of The Mitchemp Trust and a Trustee at the Trust for Oxfordshire Environment.

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THE CHILTERN S



Beautiful gardens surround the almshouses and church at Ewelme.



Dragon boats race on the Thames at Temple Island.



The canal wharf at New Mill in Tring.



Right: Ashridge House, now a Management College.



Poppies in the evening near Woodcote create an almost Italian vista.
Left: Example of a double-page spread

THE CHILTERN S

Practical around the valley at Sevenoaks Place.
Below: A hill in the Great Ouse Gorge at Pinn.

also offer the country home for the Prime Minister at Chequers, near Wyckham and the Foreign Secretary at Dorset Wood near Burnham Beeches to the south.

The impact of the Victorians was also economic. The Grand Junction Canal was built through the Chilterns, to link the Thames with the canal networks into the Midlands, providing new sources of work. The need for a comprehensive rail network forced new routes through the heart of these hills, the first long distance railway in the world opened in 1825 between London and Birmingham passing through Tring and Amersham. Another route was to Aylesbury through the narrow valleys from High Wycombe to Princes Risborough. These routes in turn opened up the scope for stone industry, with mining and quarrying using bench lines. The furniture industry, based on the steady supply of planted beech wood, prospered and made High Wycombe a major centre, reaching markets throughout the Empire.

Agriculture and forestry also prospered, with new communications opening up the expanding market in London. Most of the corn had a cattle market and in the higher villages the supply and preparation of timber for the furniture factories provided extra employment.

A PERSPECTIVE

Arable and sheep farming rise with accurate back winds at Ippden.

Left: Bluebells in May are popular with the entire Chilterns.

Below: Poplars with the Chilterns and in the background.

On the scarp near the Thames, the farms developed on a steep basin from the river and approach to the top of the hills, enabling mixed farms to operate with cattle in the valleys, stable fields on the middle heights with sheep grazing on the chalk downslope above. A few of these farms still survive on the same basic layout.

The furniture industry has had a beneficial impact to this day. The southern Chilterns have one of the highest densities of mixed woodland in England, blessed with large swathes of wonderful beech woods that now provide leisure access as well as maintaining a commercial timber industry. Many of these woods provide a magnificent display every May with bluebells in abundance.

The Chilterns today remain a beautiful and accessible area to explore. There are of course the usual pressures to control with, notably to protect the environment from further development. As a natural barrier between the Midlands and London, there has always been an issue with communication links. The need for a motorway resulted in the M40 in the mid-1970s, linking its way across the hills to eventually break through to the Vale of Oxford with the highly controversial cutting near Berkhamstead. This is a problem as it does reduce the Chilterns of a vast amount of traffic and potential congestion, but is a blot on the landscape. The new HS2 high speed rail link to Birmingham is now more contentious, threatening to damage some of the best Chilterns landscapes and is being hotly opposed at the time of the Government decision to proceed with the project.