

# The Great Stones Way

A Development Project Initiated by The Friends of The Ridgeway

## Project Summary

The Project aims to develop, mainly over existing rights of way, a new walking route in Wiltshire, to be named The Great Stones Way (GSW), from Barbury Castle near Swindon, along The Ridgeway National Trail to Overton Hill near Avebury, then through Amesbury and past Stonehenge to the Old Sarum hill fort near Salisbury. It is intended that the new path will be developed to standards of surface, signage and access similar to those of National Trails. The new path will be not only a valuable recreational facility for the local communities along the route but also a catalyst for economic and community development along its benefit corridor. It is expected to increase significantly the number of visitors passing over the North Wessex Downs, across the Vale of Pewsey and along the upper Avon Valley, generating economic benefits estimated at £6 –10m annually, and supporting many new jobs, for the benefit of local service businesses and the community at large.

**The Friends of The Ridgeway:** The Friends of the Ridgeway (FoR), a registered charity (No 1107926), was set up 28 years ago. After the success of its campaign to curb the damage caused by mechanically propelled vehicles on The Ridgeway National Trail, FoR is now focussed on helping to preserve the historic Ridgeway paths by raising public awareness of their value to the community.

**The Ridgeway:** Since pre-history there has been an ancient Ridgeway route across Southern England from the South Coast to East Anglia. The route links many of our finest Iron Age hill-forts, pre-historic barrows and monuments. A central section of The Ridgeway, between Overton Hill near Avebury in Wiltshire, and Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire was approved in 1972 as The Ridgeway National Trail. The Great Stones Way and paths across Cranborne Chase to the south-west to link with the Wessex Ridgeway will complete the ancient, coast-to-coast highway.

**The Great Stones Way:** The GSW may be considered as an integral part of the ancient Ridgeway, extending the National Trail and linking the great megalithic monuments of Avebury and Stonehenge. GSW will follow the apparent ancient alignment from The Sanctuary at Overton Hill, across the Wansdyke and up to the edge of the Downs at Walkers Hill, and thence across the Vale of Pewsey to the crest of Salisbury Plain at Charlton Clumps. It will then descend to the Avon Valley and follow the river through Enford, Netheravon, Figheldean and Bulford to Amesbury, crossing the A303 by the Ratfyn foot-bridge. There will be signed diversions to Durrington Walls, Woodhenge and Stonehenge itself. An alternative path alignment across Salisbury Plain itself, skirting the flagged Danger Area, is envisaged, but this will be subject to closures when the ranges are in use. The planned extension from Amesbury to Old Sarum will link the route to Salisbury, with its Cathedral, rail access and local services.

**Feasibility:** FoR's proposals for a walking route meeting international standards of access, surface and security, with appropriate signage and information and a high degree of disability access, were subjected to a detailed study, to establish costs, demand and potential economic returns on investment. With the help of grants from the Sustainable Development Fund of North Wessex Downs AONB, from the Plain

Action LEADER group, and from Wiltshire Council's Rights of Way Department, a Feasibility Study commissioned from a consortium of professionals, led by Land Access Ltd, was completed by early-April, 2010, and concluded as follows:-

- The proposal is a good fit with the relevant national and regional strategies, and with Wiltshire's Rights of Way Improvement and Local Transport Plans.
- As a good quality route with a very strong heritage theme, The Great Stones Way should appeal to a great many walkers and quickly establish itself as a high-profile Strategic Regional Route.
- Development to "regional route" standard, with least restrictive access throughout, is technically feasible, despite concerns as to major road crossings.
- The likely cost of development, including legal costs, contingency and project management, was estimated to be £105,000 from Avebury to Stonehenge and a further £25,000 (excluding crossing works) for continuation to Old Sarum.
- The route is expected to generate economic benefits of between £6mn and £10mn per annum, conservatively based on the experience of other similar trails.
- Existing services are adequate to launch the route, but demand generated by the project would support additional provision, supporting many new jobs.
- There is good opportunity to develop a series of shorter distance circular walks based on the spine of the GSW. The number of archaeological and historic attractions en route is overwhelming.
- The overall conclusion is that there is a very strong economic and social case for developing The Great Stones Way as an internationally important recreational amenity, with a world-class heritage appeal.

**Community Support:** FoR has discussed the concept with the relevant departments of Wiltshire Council, with the Wilts and Swindon Local Access Forum, and with a wide range of interested organisations. The plans have been welcomed by the Wiltshire Area Boards concerned, and by the Town and Parish Councils along the Avon Valley sections of the route. Concerns raised by WHS conservation authorities and by Councils in the Downs and Vale of Pewsey as to potential adverse impacts are being addressed.

**Environmental Impact:** FoR is developing an effective environmental impact mitigation policy, with the help of a Consultative Group of conservation organisations, and will commission further studies to start before end-2011, to minimise any adverse effects on the communities, on the natural environment and on the sensitive archaeology along the route.

**Maintenance:** FoR has agreed to assist Wiltshire's Rights of Way Department and landowners in the management and maintenance of the route by instituting a volunteer scheme and by fund-raising.

**Contacts:**

Ian Ritchie, Chairman FoR, The Limes, Oxford St, Ramsbury, Wilts, SN8 2PS

[Ian.Ritchie@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:Ian.Ritchie@ukonline.co.uk) Tel: 01672 520090/07977 454047

Jeff Goddard, Secretary FoR, 6 Darell Road, Caversham, Reading, Berks, RG4 7AY

[Jandjgoddard@googlemail.com](mailto:Jandjgoddard@googlemail.com) Tel: 0118 9478556

20<sup>th</sup> October, 2011.