



Viewpoint

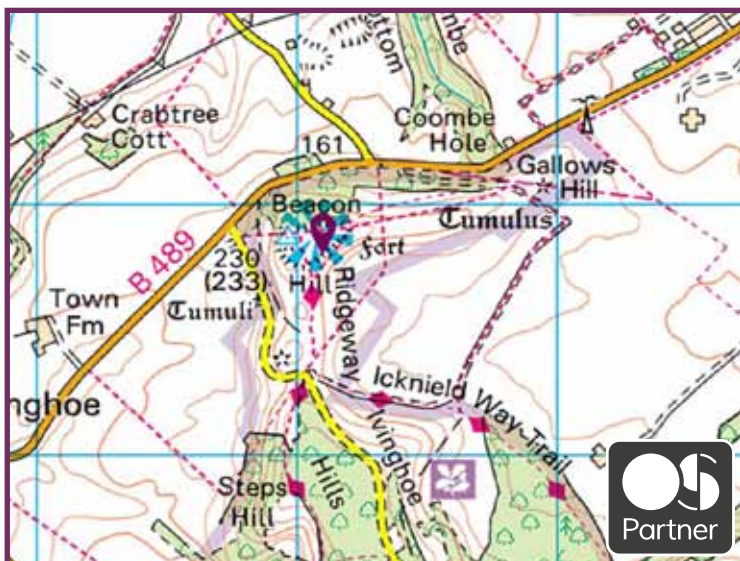
Walking the chalk



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location: Ivinghoe Beacon, near Tring, Hertfordshire, LU7 9EL

Grid reference: SP 96100 16800

Getting there: Take the turning for Ivinghoe Beacon from the B489. The car park is on the left hand side after approximately 1km of steep incline. From the car park, follow the signposts to Ivinghoe Beacon. Please stick to the footpaths!

Practical Information: Moderately steep hill climb from car-park to the Trig-Point at the top of the Beacon itself. Not suitable for wheelchair access. Sturdy shoes recommended - can be muddy

A local icon, a sight familiar with the residents of the surrounding towns and villages, and the start of both the Ridgeway and Icknield Way long distance paths, Ivinghoe Beacon stands at 249m above sea level, an imposing gateway to the rolling hills of the Chilterns.

The path you have just walked up, and the landscape around you, was also ascended by thousands of people before you, dating all the way back to the Iron Age.

Why have people been 'walking the chalk' at Ivinghoe Beacon since the Iron Age?



From your high vantage point on the edge of the Chilterns, look down over the flat expanse of the Vale of Aylesbury, then back behind you at the rolling grass slopes of the hills you're standing on.

The stark difference in height is caused by the two areas consisting of two different geologies: the Vale is mostly clay, while the Chilterns are formed of chalk.

The meeting of these two rock types forms what is called an 'escarpment', created by what is known as differential erosion: as clay is such a soft rock, it is eroded away much quicker by wind and water than the more resistant chalk, leaving behind a series of hills.

This type of landscape makes a perfect viewpoint, appreciated by modern day visitors, and thousands of years ago, an ideal stronghold and lookout for a fort. In fact, in the Iron Age (a period from about 800 BC to the Roman invasion of 43 AD), such a fort existed here. Look around carefully and you can just about still see the small raised outlines of the structure.

It wasn't all about defence though. People have also farmed this land for centuries.

If you're here in summer, keep your eyes peeled - you can see the ridge-lines from ancient plough furrows below the main hill. If it's a rainy day on the other hand, you may have had trouble walking the ascent to the top. Imagine how difficult it would have been for tradespeople and farmers walking the footpaths, dragging carts laden with goods through the mud and bad weather!

However, the Beacon is changing.

The chalk scarring you can see is not natural; that's the areas of exposed white rock, where the grass has been worn away, that you may have noticed on either side of the footpath on the way to the top of the hill.

The thousands of people that walk up to this geographically and historically rich hotspot each year are contributing to human-induced erosion. As people divert away from the footpaths, they remove the vegetation, making it easier for water droplets and wind to wear down the chalk underneath.

This can cause damage to the habitat by changing the vegetation and soil structure, as well as altering the natural beauty and quality of the landscape.

People have 'walked the chalk' here since the Iron Age, for trade, settlement and today for pleasure. But sat upon its imposing chalk ridge, Ivinghoe Beacon reminds us that although some landscapes may seem indomitable and immovable now, they are perhaps more fragile than they first appear.



View of the Beacon from the ridgeway



Plough furrows on top of the Beacon