

THE ESCARPMENT

Stretching 52 miles (84km) in a near-continuous line northeast from Bath to Mickleton, the escarpment gives the western Cotswolds the most dramatic of sheer edges. A slumbering Jurassic giant, its gnarly rock face is laid bare here and there by the elements and quarrying, its summit gripped by narrow belts of trees silhouetted against the sky.

Vistas over the Severn and Avon Vales are breathtaking – and the giddy look back up is equally thrilling. At a puffing 1,083ft (330m), Cleeve Cloud is the loftiest point in the whole of the Cotswolds.

The epic movement of continents over the last 150–200 million years that pushed and tilted the Earth’s crust to form the escarpment also created its distinctive backdrop falling away to the east: a classic ‘scarp and dip’ landscape.

Further activity gave the tale that the Devil made Meon Hill, at the tip of the Cotswold escarpment in Warwickshire, by throwing a clod of earth in a fit of anger. More prosaically, it’s the result of millennia of erosion, which detached it from the scarp.

Along with similarly created outliers like the massive whaleback of Breton Hill, Meon Hill became a noted landmark whose strategic value as a lookout made it a site of choice for an Iron Age hill fort.

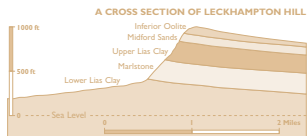


Left: ‘The Twins’ at the summit of Cleeve Hill.
Below: The Cotswold escarpment at Cleeve Hill, also known as Cleeve Cloud.



“A man may do anything with Cotswold stone but eat it”

– An old Cotswold saying.



RIVERS, VALLEYS AND WATER MEADOWS

When morning frosts freeze the banks of the River Windrush at Sherborne, it's as if Earth memories are stirring, calling to mind primeval scenes when this beautiful valley was first created.

Through millennia numerous streams, eating into the porous Cotswold limestone, have fashioned river valleys in the landscape, while the melting of seasonal snowcaps following the Ice Ages gobbled broad and deep. Where meltwaters have vanished, the dry valleys are left or, as with the Windrush, you find 'misfit' valleys: the river now a narrow ghost of its post-glacial torrent.

Water is the pervasive mood music of the Cotswold landscape. Rivers like the Churn, Coln, Leach and Windrush rise on the scarp, follow the tilt of geology southeast, and along with the Evenlode join the Thames, which has its official source near Kemble. Others link with the River Severn or Avon, and you will find no more secretive river valleys than those incised around Bath and Stroud.

Quiet riverside wanderings can delight with glimpses of otters or kingfishers, or the plop of a water vole – its numbers on the rise again thanks to local conservation work. The clear waters of the aquifer-fed Coln, among others, are known for grayling and brown trout.

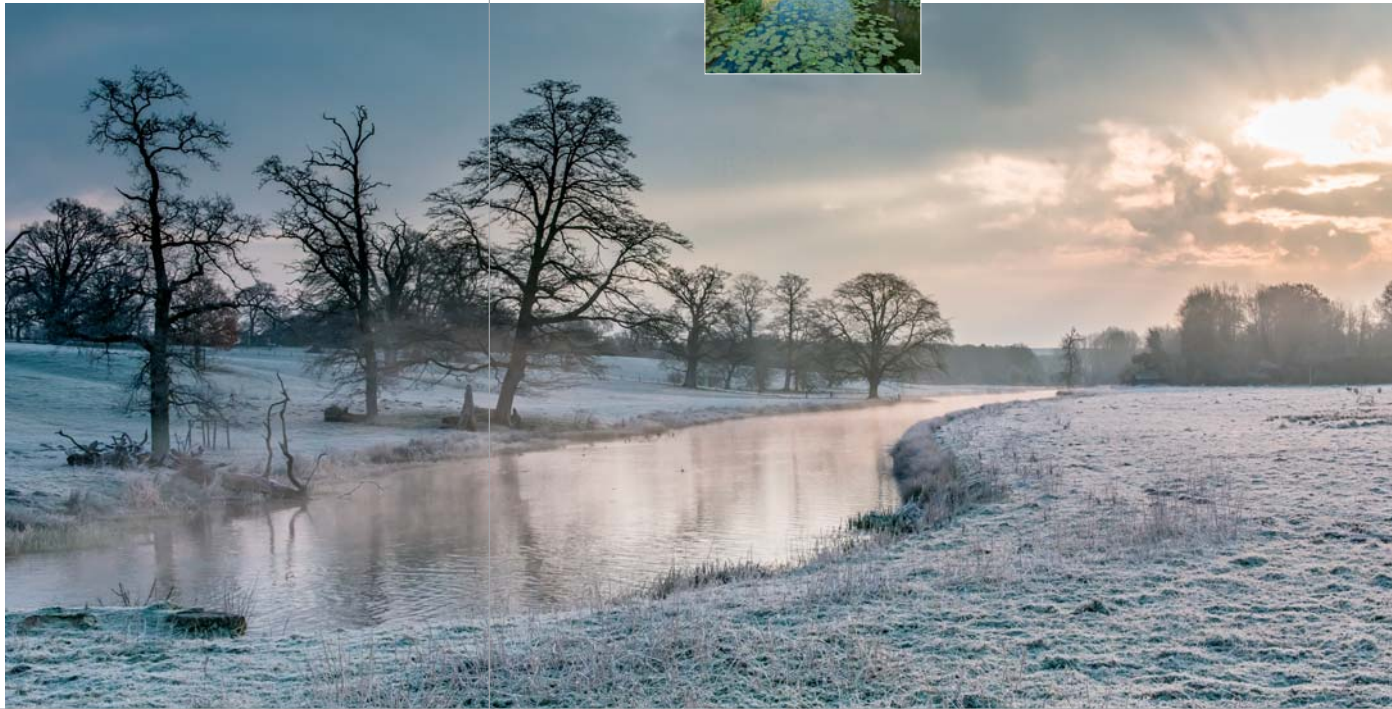
Water meadows, traditionally providing lush grazing and an 'early bite' for livestock, are also havens for flora and fauna, whether darting dragonflies over the restored 18th-century meadows at Sherborne or colourful marsh orchids, flag irises and marsh marigolds at Bibury.



Left: Willows nod over the River Evenlode, near Bledington.



*Left: The River Avon at Bradford-on-Avon.
Below: Frosty morning on the Sherborne Brook, a tributary of the River Windrush.*



ANCIENT BROADLEAF WOODLANDS

The Cotswolds' ancient broadleaf woodlands, notably clinging to the western scarp and deep valley sides, are a heart-warming glory to behold, no more so than in autumn when the beech woods erupt into fiery oranges, gold and copper.

Following the Ice Age, most of the Cotswolds was shrouded by 'wildwood', before our hunter-gatherer ancestors and Neolithic farmers cleared ground for pasture and cultivation. Still, today, nearly 13% of the AONB is woodland, with almost one-sixth of it growing on ancient sites.

Beech trees recognised to be internationally important thrive on the limestone soils. At Lineover Wood on the scarp close to Dowdeswell one spectacular specimen is estimated to be over 600 years old, the girth of its trunk a portly 23 feet (7m), the third largest beech in England. Alongside oak and ash trees, Lineover is also blessed with many ancient large-leaved limes.

A little way southwest at Cranham, Buckholt Wood – the name is from the Saxon for 'beech wood' – casts a cathedral-like calm with its soaring boughs. Also look down to spot a few of the 780-plus species of fungi found here, their names like scarlet elfcup and amethyst deceiver so evocative of mystery.

Some species, including types of spiders, are dependent on ancient woodlands to survive and it's a joy to find lots of floral rarities, such as Solomon's seal and yellow star of Bethlehem at Colerne Park and Monk's Wood north of Bath.

*"O the wild trees of home
with their sounding dresses"*

– 'The Wild Trees', Laurie Lee.



Left: Trees cling to the top of Haresfield Beacon.



Left: Beech and oak leaves.
Below: Ancient beech trees on the Cotswold Way, Lineover Wood, near Dowdeswell.



HISTORIC HIGHLIGHTS

The influence of the Anglo-Saxons, who filled the power vacuum left by Roman legions recalled to Rome in the early 5th century, is often overlooked. Yet they gave us 'Aengla Land' and the idea of Englishness, and they reorganised towns and countryside during the 800s and 900s to create a basis for much of the Cotswold landscape – quintessential England – we love today.

Among the best reminders of Anglo-Saxon culture, when Christianity flourished anew, is the tiny Saxon church of St Laurence at Bradford-on-Avon. Typically tall and narrow, with a rare richness of decoration, it is an extraordinary survivor and still used for worship.

Even Sudeley Castle, its walls glowing gold against green hills at Winchcombe, can trace estate connections back to the Saxon King Ethelred (the Unready) and his daughter Goda. Over 1,000 years since, history has layered on lively adventures here, and Sudeley is the only private castle in England to have a queen – Henry VIII's sixth wife, Katherine Parr – buried within its grounds.

Elsewhere historic monuments bear witness to battles that have further forged England's identity. Fifteenth-century Minster Lovell Hall, now a romantic riverside ruin, is reputedly haunted by Francis Lovell who, having fought on the wrong side in the Wars of the Roses, hid in a locked secret chamber, was forgotten and starved to death.

Battlefields tell tales of the English Civil War, at Edgehill (1642), Lansdown Hill (1643) and Stow-on-the-Wold (1646), the latter a decisive step towards the overthrow of King Charles I.



Left: Owlpen Manor near Uley derives its name from a local Saxon thegn.
Below: Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe.



Far left: Ancient yews flank the doorway to 11th-century Stow-on-the-Wold church.
Left: Minster Lovell Hall.



CURIOUS CUSTOMS

Where there's a steep hill, what is more natural than to chase a 7–8lb (3.2–3.6kg) Double Gloucester cheese down it?

The challenge certainly thrills the crowds at Cooper's Hill on the escarpment at Brockworth, though no one is entirely sure of the roots of this May custom, whether it began in Roman times, was a rite of passage for local lads, or derives from some other bright idea.

The Cotswold Olimpicks, drawing spectators to the natural amphitheatre of Dover's Hill above Chipping Campden in late spring, has a firmer recorded origin dating from 1612 when lawyer Robert Dover promoted the games to encourage manly sports "for the harmless mirth and jollitie of the neighbourhood". Strangely, disciplines like shin kicking (the aim is to unbalance opponents and throw them) didn't catch on in the modern Olympics that the games helped to inspire.

Eccentric, colourful traditions are the social glue of rural life and the Cotswolds excels in them: marking the seasonal round from the Ascension Day custom of Bisley Well Dressing, to Painswick Feast Day 'clypping' ceremony in September when St Mary's Church is encircled in dance and song.

Spring's Randwick Wap combines pagan and Christian elements with the dunking of the Mayor at the Mayor's Pool. The Marshfield Mumpers, performing on Boxing Day, invoke fertility rituals and medieval drama. Woollen heritage is upheld – literally – at Tetbury Woolsack Races on Gumstool Hill; once the way for muscular young drovers to impress local women, today it's – allegedly – fun.



Left: The stickler referees shin kicking on Dover's Hill.

Below: Cheese rolling, Cooper's Hill.



"Let love and friendship still agree – To hold the Banns of Amity"
– The chorus from the Mayor's song, sung at Randwick Wap (left).



SPORTING LIFE

The echoing thwack of leather on willow and the occasional “howzat!” are synonymous with English country life in high summer. Add an attractive backdrop – the wooded hills above Dumbleton’s club ground are just one example – and the scene is perfect for village cricket.

Think of a rural sporting pursuit – hunting, shooting, fishing – and it takes place around the AONB. Equine activity looms large with plenty of wide, open space for racehorse stables and gallops under the watchful eyes of champion trainers like Jonjo O’Neill at Guiting Power and Nigel Twiston-Davies at Naunton. Handy for Bath, Cheltenham and Stratford-upon-Avon racecourses!

More sheltered, estates and parks have made the area a major centre for polo, with The Beaufort Polo Club and Cirencester Park Polo Club where you might see The Duke of Cambridge or Prince Harry take the field. Badminton Horse Trials and the Festival of British Eventing at The Princess Royal’s Gatcombe Park draw thousands of spectators.

Or get away from it all with a ‘high tee’: golf courses at Broadway, Cleeve Common and Cotswold Edge Golf Club enjoy the most breathtaking views.

Back down to earth, Bourton-on-the-Water River Football in August has been making a splash in the River Windrush since 1880. And if locals aren’t putting a twist on conventional sport, they have been trailblazing: badminton was invented at Badminton House in 1863, and in 1866 the field rules of croquet were codified at Chastleton House, Moreton-in-Marsh. Where better to pick up a summer mallet?



Left: Polo action at Beaufort Polo Club near Tetbury.



Left: Football in the River Windrush at Bourton-on-the-Water.

Below: Cricket in Dumbleton’s idyllic setting.

“I do love cricket – it’s so very English”

– French actress Sarah Bernhardt, on seeing a game of football.

