**West Berkshire – yesterday and today**

This exhibition tells the story of West Berkshire, a largely rural district, three quarters of which is designated within an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Our story begins about 100 million years ago with the formation of the chalk rock beneath our feet. It was formed from the fossilised remains of tiny sea creatures.

**Above West Berkshire**

**Landscape**

West Berkshire’s appearance is related to the rocks beneath us that provide raw materials for building and processing, soils suited to grazing or crops, and the action of rivers – past and present.

**Chalk Downlands**

**Sand and Clay**

**River Valleys**

**Sarsen stones**

**Geological Timeline**

The dominant rock in West Berkshire is Chalk which was laid down in a shallow sea during the Upper Cretaceous (beginning about 100 million years ago).

**Fossilised tusks**

**The Straight-Tusked Elephant**

**The Woolly Mammoth**

**What is West Berkshire?**

**a) 1851** Often likened to the shape of an old boot.

**b) 1974,** changing to more of a slipper shape.

**c) 1998 Berkshire County Council was abolished and** was renamed West Berkshire Council.

**People and Places**

The next three rooms tell the story of people who have lived in West Berkshire.

**History timeline**

**Early Signs – Palaeolithic period (850,000 to 10,000 BCE)**

Early humans visited West Berkshire from around 500,000 years ago following the retreat of glacial ice.

**Beginnings – Mesolithic period (10,000 – 4,000 BCE)**

Evidence shows us that people were still gathering plants, fruit and other wild foods.

**A more permanent presence – Neolithic period  
(4,000 to 2,350 BCE)**

Human started to settle in one place, grow crops, domesticate animals and make pottery.

In West Berkshire we do not yet know where they lived but there is evidence that they were active in the area.

**Recording the Past**

**1 Palaeolithic –** The only evidence from this period is finds of stone artefacts, largely discovered on gravel terraces.

**2 Mesolithic –** Important finds of stone tools and environmental evidence suggest that river valleys, particularly the Kennet, were being used as routeways in this period.

**3 Neolithic –** Neolithic monuments are comparatively rare, but long barrows can be found on the chalk downlands.

**4 Bronze Age –** The Bronze Age sees greater exploitation and organisation of the landscape, with many burial mounds and evidence for permanent settlement.

**5 Iron Age –** Iron Age sites are well distributed with several hillforts with evidence of increased agriculture.

**6 Roman –** The Roman period sees large scale development of the landscape, in particular the network of Roman Roads linking towns.

**7 Saxon –** Following the Roman departure from Britain, a slow redistribution of sites occurs, including the establishment of important urban centres such as at Lambourn and Kintbury.

**A Growing Complexity Bronze Age (2,350 - 800 BCE)**

Newcomers arrived in Britain from Europe. They have been called Beaker People because of the shape of the pottery vessels found buried with their dead. They brought the skills of metalworking in gold and copper.

**The End of Prehistory Iron Age (800 BCE - 42 AD)**

Iron has a higher melting point than bronze and is easier to work into tools by blacksmithing.

**The Roman interlude (43 - 410 AD)**

The Romans brought their culture to Britain. Several Roman roads passed across West Berkshire, Thatcham being the largest known road-side settlement.

**A new beginning – the Saxon period (410 - 1066 AD)**

After the Romans withdrew from Britain, new settlers from northern Europe established territory here and then brought their families and way of life to this area.

**A Period of Change – the Middle Ages  
(1066 - 1539 AD)**

This led to the creation of several new towns like Newbury.

In this area, cloth production from local wool increased and many Berkshire mills became fulling mills, processing woollen cloth.

**Jack of Newbury (1489 - 1557)**

In the 1500s Newbury’s woollen cloth gained an international reputation. The leading local producer was John Winchcombe, who later became a national legend as ‘Jack of Newbury’.

In the 1540s, he manufactured over 6,000 kersey cloths per year. They were sold in London and exported to Antwerp, and went as far as Venice and on to the Middle East.

Winchcombe grew very wealthy and became a Member of Parliament and was responsible for rebuilding the main part of St. Nicolas’ Church in Newbury.

**The Newbury Coat**

In 1811, Sir John Throckmorton issued a bet that John Coxeter, the owner of Greenham Mills, could make him a woollen coat in one day. The process had to start with shearing of two sheep at 5am and the coat ready for Sir John to wear at 8pm for a formal dinner.

John Coxeter won the £1,000 bet and celebrated by buying 120 gallons of beer for the large crowd of 5,000 who had come to watch, and they ate roast mutton from the two sheep whose fleeces had made the coat.

**The first battle of Newbury**

**20th September 1643**

The Civil War between supporters of King Charles I (Royalists) and Parliamentarians.

**18th September**

**19th September**

**20th September**

**21st September**

**The second battle of Newbury**

**27th October 1644**

By 1644, King Charles needed to end the siege of the royalist stronghold at Donnington Castle before he could march to London, but the parliamentary troops planned to intercept the King at Newbury.

**20-24th October**

**25th October**

**26th October**

**27th October**

**28th October**

**Turnpikes and Coaching Inns**

The journey time between London and Bath reduced from three days to two by the post coach, and to only 12 hours on the overnight ‘flyer’ run by the Newbury firm of John Clark and Co.

**The Kennet and Avon Canal**

The river Kennet was made navigable from Newbury to the Thames by 1723, providing a good link to London. Construction of the Kennet and Avon Canal from Newbury to Bath to join the two rivers began in 1794.

**Crime and Punishment**

**Combe Gibbet**

The gibbet was erected in 1676 to display the bodies of George Broomham and Dorothy Newman, who had been hanged for murdering George’s wife and son. It was intended to be a warning to others not to commit crime.

Coombe Gibbet is now a local landmark.

**Tradition and change (1795 -1914)**

The opening of the Great Western Railway from London to Bristol in 1841, offered quicker journey times than either canals or horse-drawn coaches.

**Upstairs, downstairs**

Highclere Castle, just over the county border, is best known to millions as the fictional Downton Abbey.

**Iron works and engines**

The best known local engineering firm was Plenty’s, who designed and launched an unsinkable lifeboat at West Mills.

**Wood, paper and beer**

Industries processing bulky raw materials and heavy products expanded in this area as it became easier to transport them, so there were steam joinery and moulding mills, brewery and etc around.

**Rural poverty and fresh produce**

In 1795, poor harvests and rural poverty led to a poor relief system: when bread prices increased, an extra payment was made to a low paid worker so that he could afford to feed his family. The system, eventually, had encouraged employers to pay low wages.

**Quiet respectability**

By the 1870s there was a growing desire to improve cultural facilities such as public library, museum and choral societies.

On Northbrook Street specialist stores sprang up with names we still recognise like Joseph Hopson, Alfred Camp, and Griffin & Sons who sold pork sausages on the bridge.

**Schools for boys and girls**

In the 1800s elementary education became available for all children up to the age of 13 years.

**Local, national and worldwide**

**(1914 - today)**

West Berkshire is still a mainly rural district, but since the Second World War many towns in the district have expanded, especially Newbury, Thatcham and around Theale and Calcot where major housing, industrial and retail complexes continue to be built.

**World Wars – at home and abroad**

On 10th February 1943, a German bomber strafed the streets of Wash Common and south Newbury with machine gun bullets before emptying its load of bombs. 15 people died and 41 were injured.

Welford Park and Basildon Park were requisitioned as convalescence hospitals during World War I. Shaw House and Basildon Park were used by the military in World War II and suffered considerable damage from the troops stationed there.

**The Cold War and Nuclear Technology**

Since the Cold War era of the 1950s, West Berkshire has been a critical location for the provision of Britain’s nuclear deterrent.

The United States Air Force was based at Greenham Common airfield until 1964 and flew heavy bombers from there.

**Greenham Common Protests**

**(1981 - 2000)**

In 1980 the Government announced that nuclear cruise missiles would be sited at the reactivated RAF Greenham Common, as part of NATO’s defence of Europe, sparking a new kind of protest.

When the huge shelters to house the missiles were being built, women cut through the fence and danced on the earthworks. They did all they could to disrupt military activity at the air base and many were arrested.

The Cruise Missiles were all withdrawn by 1991 and most of the runways, once the longest in Europe, were removed with much of the concrete being used to build the Newbury bypass.

**Too much traffic?**

The M4 opened across West Berkshire in 1971.

The proposed A34 western bypass in 1981 ran through an area of mature woodland and a historical site, arousing a group of environmental protesters to set up camp along the route, and led to the longest road protest in European history. The road eventually opened in 1998.

**All work and no play...**

**Horse Racing**

West Berkshire’s first permanent track, the present Newbury Racecourse, was not built until 1905.

**Theatre, film and sport**

There are the Hungerford Theatre Group and the Newbury Symphony Orchestra. There are venues such as the Watermill and the new Arlington Arts Centre. Local clubs for cricket, bowling, athletics, rugby, football and tennis are popular. Cycle routes, including one along the canal towpath are created.

**Saving the Kennet and Avon**

In 1954 plans to close the canal from Reading to Bath were announced. Opposition to this led to formation of the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust, and resulted in the canal being restored and in use again by the 1990s for enjoyment.

**Technology for all**

The telecommunications company Vodafone, developed from Newbury-based Racal- Vodafone, built its new headquarters on the old Newbury showground site in 2003. It is now one of the largest providers of mobile networks.

**The Bicycle Revolution**

The first mass-produced bicycle was produced in 1869, nicknamed ‘The Boneshaker’ as the wooden wheels on cobbled streets created an uncomfortable ride. John Dunlop resolved this problem in 1888 when he developed the pneumatic tyre.

The popularity of bicycles encouraged the creation of roads, later adopted by the motor car, but bicycles had played a major role in the freedom of all classes and genders.