



Viewpoint

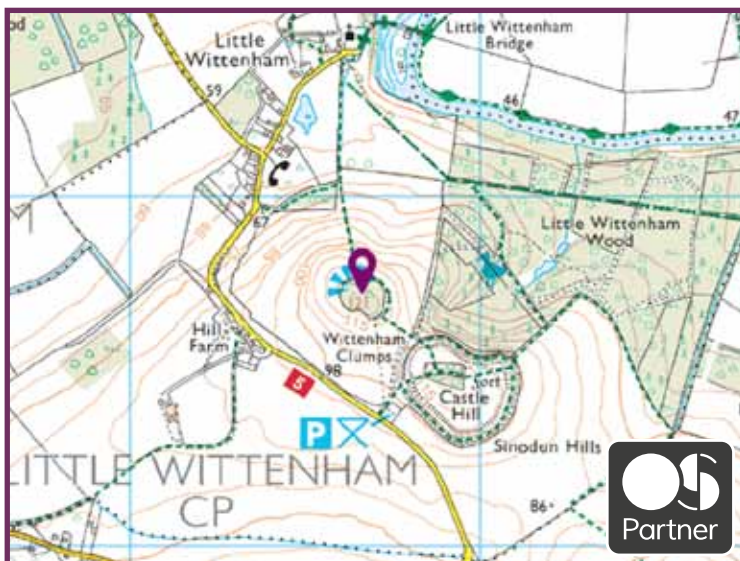
The eye of the beholder



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location:

Wittenham Clumps, Little Wittenham,
Oxfordshire, OX10 8NB

Grid reference: SU 56747 92515

Getting there:

From Sires Hill car park follow the main chalky footpath up the hill for about 100 metres until you have a good view of the hill to your right.

Keep an eye out for: Distinctive ridge and ditches of an Iron Age hill fort on Castle Hill

Look across to the hilltop in front of you, crowned with ancient trees. We are here because this is the very spot that the artist Paul Nash made his painting Wittenham, 1935.

Nash loved the countryside here and called it "a beautiful legendary country haunted by old gods long forgotten". What do you see standing here? A clump of trees, a fairly nondescript English landscape?

Why was an artist enchanted by these Oxfordshire hills?



Travelling here today you will have crossed a flat landscape of fields, hedgerows and small settlements. The two hills of Wittenham Clumps, with their crowns of beech trees, rise distinctively out of the Thames Valley, with no other high ground visible until the horizon.

Though they don't look to be part of a chain of hills, they are actually outliers of the North Wessex (or Berkshire) Downs – a range of chalk and sandstone hills that stretch from Reading in the east to Devizes in the west. Both chalk and sandstone are relatively soft rocks. Over time wind and rain have shaped the Downs scouring rocks away and leaving other parts standing like the hills of Wittenham Clumps.



Aerial view of Wittenham Clumps
© Dave Price, Geograph (CCL)

But there is another way of thinking about landscapes beyond how they formed. This viewpoint gives us an opportunity to consider how places can make us feel and why we all experience them differently.

Compare your view of the hills with the painting by Paul Nash. You can recognise key features – the crown of beech trees, the slope of the hillside – but it is not a facsimile of the scene, like a photograph would be. The trees seem to stride up the side of the hill and the undulations in the landscape are exaggerated, almost wave-like.

Nash's uncle lived near to Wittenham Clumps and he discovered the hills whilst visiting him as a teenager. In 1911, aged 13 he wrote to a friend: *"The country ... is marvellous – Grey hollowed hills crowned by old, old trees, Pan-ish places down by the river wonderful to think on, full of strange enchantment... a beautiful legendary country haunted by old gods long forgotten"*.

It was not just mythology that Nash was interested in, but history too. If you look across to Castle Hill you can see the ridge and ditch remains of an Iron Age hill fort.



'We are making a new world' by Paul Nash (1918)

The Romantic movement was another inspiration. Its proponents valued freedom of the artist and emphasised intense emotion as an authentic source of experience. In art especially, landscape painters began to turn to wilder landscapes and romantic ruin.

Another factor however had arguably an even greater influence on his landscapes. Paul Nash was a war artist in both World Wars and saw first-hand the terrible destruction of trench warfare and the damage to man and nature. It was this experience which made him cherish the landscapes of Britain even more.