

A Vision for a People's Countryside

A new strategy for Brighton's downland landholding

Compiled by The Brighton Downs Consortium

Supported by:

Council for the Protection of Rural England Sussex Branch, Society of Sussex Downsmen, Sussex Wildlife Trust, Brighton & Hove Friends of the Earth, Brighton Urban Wildlife Group, Federation of Sussex Amenity Societies, Friends of the Earth UK, 'Keep Our Downs Public', Open Spaces Society, Ramblers Association Sussex Area, South Downs Campaign Group, Sussex Archaeological Society, Sussex Ornithological Society.

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Public Sector Landownership on the Brighton conurbation Downs

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FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Summary

A Very Special Place

Brighton Council's downland ownership goes back over 100 years. The Brighton Downs:

- are a nationally famous landscape, with rare wildlife habitat
- have a rich cultural heritage
- are accessible and popular countryside

Under Threat

However, they are vulnerable:

- development pressures are great
- open space is neglected
- the wildlife resource is declining
- inappropriate farming

Top Ten Proposals:

- 1 A co-ordinated project of landscape restoration and open access provision.
- 2 The creation of an attractive urban fringe.
- 3 Promoting the Downs to residents and visitors.
- 4 Restoring the popular landscapes, like Ditchling Beacon.
- 5 Creating new country parks.
- 6 Providing public access where it is needed.
- 7 Targeting important areas for new public ownership.
- 8 Encouraging diversification to meet local demands.
- 9 Setting up new business arrangements.
- 10 Putting the land in trust, safe for tomorrow.

A Vision

People care passionately about their Brighton Downs. This vision needs to be turned into a positive action plan. Is there the will to utilise the great downland potential? A new strategy is needed for this valuable and beautiful heritage.

Introduction

History of Brighton's Estate

Brighton Council's downland ownership goes back over 100 years. The earliest acquisitions were in the west in the 1880s, with Mile Oak and New Barn Farms, currently in Hove Borough. Land was acquired to safeguard water supplies and the Corporation also set about acquiring the private water companies, starting with The Constant Water Service Company in 1872. Bylaws were subsequently developed on over 30,000 acres to prevent "turf breaking cultivation or development over the headings". Control of development and the provision of public open space later became the main reasons for purchasing land in the inter-war period.

Following the Ovingdean/Whitehawk purchase (£34,100 in 1912/13), land acquisition was stepped up and reached its peak in the 1920s and 30s. The major areas were: Waterhall (737 acres in 1920), Balsdean (1925), Moulsecoomb Estate (315 acres in 1925 for £30,000), Patcham Court Farm (from the Marquess of Abergavenny in 1925), High Park Estate (1926), Saddlescombe Farm (£10,215, 1926) and Devil's Dyke (190 acres, £9,000 in 1928 - a Herbert Carden initiative). In 1928 Greater Brighton was formed, annexing Ovingdean, Falmer, Moulsecoomb and Bevendean from Newhaven Rural District. Stanmer was annexed in 1934, with the rest of Falmer (then in Chailey) now in Lewes District.

In the 1930s the Withdean area was purchased (Park in 1933, the rest in 1938) to limit housing development. The West Blatchington Estate, including Waterhall Golf Course and Standean Farm, was acquired in 1936. The Stanmer Estate, including Stanmer and Falmer villages, plus the farms of Home, Mary, Balmer, Housedean and Court, was purchased in 1947 from the Earl of Chichester (Pelham family - 4,958 acres for £225,000). In 1951, the Brighton Extension Act brought the Dyke Road/Waterhall area into the borough.

The total downland estate now runs to some 13,000 acres. This forms a broad, almost unbroken band, from Portslade to Saltdean, with over a third of it outside the borough, in Lewes, Hove and Mid-Sussex districts (see Map 1). In recent times the public estate has been split between land managed as farmland and that managed as open space/golf/etc.

Apart from one or two minor sales, the only significant land sale was in 1976 when Brighton sold Mary Farm (749 acres), to the north of the University of Sussex, to part-pay for the Prince Regent swimming complex.

Recent Happenings

On 12 January 1995 the Council, in secret, voted to sell the downland "situated entirely or predominantly outside the Council's boundaries". This included eight farms, from Mile Oak in the west to Pickers Hill north of Saltdean. A ninth farm, Saddlescombe, along with the famous Devil's Dyke, was sold to the National Trust as part of a separate proposal.

Brighton Council agreed this course of action as a response to tight government restrictions on its borrowing powers, which had undermined its ability to create a significant programme of capital investment.

Like many other opportunist local authorities, Brighton looked to a programme of asset sales as a means of generating capital.

The long history of distant and conservative management of its downland resource (which had so badly damaged their recreational, biological and cultural value) had brought the Council to the point where it had completely lost sight of its downland's strategic importance for the borough - and the nation.



Initially, Council officers proposed the sale of the whole downland estate, but Councillors' political caution ensured that this proposal was replaced with one for the disposal only of those farms lying outside the borough boundary.

The wide and vigorous opposition to the sale from the local community and the environmental movement eventually persuaded the Council to turn their attention - for a second time - to the alternative fund-raising possibilities of an out-of-town retail development at Patcham Court Farm. This sale may yield some £5 million (possibly more), against £2-3 million for the out-of-borough farms. (NB the two Hove farms, Mile Oak and New Barn have been taken off the sale list pending the merger of Brighton and Hove Councils into a new unitary authority.) The terms of the downland sale have been revised and the Council are negotiating with the National Trust and looking at possible conditions and covenants that could be placed on the land in any future sales (Property Sub-committee 19/6/95).

The Importance of the Downland Estate

The South Downs are a national treasure and a famous landscape. They are designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and are a candidate National Park.

The ecological importance of the Downs is without question, with its internationally rare habitats and species.

Many cultures and peoples have left their mark on the Downs in a history of settlement and farming going back 6000 years. Two-thirds of all Scheduled Ancient Monuments in Sussex are to be found on the South Downs (tumuli, hill forts, field systems, etc).

Countless 'artisans' have written about and lived on the Downs. Rudyard Kipling wrote of the "blunt bow-headed, whale-backed Downs". Hilaire Belloc, W H Hudson, Richard Jefferies, Gilbert White, Barclay Wills, Virginia Woolf, are a few of the writers; and, there have been poets, artists and composers.

It is accessible and popular countryside - easy walking on firm tracks (no peat bogs or mountain hazards), an adjacent local population of a quarter of a million people in Brighton and Hove alone, and over 30 million visits to the South Downs every year.

Brighton's Downland Wildlife

Brighton's downland consists mostly of open habitats: old herb-rich grassland, new sown grasslands, arable crops.

It also has large, well established plantation woodlands, and one area of ancient woodland - Stanmer Great Wood.

Scrub still dominates some areas, as at Deep Bottom, Patcham Court Farm, though ploughing has eliminated much scrub.



Round-headed Rampion

Some habitats which would have been common on Brighton's Downs are now virtually extinct, through ploughing and dereliction. Thus 'chalk heath', which is an intimate mixture of chalk-loving species, such as Horseshoe Vetch, and acid-loving species, such as Heather and Tormentil, is now confined to a few square metres. The last heather bush in Loose Bottom is specially surrounded by a wooden fence - like a museum exhibit! Chalk heath is often commemorated by place names, such as "Varndean" and "Varncombe" at Patcham (meaning 'Fern Valley'), or "North Heath Barn".

The use of sprays has rendered many once-common arable weeds, such as Shepherd's Needle and Pheasant's Eye, very rare. And the birds of arable downland, such as Corn Bunting and Skylark, are also in heavy decline through reduction of insect and seed food sources and the spread of autumn sown crops.

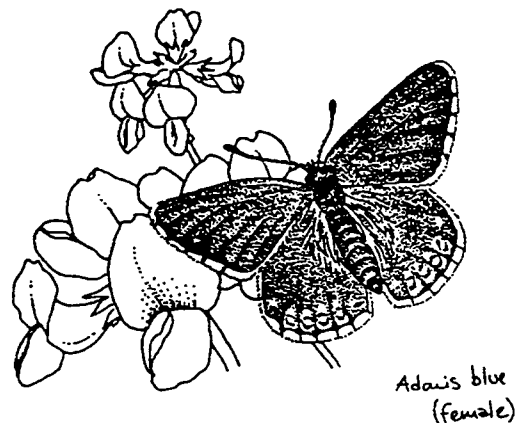
Downland has its special birds. The Steppe-loving Wheatear can still be seen on migration and may soon be encouraged to breed again. A project of downland restoration may also bring back the evocative Stone Curlew, which only recently became extinct as a downland breeding species. Planting of new Gorse thickets may encourage back the Dartford Warbler and Stonechat. Brighton's downland between the Devil's Dyke and Thundersbarrow Hill was the centre of the Sussex population of the gigantic Great Bustard - possibly the heaviest flying bird in the world. The last one was killed somewhere near the Dyke golf course in 1825. The name "Cockroost Hill", Portslade, commemorates this magnificent creature. The stuffed bird can be seen at Brighton's Booth Museum.

Significant areas of rich chalk grassland do survive on Brighton's downland estate. The pastures around Castle Hill may well have remained open, unwooded and in continuous existence since early post-glacial times, their species of flower and small creature migrating in with other tundra and open land vegetation. Continuous human activity during the whole post-glacial period may have kept the landscape open and preserved its especially rich assemblage of species.

Elsewhere on Brighton's downland other rarities survive, such as the tiny Bastard Toadflax north of Portslade and on the slope of Whitehawk Hill. Field Fleawort survives on several Brighton sites. This species is especially associated with ancient trackways and prehistoric settlements. It may have been an ancient cultivated herb.

The gorgeous and rare Adonis Blue butterfly, together with the striking Chalkhill Blue and Little Blue, can be seen on Brighton's Downland.

Up to 40 species of plant per square metre can be found on the richer Brighton sites, making them rank with the best sites anywhere in Britain.



Political Context

Window of Opportunity

We are presently living in a time of peculiar opportunity for countryside conservation generally and for downland in particular.

We have seen the development of great international concern with agricultural over-production in the metropolitan countries; environmental damage caused by modern farming; and, indiscriminate levels of subsidy paid to farmers.

As a consequence the economic and political weight of farmers and landowners in the countryside is now subject to continual challenge.

On a local level, a vigorous campaign, building on the public's strong cultural attachment to downland as a public space, ensured that the South Downs was one of the first declared Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) and was also chosen as the site for a pilot scheme for managing Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) - the Sussex Downs Conservation Board.

Furthermore, past policies by local authorities and the National Trust of prioritising acquisition of downland has resulted in a combined public sector estate of around two-thirds of the open downland between the River Adur and the River Ouse (see Map 1). Only on the Cuckmere River to Eastbourne Downs does the public holding run to the same extent.

This gives the population of the Brighton conurbation a tremendous advantage in developing policies for downland which addresses their needs.

Issues/Problems

Recreational Demands

Over the future period people's interest in downland for recreation will continue to steeply rise.

Demand is presently met in two main ways:

- firstly, by a network of narrow, linear public rights of way, often bounded on one or both sides by wire. Over most downland, including Brighton's, these rights of way do not pass through the surviving areas rich in wildlife and archaeological interest. Thus exceptional areas such as at Loose Bottom, Mount Zion, Big Bottom and Cockroost Hill remain virtually unknown to the public;

- secondly, by a series of 'honey-pot' open spaces, including the Devil's Dyke, Ditchling Beacon and Stanmer Park, which are often of high grade wildlife and archaeological value, and thus more vulnerable to the pressures of mass use.

These kinds of provision simply will not cope either with people's expectations or the strain on vulnerable site qualities.

In contrast, historical access to downland had the character of a freedom to roam, unencumbered by the enclosing hedges, fences and walls of the Wealden landscapes. Rights of way had the connotation of broad, open routes in which a person was free to choose his or her own journey line, not the narrow barbed wire corridors they often are on modern downland.

Development Pressures

The twin factors of a declining agricultural sector looking to utilise its assets in new ways, and rising recreational demands, will lead to heavy pressures for changes of use on downland and the development of commercial recreational interests.

Much of this will be damaging to wildlife and landscape (like modern golf courses), intrusive and noise polluting (like motorised sports), excluding (through expensive membership schemes and charging), and unsustainable (for instance, by demands on the water supply).

If we do not devise an alternative strategy for popular recreation, we will not be able to resist these pressures.

Neglected Open Spaces

Our present downland Open Spaces, such as Moulsecoomb Wild Park/Hollingbury, Waterhall, Stanmer Park and the Dyke Golf Course, suffer from a long history of under-management. This is partly caused by lack of resources, but mostly by an historical conception of the management of 'natural' sites which believed in 'letting nature take its course'. The result of this neglect has been the dereliction of the wildlife-rich grasslands on these sites and their succession to inaccessible scrubland.

The Wildlife Resource: Fragmentation and Dereliction

Intensive agriculture has caused profound damage to the rich and specialised wildlife of downland.

A survey of the Hove and Shoreham Downs recently found that the tiny fraction of surviving chalk grassland on the dip slope of the Downs was now broken into 58 fragments, separated from each other by a mean distance of around 200 metres.

150 years ago this resource was unitary and completely inter-connected.

Nowhere on Brighton's Downs, where farming is the dominant land use, does chalk grassland survive, except on steep slopes inaccessible to farm machinery and marginal to farming practice.

Whilst Brighton's recent management, linked to the ESA scheme, has made great strides in conserving wildlife habitat, the results are still very patchy. Many old pasture fragments remain derelict and scrubbed over, or inadequately managed.

The Urban Fringe

Urban fringe downland is subject to many special threats. It is often damaged by intrusive development or noise pollution. It is often abandoned by farmers, as too difficult to manage (as at Bevendean, Moulsecoomb and Toad's Hole Valley, Hove). It is subject to vandalism and damage (such as fires, dumping, fence damage and dog nuisance), and it can feel dangerous and insecure to users.

Yet often it retains high quality habitat (such as Whitehawk Hill, Moulsecoomb Wild Park or Benfield Hill) which local communities feel strong 'ownership' and affection for.

Often urban fringe sites which should be available for the public to enjoy (such as the beautiful Falmer Court Farm buildings and the slopes of Mount Zion, Hove) are inaccessible to the public.

Areas with tremendous recreational potential (such as Waterhall and Stanmer) are left only partly utilised, neglected and thus vulnerable to predatory development proposals.

Farmyard Eyesores

Many farmyards are sprawling eyesores, characterised by cheaply built structures, some huge, and often in poor condition. Large quantities of neglected equipment fill surrounding areas. Slurry problems indicate unsustainable farming practices. Some farmyards are like small industrial estates in scale and appearance. They may well act as stalking horses for just such uses.

Inappropriate Farming Practice

The poor, thin soils of much of Brighton's Downs, coupled with the vulnerability of its rich wildlife, make the issue of inappropriate farming practice even more sensitive than on other farmed land.

The destructive results of excessive tillage on these areas has already been referred to.

But even stock grazing has its problems. Poaching of the sward by dairy herds tracking across herb-rich pastures, or stock congregating at winter feeding points, and nutrient enrichment from dumped winter feed, slurry and fertilisers, all cause damage.

Year round grazing and excessive stock numbers can depress invertebrate abundance and diversity.

Game rearing pens will destroy grasslands they are placed upon, or flowers and invertebrates in woodlands.

Proposals

Managing optimally for farming, wildlife and recreation is a complicated, "hands on" matter requiring experiment and commitment. It also needs co-operation between interest groups as equals.

Map 3 highlights the areas of the main proposals which follow.

A Project of Landscape Restoration

The combined need to develop strategies for recreation, wildlife and archaeological conservation, and for a sustainable agriculture, all point in the same direction.

We need a co-ordinated project of downland landscape restoration which is focused on the re-creation of extensive and publicly accessible range-grazed permanent grasslands and their associated habitats (such as scrub areas and dew ponds).



Early Spider Orchid

We envisage this land use being dominant in: the areas of high contour and poor soils; where surviving wildlife habitat and visible archaeology is concentrated; and, where the landscape is most dramatic.

Such a project is already implicit in the ESA scheme and in Brighton and Hove's Borough Plans, though the ESA scheme is not targeted and does not have open access provision within its remit.

It is remarkable that the areas that suggest themselves for restoration to permanent pasture coincide very closely with those areas that had this land-use up to the recent historical period (see Map 2).

This is no coincidence. Artificially high incentives to farmers to destroy downland pastures through post-war price support and subsidy, and, historically, through supply bottlenecks (such as the Napoleonic blockade) have masked the unsustainability of much high downland tillage.

We do not envisage this land-use as exclusive on downland. The sheltered valley bottoms with deeper soils long provided the arable complement to pasturage in the 'sheep and com' economy (see Map 2).

If done with conservation in mind (such as with conservation headlands), cultivation can bring real benefits to the suite of birds (such as Corn Bunting), plants (such as Pheasant's Eye) and invertebrates which do best in croplands.

Patches of scrub could be re-created on the larger areas of reverted arable land, particularly where they used to occur. (Gorse scrub is a now-scarce, but once very characteristic habitat of downland). This would eliminate the competition between the desire to conserve surviving fragments of chalk grassland and the resultant diminution of habitat for birds that removal of invading scrub entails. Limited scrub re-creation on reverted arable land would also help dissolve the hard-edged quality of the boundaries between areas of scrub-invaded old grassland and reverted arable land.

There would be the opportunity for a restriction on chemical use, which would greatly benefit the aquifer, and hence our drinking water. The positive health aspect of a more sympathetic farming regime should not be ignored.

Such a restoration of a more balanced agriculture, with an emphasis on permanent pasturage, will bring benefits to the public in the creation of a new recreational resource, benefits to wildlife in the re-integration and management of fragmented sites, benefits to farm employment from a mixed farming regime, and sustainability for the resource, in the conservation of soil, energy and other inputs.

The Urban Fringe

Much rehabilitation to hide or remove unsightly development, careful landscaping and the bringing into management of derelict sites is needed.

The work of the Countryside Management Service needs reinforcing and expanding, together with their support role to local site-based wildlife and other environmental groups. Brighton is particularly rich in such community groups.

The sharp distinctions between farmland, open space and 'hard' recreational areas (as at Stanmer Park) must be addressed. Thus farmyards can be re-organised and made attractive centres for visitors; derelict urban fringe downland can be brought back into management (as at Benfield Hill LNR); and the public given access to closed sites (eg Mount Zion slope in Hove, currently unavailable to visitors at the neighbouring Foredown Tower Countryside Centre).

Interpretation

Greatly increasing interest in downland, and its value as an attraction for the town's visitor trade, means that at least one Interpretation Centre is needed.

If such a Centre is situated on downland we suggest that it utilises existing buildings and be within an area of heavy visitor usage (eg. Devil's Dyke or Stanmer Park).

It may, however, be more valuable to situate such a facility in the town centre, or on the seafront (eg. at the Milkmaid Pavilion). Such a location was strongly advocated in Eastbourne when the proposal for a Centre there was being debated. The Durlston Head Centre lies close to the town edge of Swanage in Dorset.

Popular Landscapes

Certain landscapes attract, or have the potential to attract, large numbers of visitors, because of their attractive countryside setting, with no need to create special visitor services. These areas have good access either by road or by proximity to the urban fringe and provide dramatic landscapes with alluring features.

High Park Farm, adjacent to the east of Ditchling Beacon, forms part of one such landscape unit. This area also contains Dencher Bottom and its subsidiary valleys to the west - outside Brighton's ownership.

Serious traffic calming measures, for instance, on the Ditchling Road, coupled with selective off-road car parking, public transport and new rights of way over High Park Farm would make this area far more attractive. The opening of Big Bottom and Dencher Bottom to public access, together with the restoration of open access grassland east and west of the Ditchling Road, would enable this area to properly cope with expanding recreational need.

Other such landscapes include: Loose Bottom, east of the Falmer-Woodingdean Road; the top end of Stanmer Park, north of Stanmer village; and, Falmer Hill and its valleysides, situated between Bevendean and Moulsecoomb.

These landscapes should be priority areas for the improvement of access and interpretation facilities, and for landscape restoration.

New Country Parks

Other areas, such as Waterhall, Stanmer Park (which should be the subject of a separate report) and Hollingbury need the status of Country Parks, to adequately reflect their great potential for multiple use.

The Waterhall Golf Course and sports grounds, with neighbouring Sweet Hill, is one area which cries out for an integrated management plan for its many potential and existing uses. Past failure to develop such a plan lays this beautiful area vulnerable to predatory development proposals, especially given its proximity to the A23/A27 interchange.

Waterhall is large and varied enough to accommodate areas managed for nature conservation and informal open space, and could be considered for potentially controversial activities such as a youth scrambler bike track and a travellers site. Large areas of scrub, with the secluding valley configuration, would amply screen such activities. The proximity of its large areas of derelict chalk grassland to the site boundaries would make limited grazing reintroduction - alongside golf usage - very possible.

Waterhall is a perfect site for a north-west Brighton Country Park.

Rights of Way

Brighton has no definitive map of its public rights of way. Hopefully though, one is soon to be published. The opportunity should be grasped to review this map to seek a genuine enhancement of public access over Brighton's downland.

As well as incorporating the points in the proposals above, there are other considerations. Safety issues should be addressed and resolved by providing off-road links between public paths. There are many gaps in the paths network which need to be filled to create an accessible countryside (such as east-west links, particularly to the south-east of Brighton; and, path provision on the east side of the A23 road and across it). The perception of open downland access needs to be created with wide paths and, preferably, no fences.

Where new open access or new definitive paths are not possible, permissive routes could be agreed. A flexible access package could thus be negotiated across farmland in accordance with the various agricultural practices of the time. Access round urban fringe housing estates could be legitimised by this measure as well.

Extending Public Ownership

In several important areas there is an urgent need to extend the combined public sector landholding, both to safeguard the fragile nature conservation value of these areas and to properly utilise their popular recreational potential.

Clearly Brighton is in no financial position to make such purchases. However, it is in a strong position to influence other conservation bodies to make such purchases. This will probably mean the National Trust, but may include other local authorities, English Nature and so on. Brighton Council has previously endorsed the notion of integrated management of downland by neighbouring conservation landholders. Now is the time to demonstrate such commitment in reality.

Firstly, the Ditchling Beacon landscape unit, which runs from Dencher Bottom in the west to Bow Hill and Western Brow in the east, is only partially in public control. The Ditchling "honey pot" is cramped and strictly limited in its capacity to absorb visitors. Brighton owns High Park Farm; the Sussex Wildlife Trust leases the Ditchling scarp as a reserve; and the National Trust has a small acreage. The public sector purchase of the de-registered Ditchling Common, west of Ditchling Road, and Dencher Bottom and its subsidiary valleys, would create a unitary conservation zone, which, with joint planning by these public bodies, could provide a centre of public enjoyment equal to that at the Dyke, and safeguard this centre-piece of Brighton's downland.

Secondly, the rich surviving areas of chalk grassland at Mary Farm, north of the University, urgently need re-integrating in public ownership (after Brighton's ill-considered sale of the farm in 1976).

Moon's Bottom is currently derelict and its flatter land has recently been ploughed out. The superb Waterpit Hill slope is still grazed. Both slopes contain rare species, command grand views, and abut Brighton-owned land.

We suggest Brighton seeks to persuade the National Trust to purchase at least this section of Mary Farm.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the vulnerability of the mostly Brighton-owned Castle Hill National Nature Reserve and Bullock Down/Standean Bottom SSSI urgently needs addressing.

This internationally important cluster of sites is part of a broad triangular landscape area bounded by Bullock Hill/Newmarket Hill, Kingston Hill/Swanborough Hill, and High Hill. It contains important Orthopteran populations (Bush Crickets), the endemic Early Gentian (ie found only in Britain), the very rare Early Spider Orchid, and a host of other special and beautiful plants and animals. Furthermore, it is a remote and undamaged landscape despite its immediate proximity to Woodingdean.

The designated areas, however, consist only of the steep valley side slopes, and are vulnerable to damaging farming practices from both above and below.

We suggest Brighton works to persuade other conservation bodies to purchase this surrounding land and works to construct, with them, a public sector partnership to restore and safeguard this landscape.

Diversification

Brighton's farm estate has been managed on "narrow" agricultural business lines. The Council runs this through its Estates function, employing agents to undertake the day-to-day running of affairs. As a result, management of its downland has not been integrated with the Council's other concerns. In essence, the farms have been managed as a funding source for other Council services. However, in 1987 a farm conservation policy was approved by the Council and since then a broader farmland management has been possible. This is illustrated by the take-up of the South Downs Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme on Brighton's farms (36%), which is nearly twice the average across the entire South Downs (20%).

The farms, situated around the large Brighton urban conurbation, are ideally placed for diversification to meet the needs of the local population. As well as satisfying recreational needs, there are a wealth of other opportunities to grasp. A small start has been made at Bevendean Farm with local milk deliveries, and by Court Farm where there is Park Farm Shop. However, the vast bulk of Brighton's farm production is not marketed at local need.

With the increasing political pressure for sustainability, demands for healthier food and a Council looking for economic development, the farms must adapt to meet these needs.

A business feasibility plan should be drawn up, with an audit of each farm, plus its potential. For example, the farmers currently take ESA grants for sympathetic land management and production, but nothing is done about marketing the results. Why not market South Downs lamb and mutton - locally produced, reared without chemicals, conserving wildlife? The same marketing strategy could be used for beef, milk and derived products (such as cheese, yoghurt and ice cream). Somerset Brie, Dorset Blue - why no Brighton or Sussex cheese?

Home Farm in Stanmer Park could extend its management, by grazing the park, whilst the farm could be opened up for controlled public access, and produce sold on site. There is a great need for the urban population to understand the countryside, and, in contrast, for farmers to appreciate urban people's needs. One simple example is the milk cycle. People visiting Stanmer should be able to see cows grazing and being milked, with the end product (milk, cheese, yoghurt, ice cream, etc) available for purchase. People would have the opportunity to have close contact with animals and the process of how their food is made. Developing this more fully, there could be a much fuller integration of Home Farm and Stanmer Park into an urban farm/country park-type environment.

Organic produce commands premium prices, but, as yet, there is no local addressing of these demands. Conservation grade crops could also be grown. Brighton's farms could satisfy the breakfast needs of the local population (meusli and milk, sausage and eggs, toast and honey) and could go a long way to supplying lunch, tea and dinner too!

People need food, but they also generate waste. Recycling must be stepped up to conform to legislation and to satisfy environmental demands. Brighton's farms are ideally placed, in a ring around the conurbation, to help. Organic waste could be taken by the farms and turned into compost. The compost could then be sold back to people. Unsustainable, non-local peat would be replaced by sustainable, local compost, produced from a waste product. A by-product of woodland and scrub management could provide wood chips for mulches. There are many energy initiatives being explored and these could be tried on the farms.

There are an abundance of openings for diversification on Brighton's farms that will satisfy local demands, generate income and help the environment.

New Business & Tenurial Arrangements

The proposals for landscape restoration that we have made imply a serious rethinking of Brighton's business and tenurial arrangements on the downland estate.

Other partial models exist for this task, such as Eastbourne Council's re-organisation of its farming enterprise and an increase in its in-hand acreage. Their innovations have, incidentally, turned serious losses in a Council enterprise into healthy profits.

Management with conservation and recreation as a priority implies far greater control by Brighton than the present full agricultural tenancies allow.

Furthermore, the present tenancy boundaries may make less sense when new, broad areas are returned to permanent grass. For instance, Brighton has two neighbouring farms, on one of which virtually the whole holding has been returned to permanent grass under the ESA scheme, whilst its neighbour is still managed for arable with a large, intensive dairy herd. Reversion of a large part of the arable holding to grass may make arable farming unviable on this holding. Yet partial arable cropping is sensible and may have employment gains. It may make sense to farm the two farms as one unit, thus allowing the cultivation of some of the better land on the ESA holding alongside the remaining arable on the presently arable holding. Both sides may thus gain with reversion to grass of the poorer land which would benefit conservation.

Control of grazing on the new grasslands (and surviving old grasslands) requires a larger management direction. Presently, old grasslands within the ESA scheme may be grazed at inappropriate times of year, too heavily or continuously to properly safeguard aspects of their wildlife or to integrate properly with visitor use.

Newly sown ESA grasslands may presently provide good nourishment for stock, but may offer little scope for recolonisation by chalk grassland wildlife. Long term programmes of nutrient stripping, with minimal re-sowing, and the addition of seed from neighbouring surviving old chalk grassland sources may be needed.

Chalk grassland restoration needs all the long term benefits which broad public ownership can bring: the ability to forgo short term profits for long term gain; the ability to subsidise one sector from the profits of another; the ability to account social and environmental benefits; and, the ability to plan strategically.

New Management Structures

The present structure of management of the downland estate is badly undemocratic and in no way reflects its real function or does justice to its management needs.

It is run by a private land agency, reporting to the Estates Sub-Committee of the Council's Policy & Finance Committee.

Neither the Environmental Services Department, with its specialist planners and its Countryside Management Service, or Leisure Services, are part of this structure, despite the primacy of issues of recreation, physical planning and the environment on downland.

Neither Brighton residents nor any body of downland users is represented in this structure.

Furthermore, the close control of the resource by the Council's budgeting Committee - and the present lack of commitment by the Council to its downland - makes it ever vulnerable to asset sales proposals.

We need a new, democratic and accountable management structure which enables Brighton people to properly plan the future of this resource, yet puts it at arm's length and beyond the temptation of sale.

We suggest investigation of the formation of a Trust, controlled by the Council, and on which representatives of downland interest groups would sit alongside Council members.



Eastbourne Council is currently investigating such a holding body for its large downland estate.

Ashdown Forest is held in such a way by East Sussex County Council.

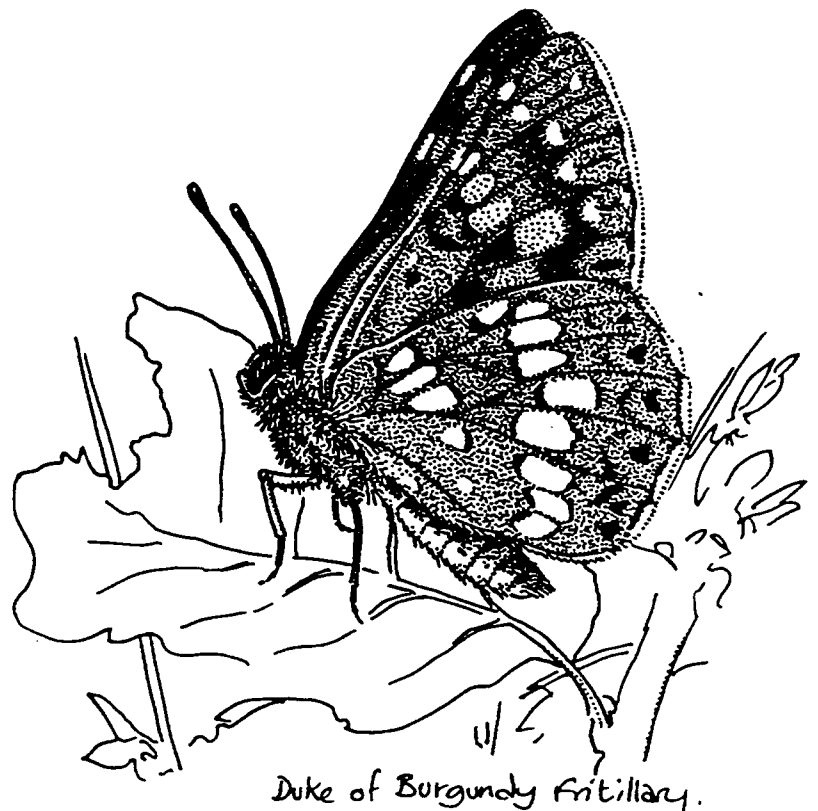
Brighton Council itself manages the Ambrose Gorham charity lands at Telscombe on behalf of Brighton residents via a Trust from which the land is inalienable.

The downland estate needs security and accountability to its users - Brighton people - in the long term. We must have no more exhausting and politically damaging sales scares.

Towards the Future

The downland sales proposal has done one positive thing. It has reminded Brighton people that they actually possess this strategic and beautiful heritage. They may now realise that they do not control it as closely as they should; that it has suffered profound damage in recent decades, almost "behind our backs"; and, that strong measures are needed to utilise its great potential for the future.

Let us build on these insights!



Appendix

Some Suggested URBAN Fringe Projects:

- **SHEEPCOTE VALLEY**
Serious landscape restoration tasks.
- **WHITEHAWK: RACE HILL SLOPE**
Proposed Local Nature Reserve. Valuable landscape, wildlife, educational resource.
- **BEVENDEAN DOWN**
A focus for community initiative. Landscape restoration.
- **MOULSECOOMB WILD PARK**
Proposed Local Nature Reserve.
- **STANMER PARK**
Country Park/Urban Farm.
- **WATERHALL**
Major integrated management project for multiple recreational/conservation uses.
- **BENFIELD VALLEY**
Re-use of Farmyard complex. Country Park.
- **FOREDOWN TOWER**
Creation of recreational landscape complementing Tower Interpretation Centre.
- **INFORMATION CENTRE**
Countryside information centre needed, accessible to people - town centre or seafront location?