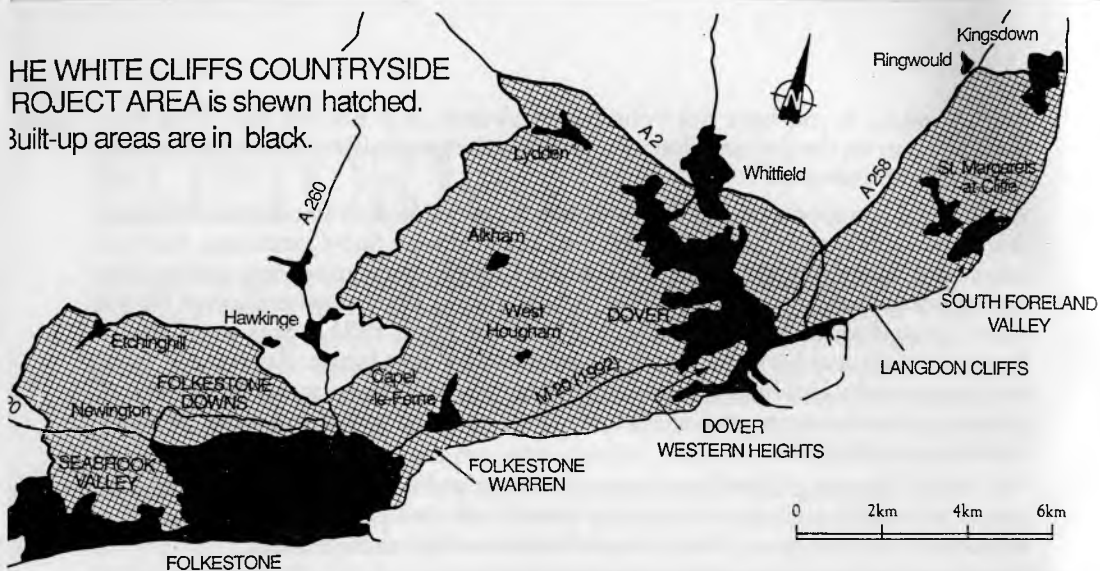


THE WHITE CLIFFS COUNTRYSIDE PROJECT AREA is shown hatched.
Built-up areas are in black.



BASED ON AN ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP for which permission to use has been granted to the White Cliffs Countryside Project by H.M. Stationary Office

MELANIE WRIGLEY TALKS ON

The White Cliffs Countryside Project

Reported by MAY JONES

A very appreciative audience met in the Dover Harbour Board Hall on 13th January for Melanie Wrigley's illustrated talk on the work of the Project. As one of its three Projects Officers she was well able to explain its aims and achievements from first hand experience using excellent colour slides.

The map on this page shows the conservation area covered by the scheme and the six priority areas for action in the first three years. The group of logos of sponsoring organisations indicates its importance both locally and nationally.

We are extremely fortunate to have on our doorstep such wonderful examples of chalk grassland, for this corner of Kent, owing to its proximity to mainland Europe, has a number of species of plants and animals not found elsewhere in Britain – for example, the late spider orchid. If correctly managed such grassland can support thirty to forty plant species per square metre.

Many of the plants colonised the open habitats created when Neolithic man first cleared the post-glacial forest and they have continued to flourish where man's activities have prevented the growth of scrub and trees which would have shaded them out. The reduction in animal husbandry since World War II has allowed coarse Tor grass to invade and overrun large expanses of the Downs, covering the soil with its leaf litter, which prevents the germination of other seeds. One important aim of the WCCP is therefore to introduce carefully controlled grazing which allows the finer grasses and then flowers to regenerate. The rare breed of Dexter cattle owned by Mr and Mrs K. C. Smith, of Sladden Farm, Alkham, have already done sovereign service on the Western heights to this end and two colonies of bee orchids are now to be seen near the Drop Redoubt, as well as field scabious and squinancy wort (a good indication of old grassland).

Wild cabbage which grows on the Dover cliffs is a national rarity and a protected species, the wild ancestor of all our cultivated brassicas. Plant scientists at Wye College are currently breeding with it for increased resistance to disease. As with so many other wild plants, its seeds can remain dormant for very long periods and then develop when conditions are favourable, as they did as soon as old buildings in Snargate Street were pulled down.

Our Dover area also contains very rare types of broomrape, a parasitic plant which plugs its roots into a host such as knapweed. As with other rarities this prompts the question did it colonise over 8000 years ago before the Channel was opened up or was it spread by the wind?

Other more common, but no less interesting and attractive plants, are to be seen, such as Autumn Ladies' Tresses, Viper's Bugloss, Milkwort (once thought to encourage lactation), Salad Burnet (rich in Vitamin C and the Stemless Thistle (alias 'Picknickers' Peril).

Blue butterflies are probably the best known of the typical chalk fauna and their numbers have been very much reduced in the post-war period. The Chalk Hill Blue, for instance, needs the Rock Rose, a calcicol, on which to lay its eggs. Bird's Foot Trefoil, another chalk-loving plant supports other blue butterflies and it is therefore making a doubly welcome comeback in the area. The Adonis Blue, which is, fortunately, still to be found in the South Foreland Valley and at one spot on the Folkestone Downs, needs ants – for the second stage of its life cycle. The ants eat the honey dew secreted by its chrysalids which are therefore carried down into the anthill and safely overwinter there.

Woodland habitats encourage a variety of other wild plants, especially coppiced areas, which allow sufficient sunlight for bluebells, Ransoms (wild garlic) and primroses and wood anemones, the last two being good indicators of ancient woodland.

The enumeration of activities undertaken with the project makes impressive reading. Volunteers of all ages (up to 80+!) gave 2500 work days in 1991, to a variety of tasks, from the spectacular clearance of accumulated litter on the Western Heights (views of the Royal Greenjackets abseiling down walls to remove items caught on rough surfaces!) to the more mundane clearance of footpaths and ponds. This total included the routine "policing" by volunteer wardens of areas near their homes.

Guided walks are becoming increasingly popular and other more specialised expeditions (astronomy, winter sketching and mini-mammal safaris) are now on offer.

70 Rural skills such as hedge-laying can be learnt at Great Shuttlesfield Farm, Lyminge, and coppicing (a practice which dates back to Roman and Saxon times) at Little Farthingloe Farm, Dover. Apart from their intrinsic interest such skills are required for Countryside Management Courses and the WCCP can therefore assist with some career training. It also has an educative rôle for the public by providing information leaflets and information panels at viewpoints along the footpaths, by encouraging people to follow the country code, especially where grazing animals are concerned and by stimulating an interest in and an appreciation of the natural environment generally.

An increasing number of schools are taking advantage of opportunities for fieldwork and other activities. Harbour School are carving oak labels for a tree trail in the Elms Vale Ecological Park, Channel High has helped with building steps in the Warren and way-marking on the hills, while Astor pupils have translated publicity pamphlets as part of their cross-curricular activities. Girls have enjoyed considering wild flowers for cosmetics on a "Smelly Day" and children have researched social history in Cowgate Cemetery.

Knowing the value of the area to local schools, the Projects Officers would like to produce a National Curriculum pack to encourage parties from other areas to come to this part of Kent for study.

Farther afield, the WCCP is twinned with the French Countryside Project covering the Calais to Boulogne section of the Pas de Calais and together they aim to encourage walking on both sides of the Channel as an adjunct to, or substitute for, other "duty free trips." As leisure travel increases they will need to balance tourist use with environmental need in their respective areas, but at present they are happy to encourage as many people as possible to explore the countryside.

At the end of the meeting a number of members who had been particularly interested in the culinary and medicinal properties (real or imaginary) of the wild plants were pleased to discuss the subject further with Melanie and look at the books on display.

POSTSCRIPT.

At least three enthusiasts have joined guided walks as a result of this talk and would heartily recommend them. Spring is the best time to visit the Elms Vale Ecological Park. Shall we see you there?

The organisations involved are:

Dover
District
Council



COUNTRYSIDE
COMMISSION



Kent Trust
for Nature
Conservation

These badges or logos are those of a unique partnership of organisations including the local authorities, conservation bodies, volunteer sector and local business that has been formed to help the White Cliffs Countryside Project tackle the problems in its area.