

CHALK GRASSLAND

Dover District's Precious Natural Heritage

Melanie Wrigley, Senior Project Officer

Chalk is an internationally rare rock. It is found outcropping in Britain and in continental Europe but in no other places in the world. The Chalk was formed about 100 million years ago (in the Cretaceous Era) when a shallow tropical sea covered this part of Europe. The Chalk formed from the microscopic skeletons of marine alga called coccoliths. When they died their skeletons rained down onto the ocean floor to form millions of tons of chalky sediment. Over geological time this was compressed, compacted and eventually uplifted to form land.

Since the last Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago, the chalky areas of Britain and Europe have been covered with forest. The areas that have now become the chalk downlands once had thick soils and forests of beech, elm and lime trees when our climate was quite different from what it is now.

Stone Age ancestors started the process of cutting and clearing the forests to use the timber and as time passed on successive generations cleared trees for timber and to make way for fields and agriculture.

The first areas to be deforested were the chalky hills, because flint was found within the chalk. It was used to make sharp edged tools, such as axes and blades and these tools, of course, were used to clear the forest in the immediate areas of the chalk. Once the timber was gone the character of the chalky areas changed from forest to open (grassland) habitat. Meanwhile, the thick woodland soils were washed away leaving very thin, infertile soils over the chalk rock.

Grassland was maintained as people grazed their domestic animals and the chalk downlands (down is derived from 'dun' meaning hill) were in the process of being born. Grazing pressure from domestic animals such as sheep, cattle and goats kept these areas of grassland as grassland. The grazing prevented shrubs and trees from growing and very vigorous species of grasses and plants were kept in check enabling the fine, more delicate plants and the animals that solely depend on them to thrive and to survive.

In recent times, the chalk downlands have not been grazed and coarse grasses and scrub have started to invade the rare chalk grassland. The White Cliffs Countryside Project (WCCP) was set up locally to manage the local chalk grassland, to maintain this internationally rare habitat and all the wealth of plants and animals that depend on it for their continued existence.

Professor David Bellamy once said that 'ancient chalk grassland is Britain's equivalent to tropical rain forest' because of the numbers of rare plants and animals the chalk turf supports. Chalk grassland is as much a part of Britain's special heritage as the White Cliffs of Dover themselves or our stately homes, castles, museums and arts collections. We should be very proud of it and all the biological wealth that it contains.



Knapweed



Horseshoe Vetch and Adonis Blue butterfly

The only way to keep our Chalk grasslands for the future generations to enjoy and appreciate is for us to manage them correctly now for the future. Chalk grassland needs to be grazed by animals because that is how it formed in the first place in Britain and Europe. Without grazing it will revert to thorny scrub as can be seen happening at Plum Pudding Hill at Maxton for example. Thirty years ago this was open chalk grassland with a little scrub and trees at the perimeter. Now it is mainly covered in very thick, thorny scrub. The rare wildlife has been replaced by common, widespread species.

It is a matter of balance and yes, man is playing God with the habitats of Britain and the World. But we are in a situation where we can manage the rare habitats such as chalk grassland and ancient woodland to keep them special or we can leave them and the rare wildlife will be lost probably for ever.

Let's be proud of our chalk grasslands and the rare orchids, herbs, butterflies and moths, and other insects that utterly depend on them. Chalk grassland is part of Britain's natural heritage. It is part of Dover's and Folkestone's natural heritage. To maintain it and enhance it it must be grazed and the scrub growth controlled. That is why the

WCCP is fencing and grazing and removing scrub to keep the grassland for local people, visitors and the rare flora and fauna for the future. If you come across Dovorians who do not understand what and why we are doing the things we do on the hills around Dover maybe you would be kind enough to share your understanding for the need for chalk grassland management with them or encourage them to come along to one of our Guided Walks to find out more.

I for one am a Dovorian and a Person of Kent, proud of our special Chalk Grassland, wildlife, landscape and associated habitats and will do my utmost with the WCCP to maintain our precious, natural treasure of biodiversity for future generations to enjoy. If you would like to help us to care for the local countryside and wildlife then why not get involved in some way, such as becoming a volunteer, or a voluntary warden, or attending or leading a guided walk or bringing the children along to GREEN GANG events - family activities in the school holidays.

Please contact us at:

The White Cliffs Countryside Project,
6 Cambridge Terrace, Dover CT16 1JT
or telephone/fax 01304 241806.

SIXTY YEARS ON

A MEMORIAL FOR ADMIRAL BETRAM HOME RAMSAY KCB, KBE, MVO

Lt. Commander J. Owen Royal Navy

Many still remember the dark days of 'Dunkirk' and the remarkable withdrawal from the advancing enemy of so many British troops through the port of Dover in 1940.

Vice Admiral Bertram Home Ramsay, who had commanded HMS BROKE in the Dover Patrol (1914-1918), now flying his flag in Dover Castle, planned and commanded 'OPERATION DYNAMO' which brought about the evacuation. The famous 'little ships', manned by fishermen and amateur sailors, made an invaluable contribution alongside those of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy. Recognition of the Admiral's success in very difficult circumstances brought him further distinguished service on his appointment as C-in-C Allied Naval Forces for 'OPERATION NEPTUNE' in support of the D Day Normandy landings in 1944. A portrait was commissioned showing him at work controlling naval operations on 'D' Day 1944, and was hung at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich.

Admiral Ramsay died tragically in an air accident in January 1945. Portsmouth Cathedral and St. Mary-in-Castro, Dover, both commemorate his service to the nation, but there is growing support for a prominent public memorial in Dover to him and all who served under him, during Britain's darkest hour in World War II.