



WESTERN HEIGHTS

Report from Paul Hadaway



Dover's Western Heights have long played a salient role in defending the gateway to England. Over time this role has led to an almost unique landscape where humans have shaped the natural topography of the Heights to create the strangely steep and angular slopes so different from the rolling downland that surrounds the rest of Dover. Now, thanks to grant money from the Countryside Agency (CoA), the Western Heights are fulfilling a new role as the gateway to the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The AONB is a designation confirming the national importance of the Kent Downs and runs from the white cliffs at Dover, across the North Downs to the Surrey border, encompassing about a quarter of the county. The designation offers legal protection, helps conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the downs whilst providing access, information, education and enjoyment to visitors or locals alike. This is where the Western Heights have an important role to play, acting as a magnet to draw people in to exploring the wider Kent Downs.

The White Cliffs Countryside Project (WCCP) applied for and was awarded a grant under the CoA.Downs Around Towns' grant scheme administered by the Kent Downs AONB unit at KCC. This money has all been targeted at attracting more visitors to the Heights whilst improving access to, and around, the site. Improvement work carried out on the Western Heights included:

- * Approx. 250 metres of paths cleared of vegetation back 2 metres either side

- * Three new flights of steps built
- * 60 metres of paths revetted
- * Gravel treatment of approx. 200 steps & 120 metres of paths
- * Old dangerous railway sleeper steps removed & replaced & handrail repaired

These site improvements are benefiting the many people who use the area for recreation, enjoy exploring the rich history and wildlife of the Heights or the accidental casual visitors who finds their way to the site and are stunned by what they find, hidden from much of the town's view.

We are very aware that some of the 50,000 visitors to the Heights each year do find their way on to the site by accident. Many of you will have seen our full colour Explore The Western Heights leaflet and on-site welcome panels which, through this grant, have been redesigned. The new welcome panels, situated at all the main car parks or entrances to the Heights, feature a three dimensional map of the site (much better for getting your bearings, two dimensional maps of the Heights just look like a jumble of geometric shapes!) featuring site information, information about the AONB, photographs and a colourful frieze showing some of the plants and butterflies found there. The site leaflet, which follows a very similar format but contains extra information about the history of the Heights, is available from various places in the area including all Tourist Information Centres, libraries, museums and local attractions.

Besides trying to encourage more visitors to the site through the leaflet we have also installed a new series of waymarked trails to the Western Heights from key points in Dover town. This scheme is based on the 'Corridors to the Countryside', a similar scheme the WCCP established in Folkestone with the aim of encouraging people to explore the countryside surrounding their towns. This is key to the aims of the 'Downs Around Towns' grant scheme which promotes ways of establishing links between towns and these important 'green lungs' areas like the Heights. The new trails are marked by brown, heritage style, arrow signs featuring a walking man symbol, the Kent Downs AONB logo and a symbol featuring the Drop Redoubt in plan with a marbled white butterfly in the centre and the wording 'WESTERN HEIGHTS LOCAL NATURE RESERVE - Gateway to the Countryside'. The trails run from the Priory Railway Station, Pencester Bus Station, Market Square and Dover Sea front / DeBradelei Wharf.

It is hoped in the future to expand this scheme to include trails to other sites around Dover, particularly Whinless Down and, in conjunction with the National Trust, Langdon Cliffs. We will also be attempting to secure funding to design and erect panels explaining the routes, with a map, at the start of all the trails. Hopefully this funding will also come through the same grant scheme, so watch this space for more details.

Dover has a lot to offer both within the town and in the green areas surrounding it.

We are very lucky as Dovorians to have such a wealth of important, species rich, well managed, accessible areas of countryside on our doorstep. It is only right that these areas are treated with respect and promoted for the valuable resource they provide, be it for recreation, landscape, history or wildlife. WCCP will continue to work to encourage as many people as possible, locals and visitors alike, to explore, understand and respect our local countryside as much as I am sure many of us already do.



The new signposts in use.