

Welcome to the South Downs Community Champions

The first year of the National Park was also our first year as part of MOSAIC, a national project aiming to build links between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and ten of the National Parks in England.

With funding secured for a 12-month MOSAIC project we recruited, supported and trained 29 Community Champions to lead walks, support events and act as ambassadors for the South Downs National Park in their communities. As well as encouraging the enjoyment and understanding of the National Park in our nearby urban communities they have also worked alongside members of the VRS on practical conservation tasks.

In June of last year the NPA became the main link to the Community Champions and later in the year the Champions became Volunteer Rangers as well. We are looking forward to seeing the group develop further with more leader visits, training opportunities and building greater connections with other members of the VRS across the South Downs.

Amanda Elmes

Strategy Lead – Learning and Outreach – South Downs National Park Authority



MOSAIC Champions Saira Niazi, Vanessa McClune, Henna Chowdhury and Shabana Mannan above Birling Gap.



Henna Chowdhury and Ian Hartle burning Gorse at Belle Tout.

South Downs
Volunteer Ranger Service

South Downs
National Park

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The Return of the Thymes

For many years, Downland Thymes has been the main way for Volunteer Rangers to share the work they have been doing and what inspires them. It has also been the place to find out about some of the other things that the Joint Committee/ National Park Authority has been doing. We can now use the internet to make news and views available much more quickly to most of you. For example, Trevor Beattie, our Chief Executive, writes his weekly 'blog' in the staff e-newsletter Update with Volunteer Rangers in mind too.

Where do these developments leave Downland Thymes? Is there still a place for it in the electronic age? The feedback we've had from you certainly seems to indicate that there is. For one thing, not all of you have access to the internet, so DT is still your main way of finding out what else is going on. Even for the majority of you who are hooked up to 'the cloud', most of you have told us you'd still prefer a paper copy.

You may remember that in the issue before last I included a note asking for your help to form an Editorial Committee to produce DT and I am very pleased to say that VR Russell Cleaver (see article Page 10) has offered to take on a lot of this work. With our Communications Team also lending support, Communications Officer Carrie Hulse, Russell and I met recently to agree how we could work together on DT in the future. You may already have been approached by Russell inviting contributions. Over the last couple of years, other work has meant I've struggled to produce DT as often as I would like. Our Editorial group will be looking to produce an edition every three months. Russell has a number of ideas for new things to include in the newsletter and wants to 'lighten it up' a bit. I wish him every success and I am sure you will support him by sending your articles and photos.

Developments from the SDNPA

After 'bigging-up' this paper newsletter, I'd like to highlight some developments from within the South Downs National Park Authority. The process of producing a Management Plan for the National Park is being made as transparent and inclusive as possible. In November last year, a major piece of work towards that was published, and this can be viewed at www.southdowns.gov.uk/about-us/state-of-the-national-park-report-2012. This is a really worthwhile read, setting out to capture a picture of the National Park as it is today, providing a baseline against which future changes can be measured. If you can't look at it online

and would like a paper copy, let me know.

Also in the 'About Us' section of the website, you can look at the further development of the Management Plan. From the end of February, there will be an opportunity to feed back on whether you think the process is heading in the right direction and we will let you know how you can join in. In the meantime, to help you keep your finger on the pulse, I recommend you join and use the South Downs online Forum. There's lots of news and it's well worth looking at to see the wide range of discussions. However if you really want to get involved, signing up allows you to join in properly. You can also find latest news on the website, via Facebook and follow immediate developments on Twitter. The links to these are on the home page at www.southdowns.gov.uk.

You may also be interested to know that a project to save precious South Downs chalk downland is celebrating its 1st anniversary. The South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area (NIA) is part of a new Government scheme to protect and expand chalk habitats and the environmental, economic and social benefits they bring. The project, led by the SDNPA, has brought in more than £126,000 of additional match funding to the area. It brings farmers, conservationists, non-government organisations, community groups, local authorities, research organisations and water companies together to join up and expand existing areas of chalk downland along the famous South Downs Way National Trail. It's exciting and innovative stuff and just what we need to evolve our landscape and the community that surrounds it. So far over 260 days of volunteer work have been spent on the project, so thank you for your continued support.

As always, thanks to all the contributors to this edition. It would be great to get Russell off to a flying start for the next edition, so please let him know if there are projects you've worked on recently that you'd like to tell other VRs about, or something about the South Downs past, present or future you think they should know.

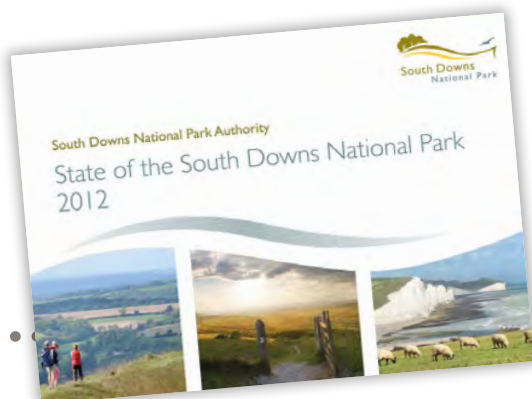
All the best to you all.

Ian Hartle

Volunteer Co-ordinator – SDNPA



Ian Hartle
Volunteer Co-ordinator



Volunteering Review - VRS Action Plan

One of the important working documents to come out of last year's Volunteering Review is the VRS Action Plan. This outlines a list of activities that we will be working on over the coming months to improve communications with and to provide a solid base for future development of the VRS. The work defined in the Action Plan came from two sources:

- **Consultation with the VRS**
A questionnaire sent to all Volunteer Rangers was followed by three independently facilitated workshops held across the National Park. Also the Training Review carried out by a group of staff and VRs.
- **Work identified by the VRS Team as being necessary to:**
 - a. Enhance NPA communication with and between Volunteer Rangers.
 - b. Support expansion and diversification of volunteering opportunities with the VRS.

The review is made up of a number of reports that were first shared with the VRS Committee and are now on the SDNPA intranet. The intranet has been available to Volunteer Rangers since November last year and was one of the first actions from the Action Plan.

The biggest area for development in the Action Plan is Communications, with a range of initiatives to improve information and knowledge exchange between volunteers, the NPA and VRS task leaders from other organisations.

This includes more facilities to be made available through the intranet, SDNP web-site and on-line Forum. Some of these will come in the spring with the redevelopment of the SDNPA intranet, including links to the VRS database for task and other information and ability to upload data/ photos.

We will also be enhancing our training by:

- **Redeveloping introductory training to provide new recruits with an introduction to the National Park and the National Park Authority (NPA).** The first of these days is happening in April.
- **An expansion of group support training – driver training, First Aid provision, leadership development, brushcutter training etc.**
- **Mentoring for new starters.**
- **Tools maintenance.**

We'll be improving the way we manage contacts to simplify the process of contacting selected groups of Volunteer Rangers, saving time and sending only to

relevant people. We have fed our requirements into work being done by our Communications Team for a new organisation-wide facility.

We will be developing events to create more opportunities for staff and volunteers to meet and share knowledge and views on National Park matters including:

- **Summer visits to winter work sites with site managers to see benefits.**
- **Work related workshops.**
- **Programme of talks/ walks on subjects of NP interest – the first of these have been organised in early March.**
- **The development of *Downland Thymes*, with more content from the NPA through our Communications team and more input into its production from volunteers.**
- **More joint practical tasks, where groups from more than one area have a chance to see other parts of the National Park and work together.**
- **Exploring opportunities for on/off site meetings between Area Managers/SMT representatives and volunteers.**

Communications is not the only area we are working on. Other developments include:

- **Amendments/enhancements to VRS uniform – waterproofs and sweatshirts for practical VRs and waterproofs for South Downs Way volunteers.**
- **Enhancement/redevelopment of the way we manage information about you and your work to provide on-line services for task leaders and Volunteer Rangers and to make the current facilities easier to use.**
- **Update of the Volunteer Expenses Policy – we will expand the range of opportunities for Volunteer Rangers to claim expenses, so that there is no financial barrier to potential new volunteers.**

As work goes on, we'll keep you updated on progress through Downland Thymes and through the intranet.

Ian Hartle

Volunteer Co-ordinator – SDNPA

Theme	Opportunity identified	Action	By whom	Timescale
Intranet	1. Work plans/rota visible on intranet	Summary of Intranet opportunities given to Web and New Media Officer on 23/4/12 for input into brief for design of new intranet. Progress to be monitored and more detail agreed as necessary.	AEI/HMA-M	In line with SDNPA development timeline
	2. Direct link between volunteer database and intranet (e.g. for reporting of volunteer tasks, ensuring correct resources etc)			
	3. Volunteers can upload information (e.g. about the sites, wildlife etc)			
	4. Skills summary of volunteers			
	5. Information on context of tasks e.g. project plans, woodland management plans etc where these exist			
	6. Downloadable resources e.g. ID guides, site information			
	7. Photo images – before and after shots to show difference made			
	8. Link to Downland Thymes (this needs to be downloadable from main website)			
	9. Volunteer library page with list of what's in it, how to request to borrow items etc			

The Great Wall of Stanmer

The first thing you notice is the quantity of the flints; heap after heap, sharp as razors where they've been broken or cut. No two are alike; some resemble fossilised animals, or bones. Heavy, mysterious in origin, they are almost impervious to weather.

We gather round the crumbling wall, a trough is formed with scaffold boards and after an outdoor tutorial on the ingredients and mixing of mortar we begin laying. Slowly, two courses at a time, leave for a day, strike and lift the shutters, and repeat.

Other bits are refaced, then the repaired areas and eroded surviving flintwork is flushed up with more mortar. You use whatever tools suit you; most of us end up smearing it on with gloved hands. The result pleasingly blends in and we hope weather will complete the effect.

John, our tutor from Plumpton College, places the stones delicately, a handful of mortar gently laid against the back of each facing flint, a light tap with the heel of his trowel. After the two lines of outside stones have been placed (looking like rows of disordered molars) there's an orgy of tumbling broken stones, old mortar and a few stray leaves between, and packing it with bucket after bucket of fresh mortar.

The mixer chugs away, lime powder swirls in the wind, barrow load after barrow load of 'muck' trundles over. Although brand new and Mark's (Eastern Area Ranger Mark Hayward) pet, it breaks down and has to be taken back to the supplier - a loose 20p nut and washer. Meanwhile we sort stones and shelter from the wind and rain; luckily a belt of huge old sycamores which first marked the boundary run along one side; seedlings of which over the two and a half centuries since it was built have rooted in fallen sections of wall. These will obstruct our efforts in time to come.



Photo: Ian Hartle © SDNPA
Volunteer Rangers gather flints from fallen sections of the wall to be re-used during the training/rebuilding.



Photo: © Sussex Downs College
Students from Sussex Downs College in Lewes work with Volunteer Ranger Bob Granger on Stanmer's boundary wall.

The wall runs for more than three miles around the western and northern boundaries of the Stanmer Estate. It is believed to have been built by French prisoners of war in the 1760s; probably spending bleak winter days picking the flints out of arable fields, a rain soaked sack over their heads. Laying could only take place in warmer months. It stands about 1.7m high and generally consists of outer skins of roughly coursed unshaped large flints, with a rubble core, giving an average overall thickness of about 450mm. It was capped with red half-round coping bricks which we are salvaging and storing for later use.

So far the various groups have repaired and stabilised a 30m length near Coldean Lane. The priority is to similarly stabilise adjoining standing sections, before attempting to re-instate the missing sections from ground level.

Just as we complete our stint, John reports that another two metre section has fallen (or been pushed) – the copings are valuable).

It's going to be a long job.

Simon Rogers

Volunteer Ranger – Stanmer



Photo: Ian Hartle © SDNPA
A completed section, just waiting to be capped.

An Introduction to the National Park Rights of Way and Access Accord

In June last year the South Downs National Park Authority signed a joint accord with the four local highway authorities (LHAs) who manage public Rights of Way (RoW) and other countryside access in the South Downs (Hampshire, West Sussex and East Sussex County Councils and Brighton and Hove City Council). The Rights of Way and Access Accord sets out the framework for the authorities to work together to provide a high quality RoW and access network befitting a National Park. This will enable partnership projects to be carried out that improve the network to benefit a wider range of users.

The aims of the accord are to:

- Encourage a greater diversity of people to enjoy the National Park.
- Provide disabled or less able people the opportunity to better access and enjoy the National Park.
- Remove barriers to allow easier access for all users to and within the National Park.
- Meet the aims of LHAs' Rights of Way Improvement Plans and Countryside Access Plans.
- Create new or enhanced access that meets the identified needs of the public.
- Provide information to the public including enhanced signage, interpretation or promotional material.
- Support and enhance the rural economy of the South Downs.
- Engage with stakeholders in the community through dialogue and enabling volunteer involvement.

What does all this mean for Volunteer Rangers?

Practical tasks

Although the National Park Authority does not have responsibility for maintaining Rights of Way in the National Park, we have an agreement to carry out gate and signpost maintenance along the South Downs Way and I know a number of you have contributed to this work. VRS groups have been helping both Hampshire and West Sussex Rights of Way teams to do this, and other practical



Installing a waymark post - South Downs Way, Windover Hill – above the Cuckmere Valley

work, on footpaths and bridleways. In East Sussex there has been less work done on RoW by the VRS but a new agreement and a new management system will mean more opportunities for this in the near future.

Monitoring

A group of up to thirty Volunteer Rangers work as South Downs Way Wardens, walking or riding sections of the National Trail regularly, to check on the condition of the route and also to talk to the public about Trail issues. There are a number of sections not currently looked after by a Warden and South Downs Way Officer Andy Gattiker will be seeking new recruits shortly.

Volunteer Parish Path Rangers used to survey the rights of way in Sussex each year and this work fed directly into a maintenance programme. Because the SDNPA does not have responsibility for managing the rights of way network, reports of problems now go straight to the local highway authorities. The SDNP website has a page which links to all the local highway authority reporting pages: <http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/enjoying/outdoor-activities/rights-of-way/report-a-problem>

Although the role of Parish Path Rangers within the VRS is not continuing in the way it did there are other potential needs for access monitoring which are currently being looked at. Although not the Highway Authority, the SDNPA is the Access Authority which means it has responsibilities for Access Land designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. We are looking into how we can monitor the condition of the gates and stiles and overall usability of Access Land and would like to work with volunteers on how best they can help with this.

We may also need to carry out a partial (probably five to ten per cent) survey of the rights of way in the National Park on an annual basis, to help us with our reporting on the achievements of the Accord. If we do decide to carry out a regular survey, we would need your help to achieve it.

Tim Squire

Rights of Way and Access Officer – South Downs National Park Authority

Central Areas' Gallery

Washington Chalk Pit
The same view before, during and after a VRS onslaught!



Photos: Tom Parry © SDNPA



Photos: Ian Hartle and Anne Bush © SDNPA



Nick Egerton

Work in Rewell Wood



Dick Cole and Mike Rowe



James Tolson

Photos: Simon Mockford © SDNPA

Left:
Central and Western Areas' Christmas task and barbecue at Dolly Firs.

Top to bottom:
A barbecue queue.
Helena Lewis and Peter Tucker receive 20 year Long Service Awards.
We briefly managed to get almost everyone in front of the camera – except Anne (Bush) who stayed behind.
Do you think if we keep trimming, we'll get it in the living room?

Where do you take your Downland Thymes?

To The Lamb in Angmering!
Central Areas weekend VRs found the best excuse they could to get together for lunch!

Photo: © Peter Lewis



Local origin: Volunteers growing native Sussex trees and shrubs



Raised beds filled with young trees at Special Branch's site in Stanmer.

Special Branch Tree Nursery at Stanmer Organics has been growing native Sussex trees and shrubs for fifteen years. Our project is all about providing plants of guaranteed local origin for planting in the area. Even for conservation projects, plants often come from very far away - perhaps Scotland, more likely Eastern Europe. Even among Sussex commercial nurseries who specialise in native tree species, there are none who guarantee Sussex origin for their full range (if at all). This is why Special Branch is unique.

Local origin matters to wildlife, to the environment and to the trees. For wildlife, the flowering and fruiting of local origin native tree species is well synchronised with the requirements of local creatures. For the environment, local origin planting makes the smallest carbon footprint and contributes to sustained biodiversity. For the trees themselves, local origin means that plants are better adapted to our climate and soils, so are more likely to thrive and can be more resistant to pests and diseases.

Our trees have been used in conservation projects and environmental planting schemes by organisations including the South Downs National Park, the Sussex Wildlife Trust, 'Friends of' conservation groups from Brighton and Hove local nature reserves, local community associations and schools, allotment holders, the University of Brighton, the Zoological Society of London.

The nursery relies entirely on the effort of volunteers, and offers several kinds of opportunity for Sussex conservation organisations

and volunteers. First, and obviously: if your project wants to plant trees or shrubs - as hedging, for woodland, or as standard trees - come and talk to us.

Second, if you want to develop skills in organic horticulture and propagating trees from seed, volunteer with us. Get the benefit of our fifteen years' experience. If spade work is what you enjoy, join us in some of the maintenance tasks that our mature half-acre site throws up: rebuilding raised beds, fixing fences, winter pruning (250m of hedge!), and composting. Specialised wildlife-supporting areas of our site call for special attention: we need to manage wildflower meadows and ponds. If you have special knowledge or an interest in either of these areas we would be particularly glad to hear from you.

And finally: if you expect to use trees and shrubs in future years, why not team up with us? We can jointly collect seed with volunteers and grow it in our nursery beds at Stanmer until it's ready for planting.

To find out more, visit our website at www.specialbranchtrees.org.uk, speak to us on 07796 592 786 any time on Friday, or come and visit us. We are on site on Friday each week at our lovely, sheltered, south-facing site at Stanmer Organics, behind Stanmer Park.

We look forward to seeing you!

Mike Hales/Chris Perry
Special Branch Tree Nursery



Gathering seed from a spindle tree.



Young seedlings are transferred from trays into a raised bed.



Special Branch has led groups of Volunteer Rangers over the years - this task was in 2008.



Steep Church, near Petersfield.

Church Surveys across the South Downs

Over the past few years, during the summer, Volunteer Rangers in Hampshire have been carrying out surveys at churches in the National Park, with the aim of learning about their cultural heritage and discovering any interesting hidden stories.

The task is almost complete in Hampshire, so the aim is now to broaden the scope and survey churches in other areas with help from other Volunteer Rangers.

The survey itself comprises three elements; biodiversity, architectural - both internal and external, and a cultural aspect. By researching these key areas and taking some photography, we hope to build a landscape-wide picture of the churches' key characteristics. We're also looking to compare churches with similar stories and develop some interpretation.

The survey can be as easy as picking up leaflets at churches and going for a jolly nice summer stroll, or it can be as in-depth as you like. The background research on each church has involved an internet search of the church and parish histories to help look for interesting features before visiting. Stories of old families and controversies have all emerged, and by piecing together this information we can see how churches, a focal point for communities, have helped to shape the South Downs.

If you are interested in getting out and about and surveying some churches, please contact me for more details.

Dan Oakley
Ranger - Western Area



High forest canopy.



Demonstrating the volunteer armoury.

The secrets of ancient pasture woodland

Binswood is a remarkable example of a wooded common that has been continually grazed by livestock since medieval times. It lies in the north-west of the National Park, midway between Alton and Bordon. The site is tucked away from roads, and there is no doubt that this has helped to ensure its survival from modern development.

Pasture woodland is a relatively unusual habitat, so to find a site still being regularly grazed by livestock is rare indeed. Binswood has been described as the finest surviving pasture-woodland common in Hampshire.

Pasture woodlands come in four types; they have usually evolved from forests, wooded commons, parks or chases. Binswood reflects three of these types: in Norman times it lay within Woolmer Forest, then later it was used as a deer park by King John before evolving into a wooded common. It has been grazed by commoners' cattle ever since.

Binswood is a special place; set amongst a mixed-aged structure of oak, beech and holly you will find open unimproved pasture. Part of the wood is high forest, while elsewhere it is oak canopy over hazel - all lying on gault clay. To walk amongst it today is like taking a step back in time, for its appearance is surprisingly similar to that recorded on the 1870 OS Map. Not only is its boundary identical but the location of the paths, rides and clearings are much the same. And since the ownership and management of Binswood is now under the aegis of the Woodland Trust, it seems that the future of this remarkable area is secure.

However these simple truths are not the whole story; even if one wanted to, one cannot manage pasture woods today the same way as they were maintained centuries ago. For whilst Binswood's habitat may have remained relatively unchanged, today's livestock are not as robust as medieval breeds. In addition, modern controls on livestock

management are much more stringent. So much so that farmers are less likely to put their valuable cattle into woods to survive on rough pasture. They prefer to give their animals closer care to ensure they stay in good condition. Inevitably, pasture woodlands in the 21st century carry less livestock than is ideal to maintain the habitat. The small numbers of cattle in Binswood cannot keep up with the natural re-growth of plant species. This is where the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service comes into the picture.

Initially, National Park Ranger Rob Nicholls liaised with the Woodland Trust to talk about the site and its management. In recent years, the Trust has invested a lot of money in clearing vegetation and fencing the perimeter of the site. Following a long cessation of grazing due to Red Water - a tick born disease - being found on site, the Trust also found a new grazier who brought cattle back to Binswood. They have now been grazing for two summers and so far the disease has not re-occurred.

The next phase of management is to open glades along the rights of way that cross the site to improve public access and woodland butterfly habitat. In October and November 2012 the Hampshire VRS arrived to supply the manpower. It proved a delightful experience: whilst we worked we found individual cows coming up to join us, curious to see what all the fuss was about. Over four task days we widened rides, extended clearings and coppiced hazel stools. And when we finished we even found that the Woodland Trust were happy to pay for our services, since it had saved them getting in contractors. You don't get many tasks as good as Binswood!

Russell Cleaver

Volunteer Ranger – Western Area



Binswood circa 1870



Binswood in 2011



A glade extended

Cattle graze the brash

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100050083

Photos © Russell Cleaver



The glow in the sky from a built up area makes star gazing much less satisfying – in the centre is the constellation of Orion.

The Sky at Night

Interested in stargazing and astronomy? The South Downs National Park Authority is researching the possibility of becoming an International Dark Sky Reserve. These are areas of outstanding starry skies that offer the best opportunities for astronomy and getting out and looking at the night sky.

In order to meet the criteria, we must first record the quality of the night sky across the Downs. Over the last few months, Western Area staff, Volunteer Rangers and local astronomers have been out and about recording the sky quality and finding the darkest areas in the Hampshire Downs, and we could do with some help in other areas.

The job is relatively simple but it can take some time. Using a Sky Quality Meter, a GPS and a form, volunteers have been driving around taking readings every 500m or so. Teams of three are ideal, but it can be done individually too.

So if you're interesting in measuring your local skies, doing something a bit different and contributing to our data collection and application, please contact me for more details. If you get some good measurements, I might even let you have a go with the telescope!

Dan Oakley

Ranger – Western Area

To Skittle or not to Skittle? That is the question

In the last issue of Downland Thymes we asked you to let us know your thoughts about our skittles evenings and to send us any other ideas for future socials.

Thank you to everyone who responded to the request. The general response was that most people enjoyed skittles and wanted the evenings to continue, but not during the dark winter evenings. Several people also suggested alternative social events to skittles, so thank you for these. Plans are underway to hold a couple of evening lectures in the Spring. These will not replace skittles or quizzes, but will be in addition to social events.

We will go through all of the replies in detail and come up with a proposal for future social events to start in April 2013.

Anne Bush – *Volunteer Support Officer*

Founder's Travel Fellowship

The Founder's Travel Fellowship, started by the late Paul Millmore, is a pot of money held by the VRS Committee to which any Volunteer Ranger (or group of Volunteer Rangers) can apply for a grant. The idea behind the Travel Fellowship is that VRs can apply for a grant to visit other protected landscapes, both in the UK and abroad, so that they can bring back new and fresh ideas that could be implemented in the South Downs.

Two grants have already been made. Helena Lewis visited a National Park in Switzerland to look at volunteer activity on the Swiss National Trails, and Marion Trew visited several Visitor Centres in the UK to see if their strategies could be used to encourage more people to visit Seven Sisters Country Park and the broader area of the South Downs.

The Committee is again inviting applications to the Fellowship. These can be made by an individual or a group and don't have to be anything as grand as foreign travel. It could simply be that a group from one area of the South Downs National Park would like to visit a group in another area for a joint practical task and overnight stay.

For the full criteria and an application form please contact me by calling 07866 962736 or email anne.bush@southdowns.gov.uk.

Anne Bush

Volunteer Support Officer

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The information contained in this newsletter was, as far as known, correct at the date of issue. The South Downs National Park Authority cannot, however, accept responsibility for any error or omission.