

South Downs National Park

Special Qualities

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Introduction

Within the diversity of the English countryside, the National Parks are recognised as landscapes of exceptional beauty, fashioned by nature and the communities which live in them. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 enabled the creation of the National Parks, and ensures that our most beautiful and unique landscapes have been, and will continue to be, protected in the future.

The purposes of National Parks are to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area and promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Park by the public. Working in partnership with other Local Authorities and organisations, National Park Authorities also have a duty to seek to foster the economic and social-well being of communities within the Park in carrying out the purposes.

The South Downs National Park is Britain's newest National Park. Situated in the heavily populated south east it has strong social, historical and environmental links with the major towns and cities in its hinterland.

The South Downs National Park is a living, working and ever-changing landscape, shaped by its underlying geology and its human history. It has many special qualities which together define its sense of place and attract people to live and work in the area and visit the National Park. These special qualities need to be understood, appreciated, conserved and enhanced.

The special qualities reflect both the engagement with stakeholders of the National Park and technical evidence.

I. Diverse, inspirational landscapes and breathtaking views

The geology of the South Downs underpins so much of what makes up the special qualities of the area: its diverse landscapes, land use, buildings and culture. The rock types of the National Park are predominately chalk and the alternating series of greensands and clays that form the Western Weald. Over time a diversity of landscapes has been created in a relatively small area which is a key feature of the National Park. These vary from the wooded and heathland ridges on the greensand in the Western Weald to wide open downland on the chalk that spans the length of the National Park, both intersected by river valleys. Within these diverse landscapes are hidden villages, thriving market towns, farms both large and small and historic estates, connected by a network of paths and lanes, many of which are ancient.

There are stunning, panoramic views to the sea and across the Weald as you travel the hundred mile length of the South Downs Way from Winchester to Eastbourne, culminating in the impressive chalk cliffs at Seven Sisters. From near and far, the South Downs is an area of inspirational beauty that can lift the soul.



Harting Down, West Sussex



Seven Sisters, East Sussex



The Hangers from Stoner Hill, Hampshire

2. A rich variety of wildlife and habitats including rare and internationally important species

The unique combination of geology and micro-climates of the South Downs has created a rich mosaic of habitats that supports many rare and internationally important wildlife species. Sheep-grazed downland is the iconic habitat of the chalk landscape. Here you can find rare plants such as the round-headed rampion, orchids ranging from the burnt orchid and early spider orchid to autumn lady's tresses, and butterflies including the Adonis blue and chalkhill blue.

The greensand of the Western Weald contains important lowland heathland habitats including the internationally designated Woolmer Forest, the only site in the British Isles where all our native reptile and amphibian species are found. There are large areas of ancient woodland, for example the yew woodlands of Kingley Vale and the magnificent 'hanging' woodlands of the Hampshire Hangers.

The extensive farmland habitats of the South Downs are important for many species of wildlife, including rare arable wildflowers and nationally declining farmland birds. Corn bunting, skylark, lapwing, yellowhammer and grey partridge are notable examples.

The river valleys intersecting the South Downs support wetland habitats and a wealth of birdlife, notably at Pulborough Brooks. Many fish, amphibians and invertebrates thrive in the clear chalk streams of the Meon and Itchen in Hampshire where elusive wild mammals such as otter and water vole may also be spotted. The extensive chalk sea cliffs and shoreline in the East host a wide range of coastal wildlife including breeding colonies of seabirds such as kittiwakes and fulmars.



Adonis blue butterfly



Round-headed rampion



Heathland habitat, Iping Common, West Sussex

3. Tranquil and unspoilt places

The South Downs National Park is in South East England, one of the most crowded parts of the United Kingdom. Although its most popular locations are heavily visited, many people greatly value the sense of tranquillity and unspoilt places which give them a feeling of peace and space. In some areas the landscape seems to possess a timeless quality, largely lacking intrusive development and retaining areas of dark night skies. This is a place where people seek to escape from the hustle and bustle in this busy part of England, to relax, unwind and re-charge their batteries.



Amberley Wildbrooks, West Sussex



Walkers on the South Downs Way, Devil's Dyke



Orchids on Beacon Hill, Hampshire

4. An environment shaped by centuries of farming and embracing new enterprise

The rural economy has strongly influenced the landscape and over 80 per cent of the South Downs is farmed. Past agricultural practices have produced some nationally valuable habitats including chalk downland and lowland heath, with traditional breeds specific to the area such as Southdown and Hampshire Down sheep significant in the past and still bred today. Many farmers and landowners are helping to conserve and enhance important habitats through environmental stewardship schemes. Large estates such as Goodwood, Cowdray, Petworth and Firle, with their designed parklands, have a significant effect on the landscape and the rural economy. The ownership of large areas of the eastern Downs by local authorities or the National Trust is a legacy of the early 20th century conservation movements to protect the iconic cliffs and Downs and the water supply to coastal towns.

Farming has always responded to the economy of the day and continues to do so. Some farmers are diversifying their businesses, for example by providing tourist accommodation and meeting the growing market for locally produced food and drink. Climate change and market forces continue to influence the landscape leading to new enterprises such as vineyards, and increasing opportunities for producing alternative energy, for example wood fuel.

However, the economy of the National Park is by no means restricted to farming. There are many popular tourist attractions and well-loved local pubs which give character to our towns and villages. The National Park is also home to a wide range of other businesses, for example new technology and science, which supports local employment.



Durleighmarsh Farm & Orchard, West Sussex



Harveys Brewery, Lewes, East Sussex



Sheep in the Meon Valley, Hampshire

5. Great opportunities for recreational activities and learning experiences

The South Downs offers a wide range of recreational and learning opportunities to the large and diverse populations living both within and on the doorstep of the National Park, and to visitors from further afield.

With 3,200 kilometres (2,000 miles) of public rights of way and the entire South Downs Way National Trail within the National Park there is exceptional scope for walking, cycling and horse riding. Many other outdoor activities take place such as paragliding, orienteering and canoeing. There is a chance for everyone to walk, play, picnic and enjoy the countryside, including at Queen Elizabeth Country Park in Hampshire and Seven Sisters Country Park in East Sussex.

The variety of landscapes, wildlife and culture provides rich opportunities for learning about the South Downs as a special place, for the many school and college students and lifelong learners. Museums, churches, historic houses, outdoor education centres and wildlife reserves are places that provide both enjoyment and learning. There is a strong volunteering tradition providing chances for outdoor conservation work, acquiring rural skills, leading guided walks and carrying out survey work relating to wildlife species and rights of way.



Cycling on the South Downs Way



Paragliding near Lewes

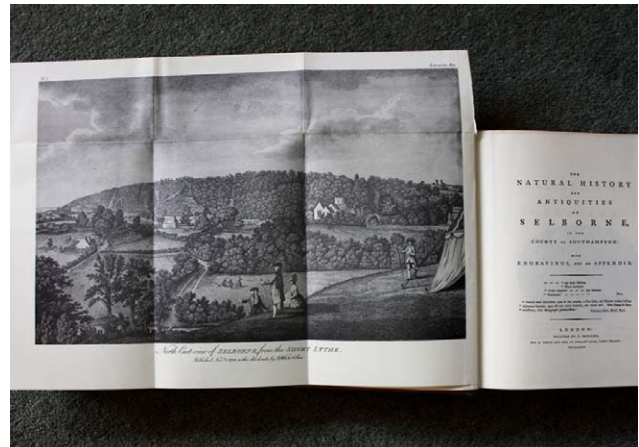


Butser Ancient Farm, Chalton, Hampshire

6. Well-conserved historical features and a rich cultural heritage

The distinct character of many areas of the South Downs has been created by well-conserved historical features, some of which are rare and of national importance. Bronze Age barrows, Iron Age hill forts, Saxon and Norman churches, dew ponds, historic houses and landmarks of the two World Wars help to give the National Park strong links to its past human settlement. These links are reinforced by the variety of architectural building styles spanning the ages. Evidence of earlier farming traditions can still be seen today in the pattern of field boundaries, and relics of the industrial past remain in the form of old iron workings, brickworks, quarries and ancient coppiced woodlands.

The South Downs has a rich cultural heritage of art, music and rural traditions. There is a strong association with well-known writers, poets, musicians and artists who have captured the essence of this most English of landscapes and drawn inspiration from the sense of place: Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Hilaire Belloc, Edward Thomas, Gilbert White, Edward Elgar, Joseph Turner, Eric Gill and Eric Ravilious, among many others. Today traditions continue through activities such as folk singing and events like Findon sheep fair. Culture lives on with new art and expression, celebrating the strong traditions of the past.



'The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne' 1st Edition, by Gilbert White



Saxon Church, Singleton, West Sussex



The Chattri, above Brighton, East Sussex

7. Distinctive towns and villages, and communities with real pride in their area

The South Downs National Park is the most populated National Park in the United Kingdom, with around 110,000 people living within the boundary. Significantly more people live in the major urban areas and villages that surround the National Park including communities that are actively involved in the South Downs such as Brighton and Hove, and Eastbourne.

The South Downs is unique in having the largest market towns of any UK National Park - Lewes, Petersfield and Midhurst. The character and appearance of these and many other settlements throughout the National Park derives in large part from the distinctive local building materials. Picturesque villages like Selborne, Charlton and Alfriston blend into their landscapes.

Many of these settlements contain strong and vibrant communities with much invested in the future of where they live, and a sense of identity with their local area, its culture and history. Across the South Downs there are also communities of people who come together through common interests, for example, farming, conservation and recreation. These communities dedicate time and resources to enhancing community life, conserving what is important to them and planning for future generations.



The Lynchmere Society, West Sussex



Alfriston, East Sussex



Farmers' Market, Petersfield, Hampshire