

WHOLE ESTATE PLAN

FIRLE ESTATE

The Firle Estate facts & figures

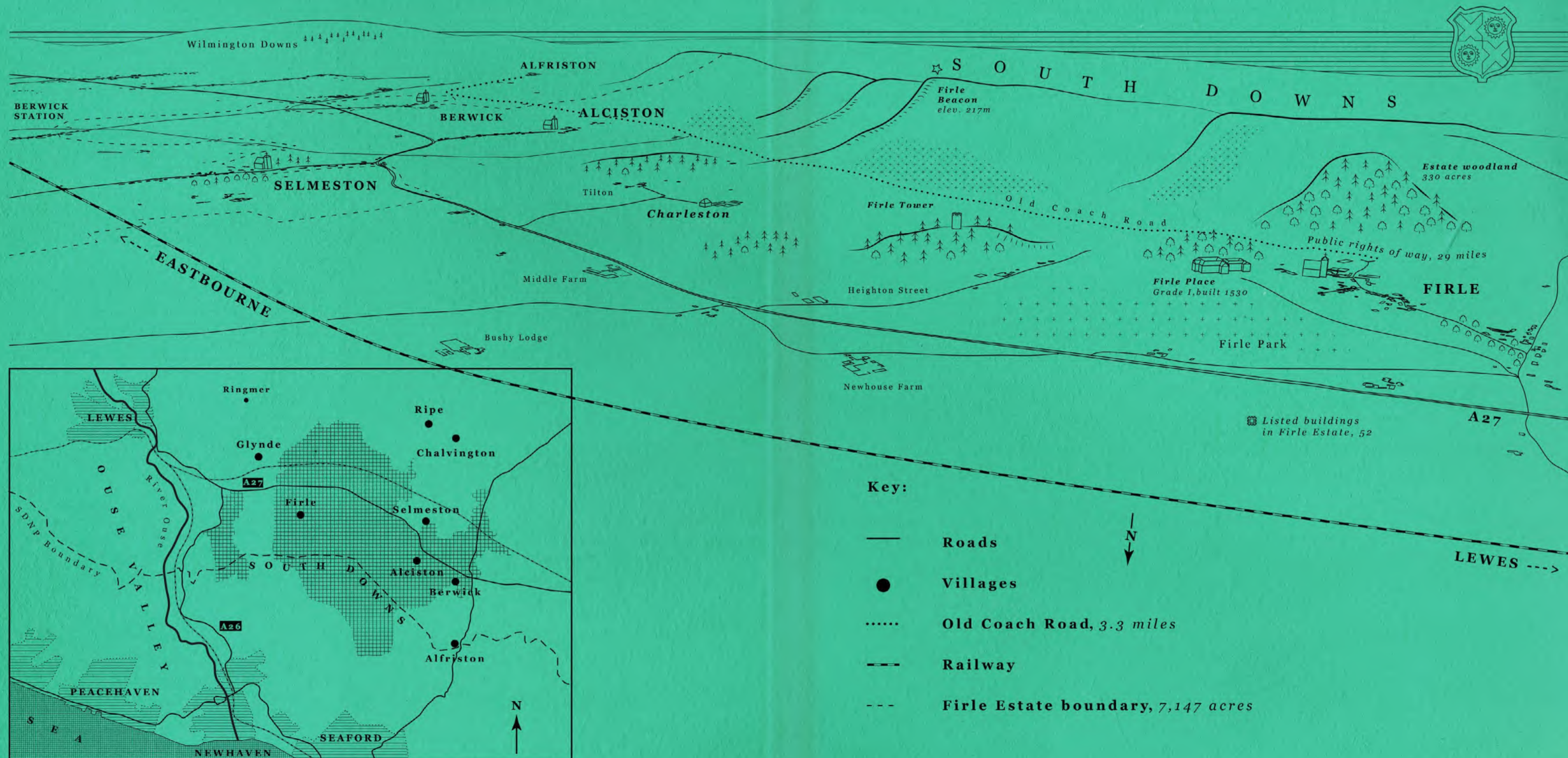
Areas

Estate.....7147 acres
SSSIs 502 acres
Open Access Land.....464 acres
Public Rights of Way.....29 miles
Estate woodland.....330 acres
Ancient woodland.....165 acres

Landmarks

Listed buildings.....52
Firle Beacon (elev.).....217m
Firle Place (built).....1530

*Sir John Gage KG inherited
Firle Estate in 1496.



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The Firle Estate Plan was written with Bob Baines, Firle Estate Director, and researched, photographed, mapped and designed by William Anderson, David Jones and George Mitzalis of Rabble: www.rabblearchitecture.co.uk from 29A Forge Cottage, Firle.

Huge thanks and acknowledgement is due to the following for their help with the Estate Plan. Lord Gage, Lady Gage, Henry Gage, the Estate Trustees, Craig Noel of Strutt and Parker, Anthony Weston of CLM rural business consultancy, the Estate Office staff, Firle Parish Council, Alciston and Selmeston Parish Meeting, Berwick Parish Council, Firle Estate farmers and businesses, the Charleston Trust, Firle Bonfire Society, Firle School, photographs by Warwick Anderson and Paul Whitbread.



~ *Foreword by Estate Director, Bob Baines*

“It is exciting to be writing a foreword for this ambitious account of life on the Firle Estate. This plan is a portrait of our landscape and its communities, a work of many years.

- 1 Each chapter of the plan captures a series of interesting and often charming snippets of Estate life; written as a response to the South Downs National Park’s request for us to portray our guiding principles. For us it has come at a time of succession between generations and it has been helpful to give as much consideration as possible to the Estate’s purpose and direction.
- 2 We aim to use the Firle Estate Plan as a foundation for decisions and to show leadership to the partners we work with. The Plan has been written and drawn to help us shape a balanced future for the landscape in which we live and work. We hope it will help pull together a wealth of information and knowledge which is often taken for granted and normally considered in isolation and stored independently.
- 3 What I find fascinating about the plan is that it joins together information from a wide range of sources with the experience of past projects and the intent of current projects to create a book from which we will continue to learn. This approach is enjoyable and unconventional and overcomes what some would say was a slightly dyed-in-the-wool view of Firle: it emphasises that we are moving with the times whilst conserving the Estate’s atmosphere and sense of purpose. Hopefully it will help those who read it understand more about the landscape, the farms and villages and give context to what we do.”



(left) East face of Firle Place across Firle Park
(top) Work in progress photographing the WEP

~ *Introduction to the Estate*

This is the Firle Estate Plan. It has been developed by the Gage Family and Estate as a ‘field guide’. Using diagrams, maps and photographs, it aims to be as useful to as many as possible.

¹ The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) recognise the challenges faced by estates to both manage land and maintain some of the most significant cultural and heritage assets within the South Downs. It was established in 2010 in recognition that the South Downs are an iconic and valuable lowland landscape in one of the more stressed parts of the country. The function of Firle’s plan is to help the Estate, the National Park and all those involved in the local communities and landscape to work in collaboration.

² The Firle Estate is a beautiful working landscape and the seat of the Gage family for over five hundred years. The Estate has a distinctive character and history. This is a matter of geology, topography, climate, the historical facts of landownership and the more ethereal and intangible qualities of inspiration and atmosphere. This sense of beauty and vitality has been articulated into an Estate Vision which has formed the starting point for preparing our Whole Estate Plan.

³ At the centre of Firle’s vision is the centuries old pattern of villages, farmland and downland. People have always been drawn to the South Downs. Many writers and artists have drawn inspiration from the Estate and their art reflects and articulates the softness, beauty and sense of freedom found in the landscape. This relationship with the land continues to evolve as it has over the past five hundred years.



(top) Surveying traditional farm buildings on the Estate
(right) Firle Beacon and the Firle Escarpment from the east



⁴ To explain how to meet the Estate’s vision, the plan is structured with five main chapters which compile a detailed record of the Estate’s natural and built assets. Each investigates a theme from the Estate’s vision. A further two chapters consider the relationship between landscape management and ecosystems services and present the scope of proposed Estate projects.

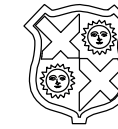
- ⁵ Chapter One ‘Connections in the Landscape’
- Chapter Two ‘Continuity and Change in the Landscape’
- Chapter Three ‘Working in the Landscape’
- Chapter Four ‘Heritage in the Landscape’
- Chapter Five ‘Living in the Landscape’
- Chapter Six ‘A Landscape of Ecosystem Services’
- Chapter Seven ‘Our Future Landscape’

⁶ The Firle Estate is not a static or nostalgic place. The Estate’s character is instead formed by the fact that life in Firle is close to the land and therefore closer to those who shape and shaped it. It is a misconception to see villages, businesses and farms as unchanging. The defining characteristic about the Firle Estate is that everybody who lives and works on the Estate is passionate about it. This is something that is experienced by those who visit. It is hoped this passion is felt by everyone who reads this. To survive for the past five hundred years it has had to evolve and that evolution will have to continue into the future if the Estate is to continue to succeed.



(top) Right to left, Lord Gage, Valentine and Henry by the Stew Ponds in Firle Park

~ The Estate's Vision



Firle Estate's vision is to be:

1. **A landscape of sensitive connections** with a distinct pattern of routes, habitats and pathways that have been conserved for future generations. This pattern is the continuum in the Estate's landscape and is key to connecting nature and growing environmental gain.
2. **A landscape with a balance of continuity and change** where networks of habitats are supported across the Estate by careful and considered stewardship. The richest wildlife habitats are often those with a long history of land use continuity. Understanding the antiquity of the landscape will define the Estate's conservation and how it responds to changing practices and perceptions.
3. **A landscape of varied local work** that supports rural employment and the production of quality local food. The Estate is a place of work and always has been. Farmyards and barns will be restored, adapted and consolidated to meet the nature and needs of new farming practices. Villages and surplus agricultural sites will be places for enterprise and craftsmanship that are encouraged by the Estate and connected by maintained local facilities and effective infrastructure.
4. **A landscape of interesting and varied culture** with places to explore new and old ideas. The Estate's ancient landscape throws up constant reminders of our past and there is an atmosphere of freedom and space on the Firle Downs. It is the quality of this sensitive contrast which has intrigued and attracted many to visit and stay. This quality will be recognised and imbued in Estate work and projects for the future.
5. **A landscape of strong rural communities** with successful village institutions, facilities, housing and societies. The Estate communities are functioning rural villages, and this attitude is kept alive by the people who live here and those who visit. The essential ingredients of this village character are the farming community, the Estate workers, the cricket clubs, the pubs, Firle Bonfire Society, the churches and Firle School. These will continue to be supported.

Strengths

The Estate is defined by its iconic downland landscape. The smooth shapes and rounded forms of the bare Firle Downs give a striking individuality to the land which is widely recognised as the epitome of chalk country.

The Estate area is well served with transport infrastructure. The A27 trunk road and the railway stations at Glynde and Berwick provide easy links and immediate regional connections.

A belt of Open Access Land runs across the Estate, from the Ouse Valley to Alfriston, along the crest of the Firle Escarpment. This 464 acre stretch of downland can be explored from the South Downs Way and the Estate’s network of footpaths and bridleways.

The public rights of way across the Estate allow a great amount of access and permit many hours of walking, cycling or riding away from main highways. There are 29 miles (47km) of footpaths, bridle paths, permissive paths and byway. This network includes a 3.3 mile (5.4km) stretch of the Old Coach Road and 3.6 miles (5.8km) of the South Downs Way - regarded among the best walks in the region.

The natural beauty of the habitats on the Firle Escarpment are matched by their outstanding ecological value. This ancient, herb-rich, chalk grassland is protected on the Estate with a 475 acre Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

1. ~Connections in the Landscape

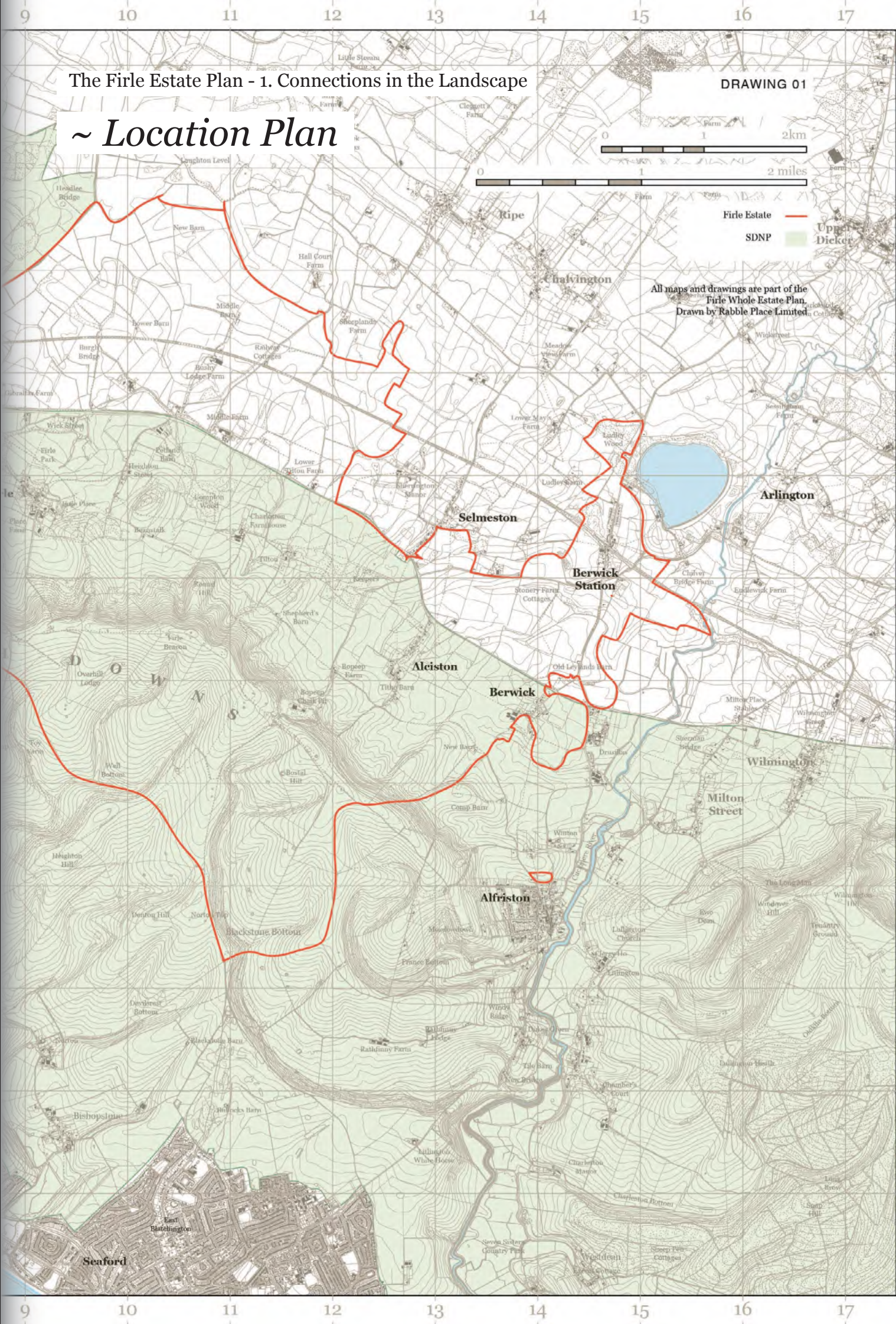
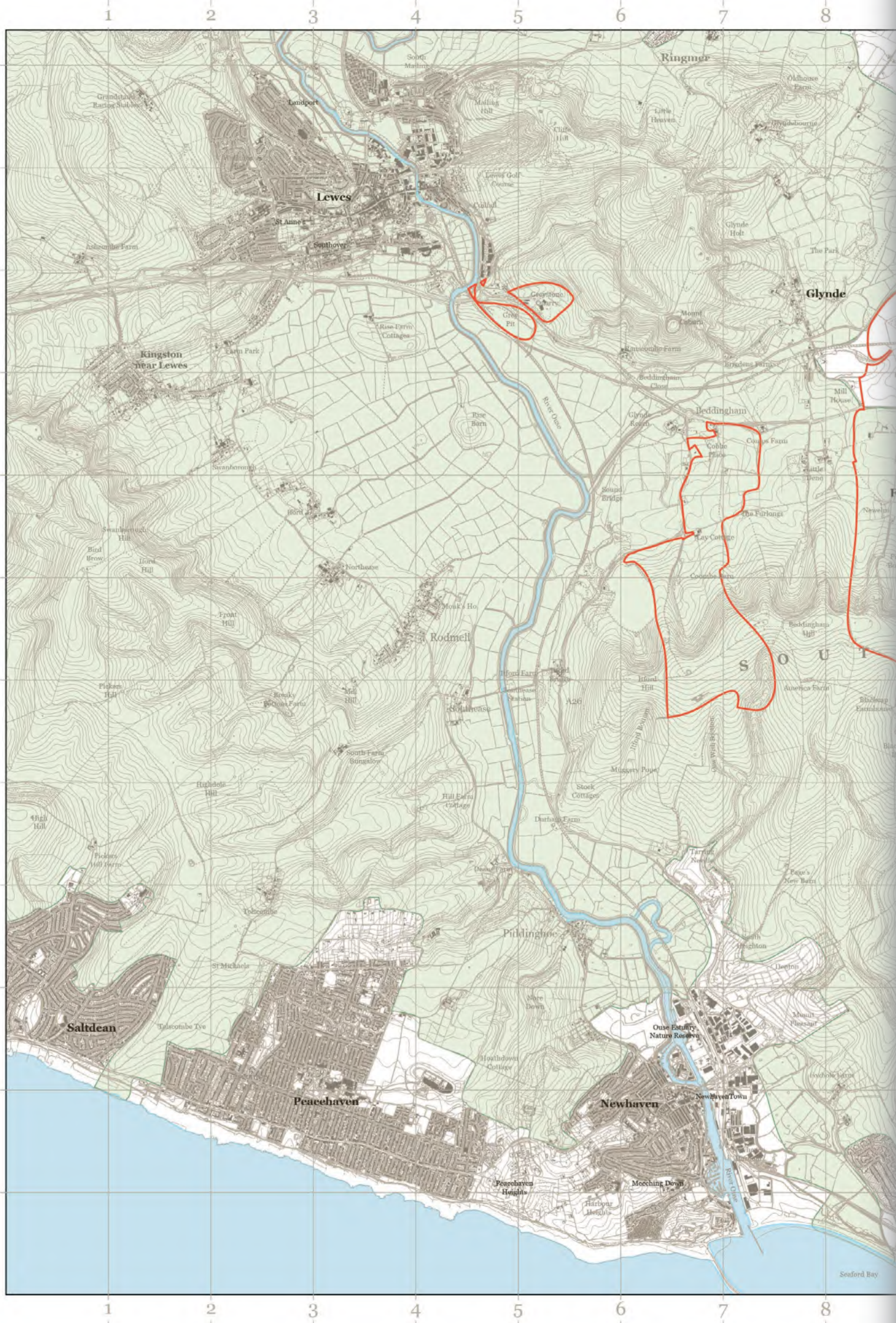
The chalk folds of the Downs rise outside the Drawing Room windows at Firle Place. Few lines of hills are as arresting as this steep northward-facing escarpment.

- ¹ The South Downs’ sheer yet smooth formation is the familiar backdrop to daily life on the Estate. The Gage family inherited the manorial rights in 1496 and sited the house in the lea of the Firle Downs - a favourable place from which to farm the soils below, and to run great flocks of sheep over open chalk grasslands.
- ² Firle is one in a line of villages and farms located where permeable chalk and upper greensand meets the impermeable gault clay which marks the southern edge of the Weald. Along this junction appear clear running springs filtered through the chalk, making Firle and the villages of Alciston, Berwick and Selmeston spring-line settlements. Each are linked by trackways to the crest of the Downs deeply worn into the chalk. These routes are locally called ‘bostals’ and lie on former droving routes. The underhill road, now a track called the Old Coach Road, which runs between Firle and Berwick was added later to this ancient network. Eighteenth century stage coaches used it as a highway to Eastbourne and is still of such local importance that it has remained a byway linking villages and farms.
- ³ Above the Old Coach Road rises the steeply curving escarpment of the Firle Downs. The smoothness and bareness of this sinuous shape results from centuries of grazing on chalk grassland. Without sheep, the grasslands of the Firle Downs would not exist. Within five miles of this precious landscape are four major towns: Lewes, Newhaven, Peacehaven and Seaford. For these communities the Firle Downs provide the space to roam.



- ⁴ The emptiness of the hill tops have a sense of antiquity and instil a feeling of freedom. Indeed, the view east from Lewes of the Firle Escarpment, seen past Mount Caburn, has entered our national consciousness as the epitome of the South Downs and amongst the most beautiful of all English chalk country. To further explore the character of the Estate’s landscape, the South Downs Landscape Character Assessment is an invaluable reference. This has been written by the National Park to help categorise the features that create local distinctiveness and give the landscape a sense of place.

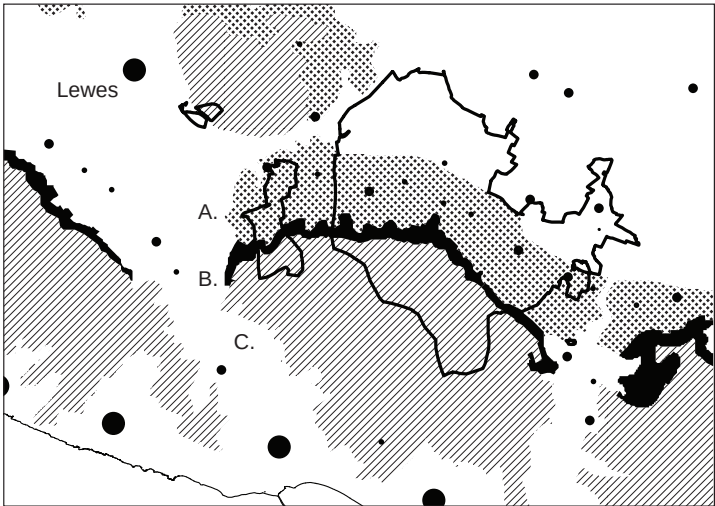
(top) Firle Place and Firle Escarpment



~ *Landscape Character Assessment*

⁵ **T**he South Downs Landscape Character Assessment articulates the qualities of the National Park’s varied landscapes. It is designed to guide the landscape’s future by recording the characteristics, sensitivities, and management considerations of eighteen identified land types. Three transect the Estate area: Scarp Footslopes, Major Scarps and Open Downland. Diagram 1 illustrates where the band of these character areas cross the Estate. The ability to walk a rough line north from Firle, Alciston or Berwick, through the scarp-foot, up the scarp slope and into open downland is one of the Estate’s distinctive qualities.

⁶ **Scarp Footslopes (Ouse to Eastbourne):** This narrow strip of land is located directly below the Firle Escarpment and extends to the clay landscape of the Weald. Its well drained calcareous fine silty soils support a mix of large 20th century arable fields, and small irregular fields of pasture which are the remnants of a late medieval landscape. Tree-lined hedgerows connect these fields with woods and copses, streams, ditches and field ponds. A network of historic lanes and ancient bostal tracks link the late-Saxon arrangement of villages and farms, and grant extensive public rights of way across the scarp footslopes.



(top) Diagram 1
Landscape Characters
A. Scarp Footslopes
B. Downs Scarp
C. Open Downs



⁷ **Downs Scarp:** The striking chalk escarpment forms the north face of the Firle Downs. Its distinctive concave-convex slope profile is indented by ‘coombes’ formed by post-glacial stream erosion, marked by sunken lanes and sheep tracks, and incised with small chalk pits. The steep landscape is covered with an extensive grass sward, designated as an SSSI, which supports a rare chalk plant species, birds and invertebrates. This habitat is bolstered by hanger woodland and areas of scrub which extend the scarp’s ecological diversity. A characteristic tree belt marks the transition to the scarp-foot which was historically planted and managed as a source of fuel and fencing.

⁸ **Open Downs:** This area comprises a swath of open upland landscape on the south facing dip slope of the South Downs. The consistent physical qualities of its chalk geology has created a gently undulating series of ridges and dry valleys that descend from the escarpment to the sea. The legacy of contemporary farming is widely apparent with a distinctive pattern of large straight sided, irregular 20th-century fields which form a mix of arable and permanent pasture, bounded by post and wire fencing. The sense of scale in the landscape, and the expanse of open skies, is vast. There is a conspicuous feeling of remoteness and tranquillity in the hidden dry valleys and an awareness of historical continuity evoked by prehistoric earthworks.

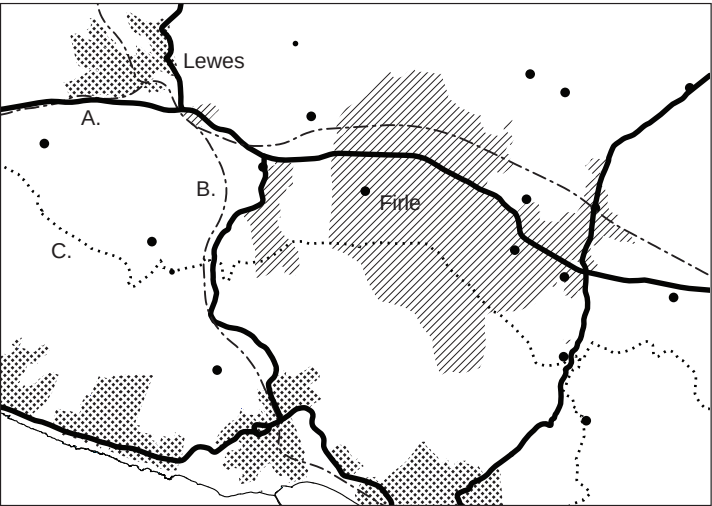


~ *Local Infrastructure*

⁹ **T**he valley floor between the slopes of Mount Caburn and the Firle Downs has historically been one of the key passes for inland movement across Sussex. Transport east of Lewes until the early 19th century would have run through Firle and along the Old Coach Road towards Alfriston or Eastbourne. In 1820 this medieval way was replaced with a more direct line north of Firle that roughly remains the route taken by the contemporary A27 trunk road which bisects the Estate.

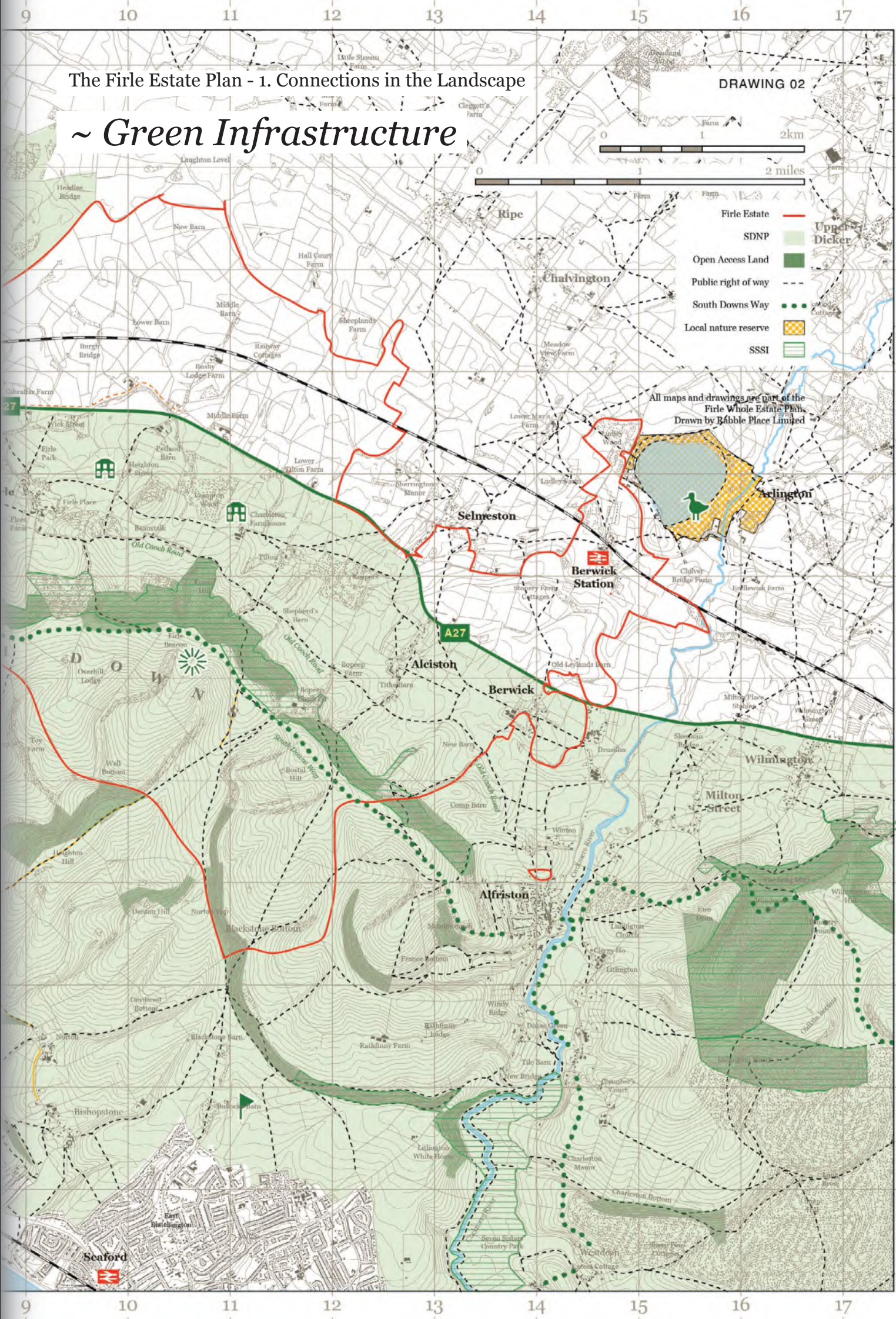
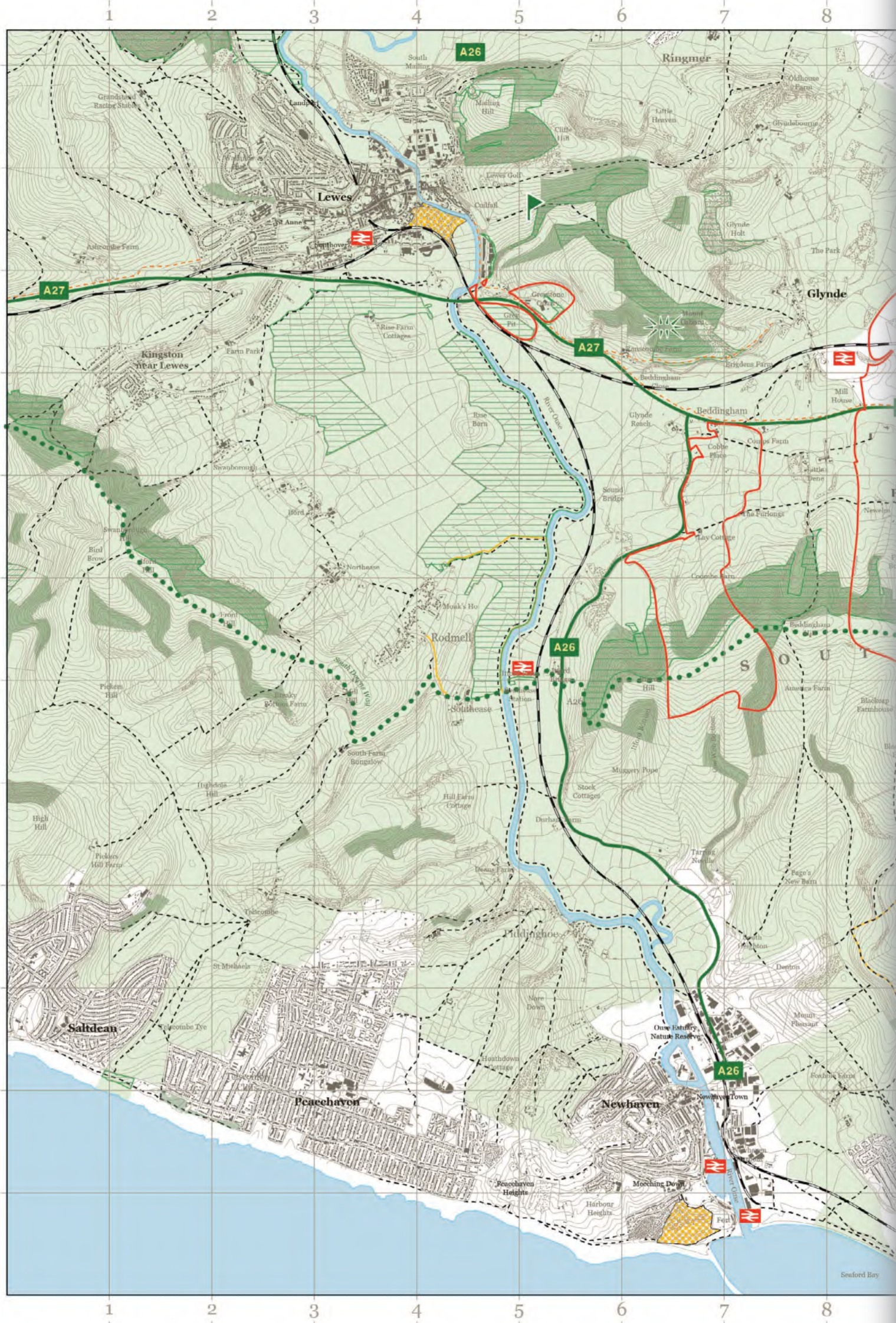
¹⁰ Lewes is the County Town of East Sussex and is the only town to lie in the heart of the Downs. Trains from London to Eastbourne stop at Lewes, Glynde and Berwick, providing three direct rail connections to the Estate. The A27 to the east of Lewes links each of the Estate villages and farms, and Firle Bostal and Bo-peep Bostal provide access to the top of the Firle Downs.

¹¹ Local buses provide a limited but valuable service across the Estate. The 125 between Lewes and Eastbourne stops on weekdays at Firle, Selmeston and Berwick. On Saturdays this service is operated by the volunteer run Cuckmere Community Bus Service. Parts of the Estate are connected by the ancient route of the Old Coach Road and a new multi-use path laid in 2023 running alongside the A27 that extends east to Polegate, supporting pedestrian, equestrian and cycle use with dedicated crossings



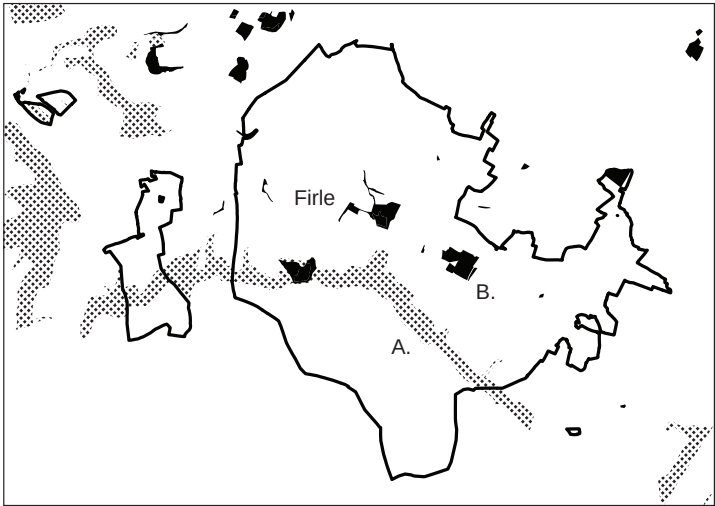
¹² Lewes, Firle and Alfriston are further linked by a network of footpaths which branch up to the South Downs Way. This route follows the original 100 mile ridgeway track along the crest of the Downs to Winchester. The South Downs Way along the Firle Downs runs parallel to a continuous belt of open access land along the scarp slope from the Ouse Valley to Alfriston where there is the ‘right to roam’. Drawing 02 overleaf illustrates this web of infrastructure, showing how the landscape is connected, revealing the extent of open access land and demonstrating the scale and quality of rights of way across the Estate area.

(top) Diagram 2
A. A27
B. Railway
C. South Downs Way
(left) Dusk view to Lewes



~ *Habitats on the Estate*

¹³ **T**he sense of timelessness found on the Firle Downs can be deceptive. This landscape has continuously evolved in response to changing human needs. There are few truly natural habitats in the UK and most specialised plant and animal species are dependant on sensitive management and conservation. Across the Estate, generations of farm and woodland management have created semi-natural corridors which link designated areas of conservation and connect habitats. The largest natural corridor is 192 ha of Calcareous, or chalkland, grass on the Firle Escarpment designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1985. This is a nationally rare habitat - rich in plant species and bordered by plantations of mature beech, ash, sycamore, hazel and hawthorn.



¹⁴ **Chalk Grasslands:** The herb and flower rich sward on the Firle Escarpment has been dependant on grazing by sheep both in its initiation and continued existence. From the late Saxons until the last war, the eastern part of the South Downs were maintained as a vast open sheepwalk, creating a landscape with a beauty matched by its ecological value. The Firle Escarpment is a remnant of this landscape. Centuries of grazing has produced a fine short turf harbouring more species of wild plants than any other habitat in Britain. The density of flowering plants and herbs make the grassland highly coloured and scented, attracting a distinctive population of birds, butterflies and insects.

(top) Diagram 3
A. SSSI
B. Ancient woodland
(right) The Old Coach Road in spring



¹⁵ Fragrant ancient chalk turf is now mostly confined to the north escarpment. To the south of the ridge gradients on the dip slope are gentler, and the grasslands here are of relatively recent origin. The antiquity of grassland alone does not ensure its health. Different species of flora and fauna have opposing grazing requirements and preventing tor grasses and scrub from dominating chalk grassland is an ongoing and difficult task.

¹⁶ **Woodlands:** There are 330 acres of woodland on the Estate, which were undervalued as a habitat and as a source of fuel and income. Approximately five percent of the Estate is wooded which is below the 2021 UK average of 13, the English average of 10 and the Sussex average of 18. Woods are categorised using post 1600 maps to assess whether they are ancient or recent.

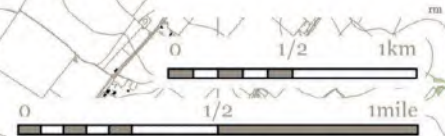
Woods which have been cleared and re-planted, or established as new plantations are defined as secondary woodlands. The biodiversity of recent or secondary categories tends to be less rich than ancient woodland.

¹⁷ Diagram three and the drawing overleaf illustrates the fragmented pattern of the woods. There are four blocks of ancient woodland: Compton Wood to the north-west of Charleston, Tilton Wood to the east of Charleston, Firle Plantation south of Firle, and Ludlay Coppice north of Berwick Station. These woods historically would have been coppiced or used as woodland pasture. Both these old systems felled or pollarded trees to ensure regular new growth which opened the tree canopy to light.

The Firle Estate Plan - 1. Connections in the Landscape

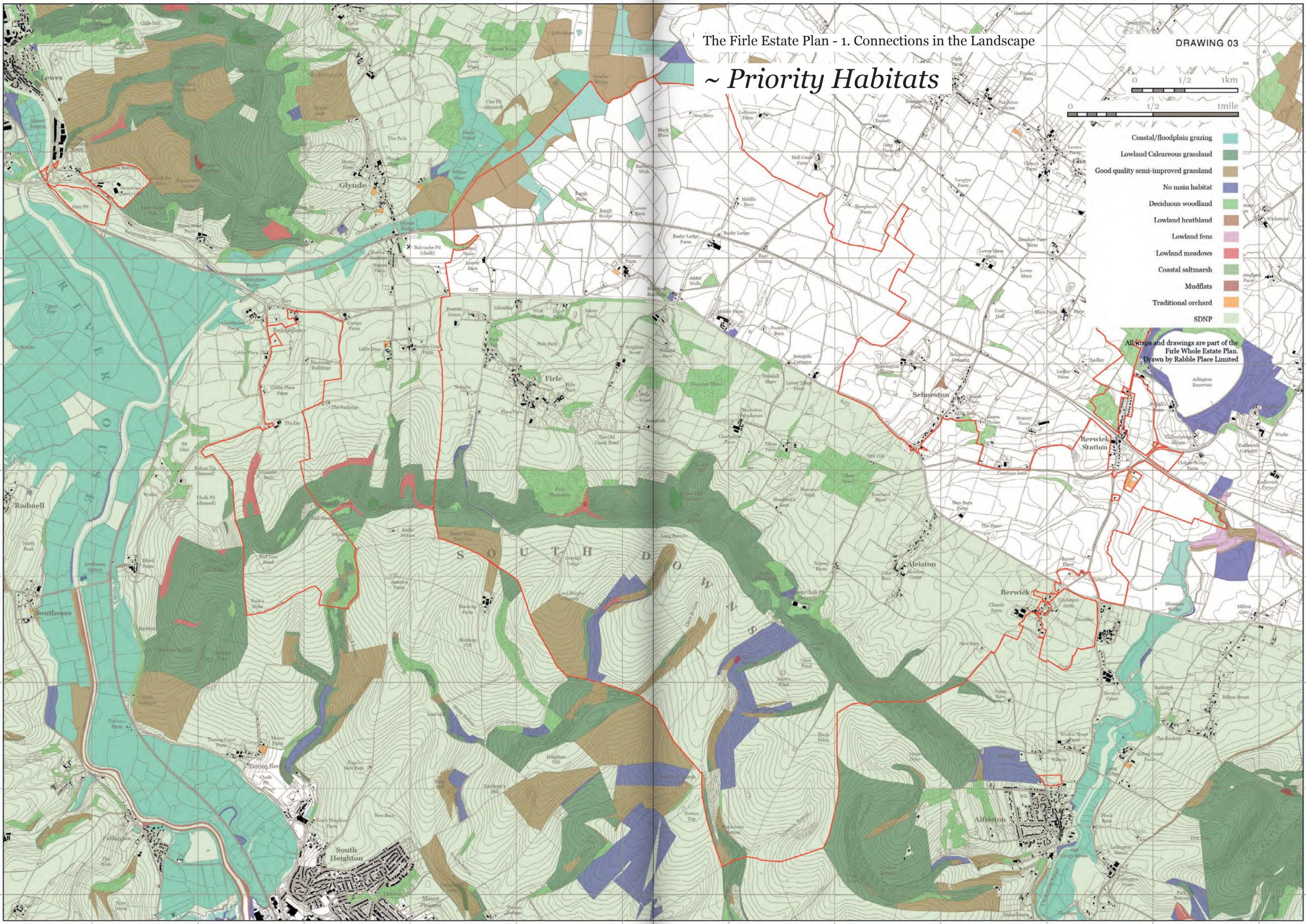
DRAWING 03

~ *Priority Habitats*



- Coastal/floodplain grazing
- Lowland Calcareous grassland
- Good quality semi-improved grassland
- No main habitat
- Deciduous woodland
- Lowland heathland
- Lowland fens
- Lowland meadows
- Coastal saltmarsh
- Mudflats
- Traditional orchard
- SDNP

All maps and drawings are part of the
Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



~ Habitats on the Estate

¹⁸ Today the patchwork of woodland, well-wooded lanes and streams, parkland and hedges define old routes through the scarpfoot landscape. The Estate’s woods require management to maintain a diversity of structure – activity that has been incentivised by the recent demand for local woodchip to fuel the 400kw biomass boiler installed in 2016 to heat Firle Place. This cycle of cutting generates a range of density from open glades to close old growth ancient woodland which in turn creates habitats with a diversity of threatened species, including woodland butterflies, vascular plants, orchids, mosses and liverwort, lichens, fungi, bats, beetles, molluscs, breeding birds and deer.



¹⁹ The Estate’s woodlands are facing an ecological shock. As successive generations of mature elms have succumbed to Dutch elm disease (40 in Alciston parish alone in 2016), the arrival of the fungus Chalara Fraxinea is killing large numbers of native ash trees. Ash is the dominant tree on the Estate. Late to leaf in the spring and one of the first to shed its leaves in the autumn, ash trees let light down to the woodland floor leading to better ground flora. After the 1987 Great Storm, ash seedlings were quick to colonise the gaps left in many woodlands.

²⁰ Farmland and Wetlands: Grassland and woodland are large landscape habitats set amongst local farmland. Agri-environment schemes have been adopted by the Estate to improve the habitats of the wider countryside. The landscape and ecosystems of the scarpfoot are dependant on hedgerows, field corners, rough pasture, rough banks, buffer strips alongside watercourses, game cover crops, winter stubble, ditches and small woodlands.

²¹ A final key habitat, connected, yet outside the Estate, is the river valleys and wetlands of the river Ouse and Cuckmere. Both rivers rise well to the north, draining large areas of the Weald. Within the National Park, chalk groundwater springs discharge clean, hard water into ditches on the floodplains. These historic pastures and grazing marshes support a diversity of plants and a rich mollusc fauna. Frequent flooding in the past attracted large numbers of wintering wildfowl. More intensive management and improved drainage has resulted in a drop in the numbers of wintering birds. As a result, much of the floodplain’s ecological interest is restricted to the ditches. In the rivers, sea trout run up the Ouse to the Bevern stream at Barcombe and the estuary of the Cuckmere River is one of the least developed and most natural in southern Britain.

(top) Old Coach Road in early summer
(right) A pair of Marbled White butterflies on the Firle Escarpment



~ Challenges

Challenges

The Firle Downs have a special cultural resonance and are a significant feature of the region’s identity. This environment carries multiple high expectations and complex ecological, management and developmental demands on its natural capital.

The conservation of the Estate’s habitats as a better integrated whole requires coordination information sharing, clear goals and commercial return. The landscape is shaped by a series of management regimes led by individual tenants. The Estate works to facilitate the concurrent environmental regeneration of chalk grassland habitats and the control of scrub invasion, management of deciduous woodland, new woodland planting, and the continuation of a mixed farming system.

The A27 suffers congestion. Parking in the villages and on the Downs is limited.

It is highly probable that the 21st century will see more demand for leisure and the Firle Downs will naturally become more valuable as a source of leisure, pleasure and wellbeing. A balance will need to be found to look after the special character of the Downs: the key features of chalk grassland, ancient trackways and the sense of remoteness and tranquillity.



(top) New sign at Firle Beacon car park with footpaths mapped and information explaining conservation grazing

Strengths

The Estate’s landscape has been formed by many different peoples through history. Their influence remains as an imprint on the landscape – stretching back to pre-historic man and the Romano-British.

Parts of the Estate are much older than is at first apparent. There is still a Saxon character to the landscape: the small parish churches, rustic working farms and bucolic villages with outlying farmsteads are pre-Norman arrangements.

The Firle Escarpment and the open Downs remained an expansive and open sheepwalk until after the Second World War. A belt of this old chalk grassland survives and would not exist without sheep. Their constant grazing keeps scrub at bay with a competitive biodiversity and has done for thousands of years.

The fertile soils of the scarp footslopes have long been an advantageous site to live and farm. This area of the Estate is today formed of a piecemeal pattern of Georgian enclosure and modern fields arranged to cultivate the most productive soils.

The Estate’s historic character is defined by pockets and strips of old and newer landscapes. Earlier landscapes, in general, have greater ecological stability. The areas of historic fields patterns that run across the Estate have therefore formed stable habitats with an invaluable continuity and connectivity

2. ~Continuity and Change in the Landscape

Understanding the historic evolution of the Estate’s landscape is vital: the richest wildlife habitats are those which have the longest history of land use continuity.

¹ The aim of this chapter is to explain the evolution of the Estate’s historic landscape character through a concise history and series of maps. An understanding of the landscape’s antiquity provides a guide for agri-environment work, helps to model where woodland restoration and new planting might take place and ensures the historic legibility of key patterns in the landscape are maintained. This information is useful for high level planning, allowing the Estate to demonstrate how dynamic the landscape is, how it has changed, and the processes of that change.

² The age of the Estate’s landscape is varied. There is a pattern to this variation which reflects underlying geology, local topography and the economic necessity of each historical period. The essential shape of the Estate’s historic landscape character is defined by a belt of early and late enclosed fields, developed in phases in the 15th to 17th and 18th to 19th centuries, that constitutes the majority of the landscape between Firle, Alciston and Berwick. Surrounding this post-medieval landscape cluster early modern, 1800-1913, and more recent field patterns. These relatively contemporary landscapes extend onto the top of the Downs where open grasslands which originated in the Early Middle Ages were replaced in the 1950s with large 20th century fields. Between these Tudor, Georgian and Modern field patterns runs the much older early medieval Firle Escarpment which has changed little in a millennia, harbouring scores of prehistoric monuments and earthworks.



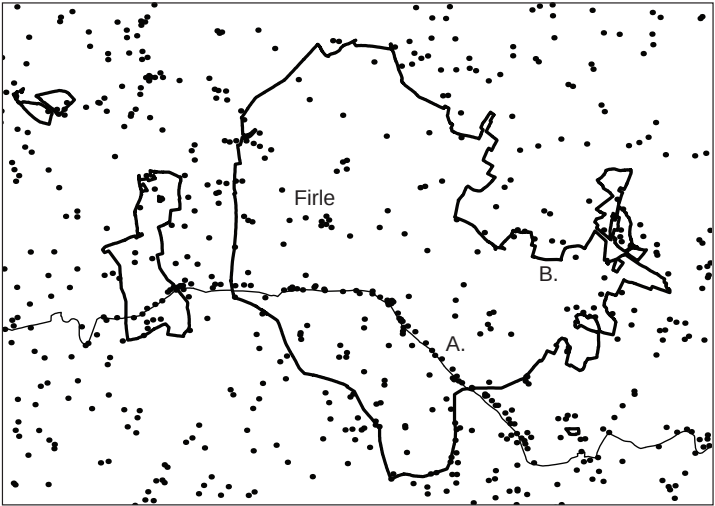
(top) Shepherds Barn and fold yard before conversion to a foraging school by the Estate

~ *The Prehistoric to Middle Ages Landscape*

3 **I**nter-glacial human life on the Downs started in the 50th century BC but it was not until the retreat of tundra-like conditions 12,000 years ago that a continuous story of human settlement began. Very little remains of these people from the Neolithic or New Stone Age except high-quality polished flint tools which have been found at Windover Hill. During the Bronze Age (3,000-500 BC) woodland clearance and arable and sheep farming spread across the Downs. The prominent burial mounds of these settlements are ubiquitous along the crest of the Firle Escarpment. Diagram 4 illustrates how between Firle Beacon and Alfriston there are upwards of fifty round barrows on top of the Downs.

4 Marks of settlement in the Prehistoric and succeeding Romano-British period are distinct as undisturbed chalk is naturally smooth. Any break or departure from flowing contours is therefore the result of human interference. Fields and ancient routes can also be seen and traced as arable farming on the Downs washed top soil down hill. This action over many seasons and centuries, created banks called 'lynchets'. Drawing 04 uses the Sussex Historic Environment Record data to indicate the location of lynchets which gives a picture of the extensive ancient agricultural economy on the Firle Downs.

5 Several centuries after the invasions of the South Saxons, the ancient downland valley settlements of the Celts and Romano-Britons were abandoned and farms re-established in villages at the scarpfoot.

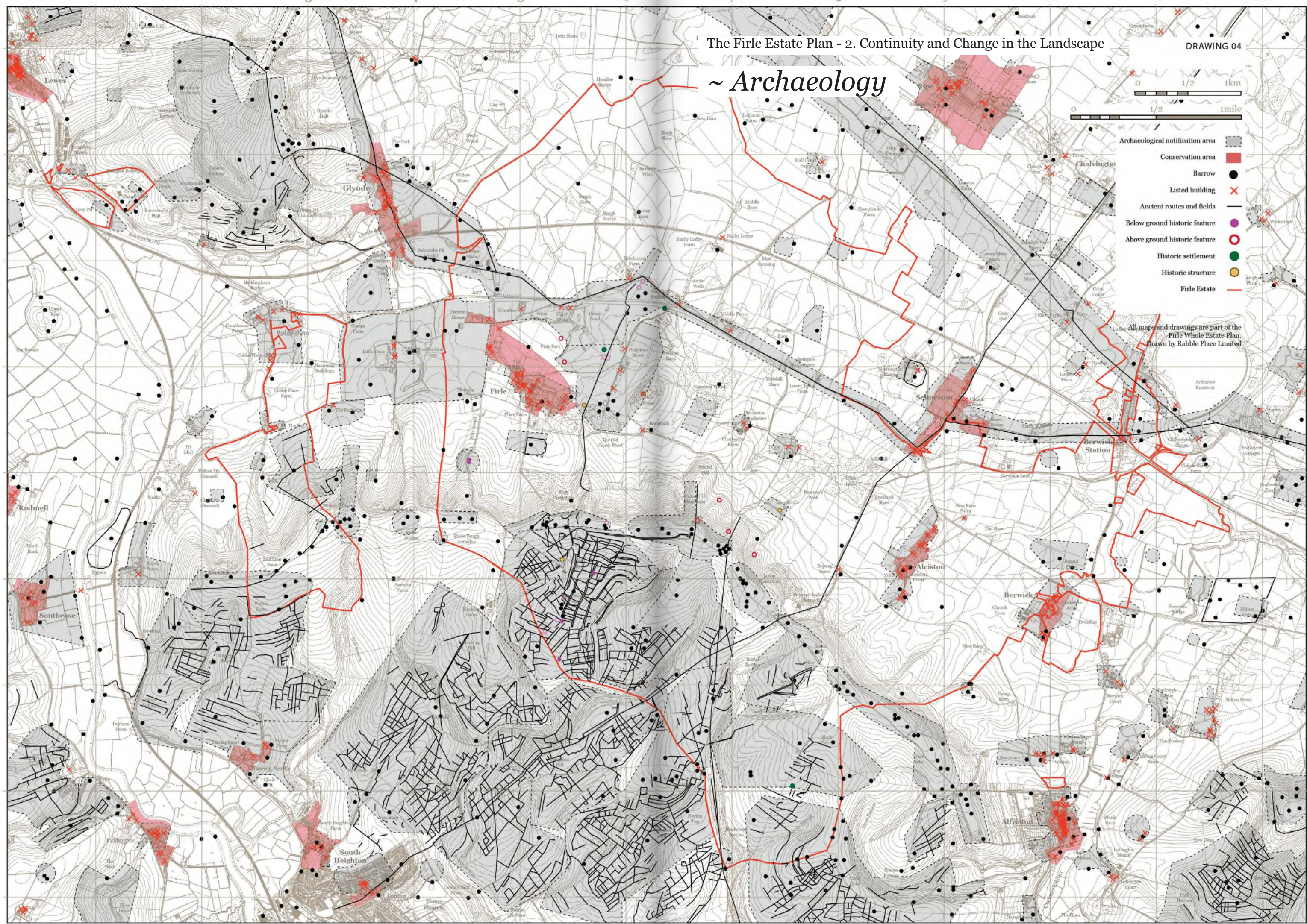


Early medieval records paint a picture of this new landscape as it emerged from the Middle Ages. It is a landscape of villages and farms shaped by peasants working both common land and manorial demesnes. Common fields were organised around the 'tithing' which required a distribution of villages with farmsteads interspersed between them. This can still be seen today: early medieval Alciston was linked to a subsidiary set of common fields at Tilton. Similarly, Firle had three outlying common systems at Charleston, Compton and Heighton.

(top) Diagram 4
A. South Downs Way
B. Estate boundary
Dots are points
of archaeological
significance
(right) Photo of barrows



~ Archaeology

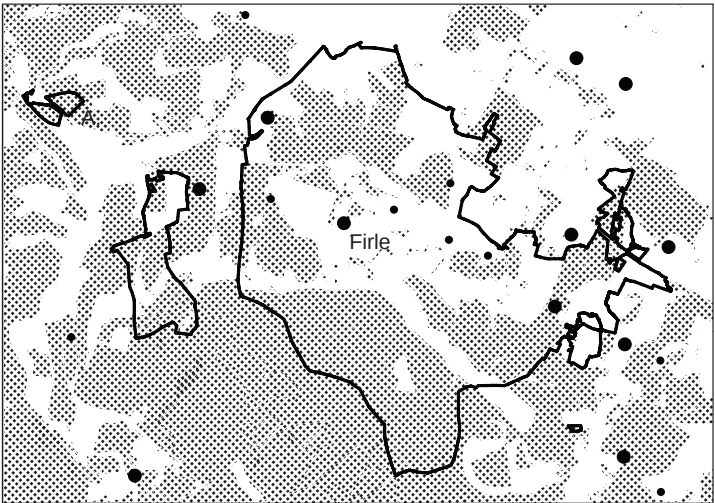




~ *The Medieval to Stuart Landscape*

⁶ Intensive sheep-and-wheat farming in the Eastern Downs was big business. The best prices for wool were charged by the monks of Battle Abbey at their manor of Alciston, which created a landscape of serious power and purpose. Through the middle ages from the 12th to the 16th centuries peasants and their lords continued the practice of Saxon sheep-and-wheat farming based around the sheep-fold. At night, shepherds would drive the lord’s flock and the common flock off the Downs. Both flocks were then ‘folded’ or fenced into arable fields with temporary wattle hurdles. This was the time-honoured Sussex fertilisation system which drove an efficient and economically organised medieval landscape.

⁷ The growth of agricultural skill occurred against the backdrop of the Black Death. Deserted and shrunken villages are the most permanent memorials of severe population decrease. Berwick today is only a fragment of a large medieval village. A deserted medieval settlement has been identified at Tilton Farm and Charleston Farm is considered to be a shrunken medieval farmstead. A deserted medieval hamlet named ‘Condone’ by the Domesday Survey is believed to be located within Compton Wood and evidence also points to the medieval shrinkage of Alciston.



⁸ In the 16th and 17th centuries the Firle Estate emerged from the medieval to the early modern world. Feudal ties were relinquished, the population increased and grain prices and raw wool exports generated great wealth for the Estate. By the late 18th century sheep-and-wheat farming on the South Downs was in its heyday and Firle was at the very centre. This productivity was driven by enclosure which discharged the last remaining small farmers and reorganised the remains of the common-field system.

(top) Diagram 5
Hatches are modern
fields and landforms
made post 1800
(left) Tree belt along the
bottom of the traditional
sheepwalk

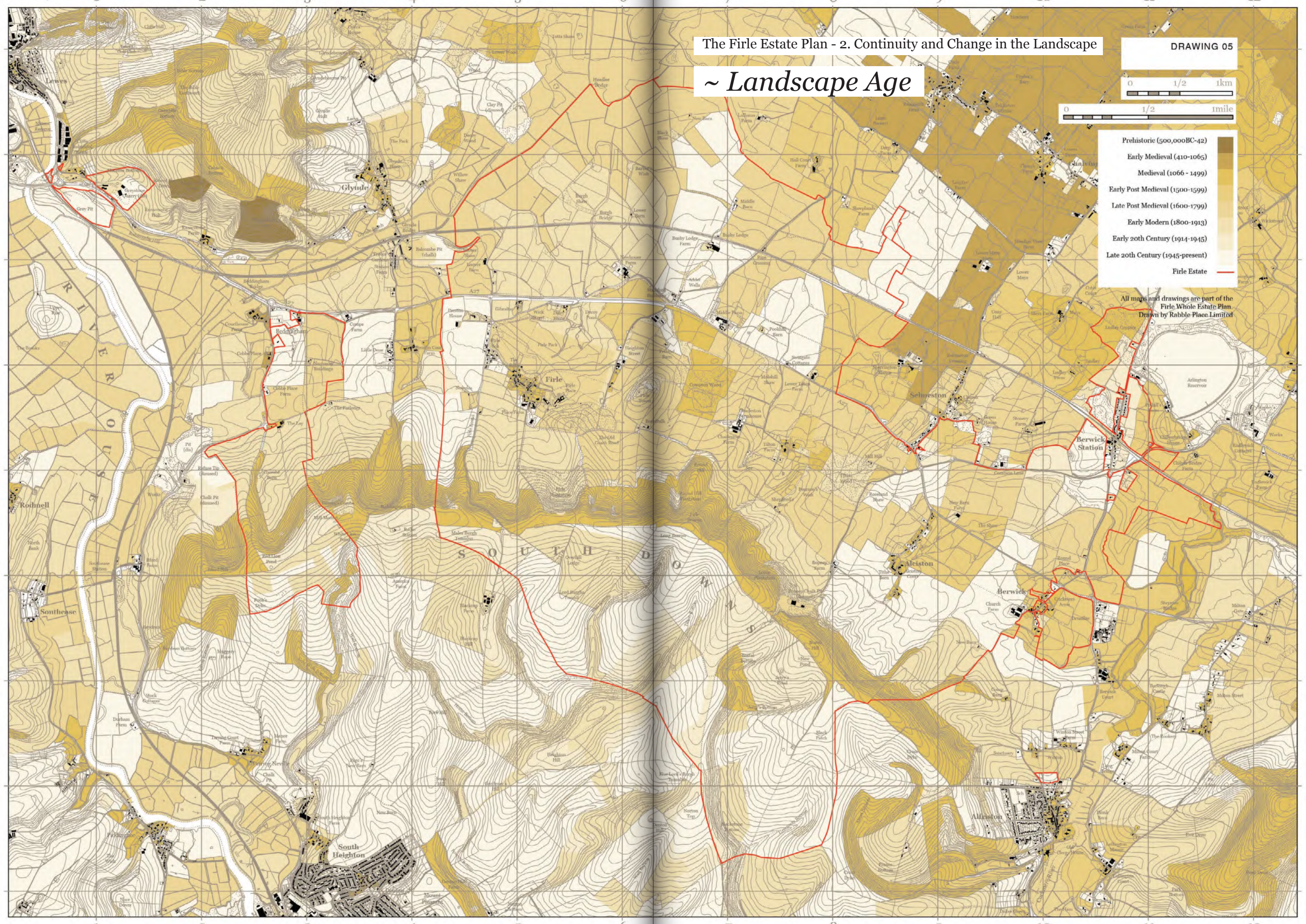
~ Landscape Age

0 1/2 1km

0 1/2 1mile

- Prehistoric (500,000BC-42)
- Early Medieval (410-1065)
- Medieval (1066 - 1499)
- Early Post Medieval (1500-1599)
- Late Post Medieval (1600-1799)
- Early Modern (1800-1913)
- Early 20th Century (1914-1945)
- Late 20th Century (1945-present)

All maps and drawings are part of the Firle Whole Estate Plan
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



~ *The Georgian to Modern Landscape*

⁹ In the austere post WW2 period the Firle Downs were ploughed for low cost corn. Lost in this imperative task was the recognition of the ancient downland turf as an amenity and ecological treasure.

¹⁰ The prosperity and enterprise of Georgian landowners across the Eastern Downs placed downland farmers in the vanguard of the agricultural practice. One of the most important changes was the improvement in Glynde of the indigenous Southdown breed of sheep from the 1780s. In 1813, Rev. Arthur Young estimated that 150,000 were kept on the Eastern Downs between Steyning and Eastbourne. The immense numbers of sheep outstripped the forage provided by the fold and by the late 19th century sheep folding started to die out. After the prosperous century between 1780 and 1880 came a period of acute difficulty with falling prices for corn and wool which bottomed in the depression of the 1930s. More profitable enterprises shifted to include dairying and beef, yet the core of the sheepwalk remained untouched until 1939.

¹¹ Immediately after the declaration of war much of the Eastern Downs were ploughed up. The land around Firle was requisitioned as a military training ground. Post war the success of arable cultivation on the high downland led to demands that it should continue. Through the 1950s ancient downland and scrub were ploughed for arable production. As economic pressures on farmers to increase efficiency became more insistent so the conflict between contemporary agriculture and conservation intensified.

¹² More recent policies such as the South Downs Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme, launched in 1987, aimed to revert large areas of arable back to chalk grassland. Yet subsequent monitoring showed that although successful in terms of restoring some of the old character of the Downs, the scheme has not delivered the enhancement and re-creation of past levels of biodiversity. The contemporary strategies to continue productive farming in tandem with conservation grazing and habitat creation are expanded in Chapter Three.

¹³ This short history of the Estate’s landscape shows that it has never been a permanent or unchanging place but it does have an indomitable character that has inspired extraordinary resourcefulness. The historic landscape character and archaeological data presented demonstrates the ‘time-depth’ of the present landscape. From these maps it is possible to assess the degree of connectivity or fragmentation of semi-natural habitats in the Estate landscape. The basis of this premise is that greater continuity of land use processes lead to greater stability within ecological habitats. This crux of the Estate’s research has been to illustrate the interconnectivity of its pre-19th century landscapes. Looking forward, this knowledge highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the landscape’s stability and allows the consideration of future practice with reference to the environment’s past.

(right) Spring sunset on the Old Coach Road facing towards The Tower



~ Challenges

Challenges

Along the top of the Firle Escarpment more than 50 barrows follow the ridge-line. These monuments and earthworks are enduring landmarks and monuments. The South Downs Way runs amongst the barrows giving a sense of age-old continuity to this section of the trail.

Across the Estate, subtle features of the historic landscape are vulnerable to change. The local pattern of old hedgerows, tracks, ancient field systems, rough sheep paths on the open scarps and bostal routes are sensitive to intensive use and require conservation.

The Firle Escarpment’s unimproved chalk grassland is exposed to economic changes in livestock farming and requires consistent grazing regimes. Without effective management, undergrazing and encroachment of scrub would both change the appearance of the Downs and the historic balance of its biodiversity.

A series of old routes link the Estate’s pre-19th century landscapes. These ecologically stable areas of landscape are sensitive to unintended trauma: changes in farming practice and subsidy, disease and intensive visitor pressure.



(top) Jim Piper in his greenhouse growing tomatoes as painted by Eric Ravillios 1935

Strengths

Farming on the Estate gives the its appearance and is responsible for its vitality. The distinctive local topography and geology requires a patchwork of mixed farming which supports a diversity of farmland habitats.

The farming Estate is split between let farms, the Gage’s in-hand farm and several ancillary tenancies and grazing lettings. The Estate is very proud of the continuity in its farming structure. All the principal farming families arrived on the Estate between 1910 and 1935 and are joint stewards of the farmed landscape.

The Estate is a lively economic area. It acts as an employer, landlord and attraction with direct and indirect benefits. Key local enterprises are directly supported through fair lease terms and support where appropriate to grow and diversify their business.

Wider, indirect, benefits stem from the Estate’s ambitions to support communities. Weight is given to tenants who will play a full social and economic role in the community, and those with children educated at Firle School. Priority is also given to local contractors and the Estate’s staffing requirements are met, wherever possible, from the local area.

3. ~ Working in the Landscape

The proximity between local village streets and farm buildings forges a sense of purpose and vitality characteristic of the Estate’s working nature.

- ¹ Farming on the Estate is important because the shape of the landscape and the nature of local produce are inseparably linked to farming methods, land management practices and the agenda of agricultural subsidies. The Estate is farmed by several principal let farms with several ancillary tenancies and grazing lettings. The Estate aims to balance food production and environmental management. The two are interdependent.
- ² Farms across the Estate are managed through Environmental Stewardship and Countryside Stewardship schemes, and farmed independently through agricultural holding agreements.
- ³ The organisation of principal farms, ancillary tenancies and grazing lettings are not perceived as indepedent businesses working in isolation. Rather, the tenant farmers are the backbone of the Estate and are considered together as an affiliated group with common interests and heritage. It is noteworthy how stable the Estate’s tenancies have been, often reaching back three or four generations. This affiliation has defined the fabric of the Estate’s rural communities where they have a substantial input. The Estate puts considerable faith in its farmers to deliver its farming objectives.



- ⁴ The distribution of stewardship targets includes a belt designated ‘restoration of species-rich grassland’ along Firle Escarpment. Adjacent areas fall into a pattern of ‘mixed stocking on grassland’, arable fields with ‘florally enhanced margins’ and perimeters of ‘arable reversion by natural regeneration’.
- ⁵ The scope of the designations demonstrate the scale of the Estate’s multiple priorities: conserving the chalk grassland along the Firle Escarpment, striking a balance of productivity, improving soil restoration and targeting ground nesting and farmland birds.

(top) Proximity: Church House and Place Farm

~ *Farming the Firle Estate*

⁶ **Conserving Chalk Grassland:** this principal downland habitat exists only fragmentally across the National Park. A significant challenge is the growth of tor-grass. Sheep are selective feeders and avoid tough fibrous grasses and scrub seedlings. Uneaten grass builds into an unpalatable thatch of tussocks. This cycle has developed over the last thirty years as numbers of cattle, heavy enough to break down tor-grass, have reduced.

⁷ The Estate’s objectives are first to reduce the dominance of tor-grass with hard grazing and second to prevent spread of tor-grass with continued management. At the start of the process Exmoor ponies counter tor-grass quickly. This is not a long term solution, and the Estate’s graziers follow with high densities of sheep and areas of cattle. A herd of Dexter cattle have been purchased for this purpose. Meeting the second objective in the long term will need careful consideration of grazing regimes and ecological priorities.

⁸ **A Balance of Productivity:** preserving old landscape patterns requires a mixed farming system that is productive. On areas of low productivity, such as the escarpment, the uncertain viability of livestock is a challenge. The Estate’s plan is to support traditional practice, with soils fed through manures and the rotation of animals, and contemporary technology. The better deployment of agricultural technology will allow Firle’s farms to make decisions on a field-by-field basis each year using finely targeted inputs across a more dynamic arable patchwork.



⁹ **Soil Restoration:** the Estate has a considerable variety of soil types in a relatively small area. Soil is a vital and finite resource and requires stringent management to avoid degradation. The cropped areas of the Downs are farmed as a mixed arable and grass rotation with organic matter fertilisers and manures from sheep grazed over the winter on stubble turnips. On the Weald and scarpfoot, the clays traditionally have had a higher organic matter content than the hill and grass ley rotations are encouraged to boost soil microbial activity. For both areas, this is a traditional mixed farming approach adopted to enhance and improve soil quality.

¹⁰ **Targeting Farmland Birds:** in the early 2000s the Estate was encouraged to revert large areas of the Downs from arable to grass to improve biodiversity. Monitoring has shown that on the Firle Escarpment this strategy, in isolation, was not successful. As a result the Firle Farm’s Stewardship Scheme has been designed to deliver a better mix of farmland and grassland habitats. The scheme uses a combination of grass buffers along the Firle escarpment SSSI, wide field margins ecologically enhanced with wild seed strips, winter stubbles that leave seeds in the ground and low input crops with bare patches and weeds. The amalgamation of these designed farmland habitats create an appropriate and supportive environment for insects, invertebrates and birds.

(top and right) Feeding during April lambing in Firle Park

~ *Future Farming*

¹¹ **W**ithin the foreseeable future the context of agricultural policy and the economy is particularly uncertain. The major strengths and weaknesses for farming however are clear: the Estate does not have highly productive land but does have highly attractive landscapes, good environmental features and tourism. To make full use of these assets, a balance of diversification and the consideration of new technology and land uses is prescient.

¹² **Viticulture:** vines are part of the recent Sussex landscape and the region is producing some of the best English sparkling wines. There are fields in Firle Farms with ideal south-facing slopes and free-draining chalk loam and flint soils. The proximity to the sea minimises risk of spring frosts and the Downs offer shelter from coastal winds. Cool-climate viticulture is challenging, yet the Estate’s microclimates are likely to be a viable environment for growing grapes and in turn producing a Firle wine.

¹³ **Farm Buildings:** there are eighteen farmyards on the Estate which include a variety of traditional and modern buildings. Many are beyond the end of their useful life, either because they are too small to accept modern agricultural machinery or farming methods, are close to the end of their intended or practical lifespan, in the wrong place, or in need of major restoration. It follows that both the distribution of replacement new buildings and the conversion of traditional agricultural buildings to create broader, diversified, income should be considered.

¹⁴ **Woodland:** in the past, commercial management of the Estate’s woods was deemed unviable and as a consequence several core woodlands were not managed. Now, the Estate’s biomass boiler has provided considerable demand for timber and woodland management is again a priority. The Estate is re-planting existing woods and spinneys and will look to plant woods as extensions of existing habitats and on areas of poor agricultural land.

¹⁵ **Biodiversity:** agricultural technology has the potential to develop precision farming with a targeted use of inputs including agrochemicals. A recalibration of spraying techniques and new methods of data collection should allow a reduction in artificial inputs. The Estate is very keen to support biodiversity as good for farming and good for nature recovery.

¹⁶ **Summary:** the Estate’s future farming scenario has two ambitions. First, the best traditional mixed farming methods will be supported with appropriate technology to minimise agrochemical inputs. Second, the ongoing management of the Firle Escarpment will revive and then maintain the old chalk grassland. On the periphery of both these core aims, new methods and practices will be tested. In order to farm in this manner, the Estate will need to increase its income derived through diversification. It is also of equal importance to work with each farming tenant to examine where investments are needed to make sure there is the infrastructure for effective and viable farming well into the future.



(top) Open Access Land on the Firle Escarpment





~ *Business on the Estate*

¹⁷ **T**he combination of farming and rural business across the Estate generates a distinct feeling of industriousness. Through history, Firle has always been a productive working landscape with agriculture being the focus of commerce and employment. The more recent provision of commercial business space for varying uses and at different scales has helped to redress the decline of agricultural employment and activity.

¹⁸ Today employment in the countryside is more nuanced and comprises a greater range and scales of businesses across numerous sectors. To ensure a working countryside, opportunities for local work must exist across a range of activities for different socioeconomic groups. As well as employment, commercial activity in the countryside supports economic growth providing new and sustainable uses for former agricultural buildings. Commercial lettings are fundamental to the Estate’s ongoing sustainability and similarly the Estate is an important client for local businesses providing valuable contracts supporting related local employment opportunities.

¹⁹ In commercial terms the Estate comprises an umbrella of different businesses and activities. The core of its own trading businesses centre around Firle Place helping to support these culturally significant buildings. Its farming and tourism activity spreads its business trading activity across its wider landholding. It follows that the Estate recognises the importance and strength of business partnerships large and small.



²⁰ Partnerships and connections are important to attract the new investment and talent that is key to delivering successful wide ranging business activities and economic growth and employment. Significantly, the Estate’s stable outlook allows it, as a business, to consider long term effects in its strategic planning and decision making on commercial, environmental and social matters.

(left and top) Firle Estate holiday let with interior photographed by Paul Whitbread showing Estate wallpaper



(top) Burning Sky
Brewery at their Place
Farm barn conversion
(right) Firle Stores

~ *Village Business*

²¹ **F**irle Stores and The Ram Inn are points of continuity in Firle Village. Daily life in Firle revolves around the Firle Post Office and Stores. Robert and Ami Reece ran the shop from 1985 to 2021, working from the original 200 year old wooden counter, and passing on the tenancy to Tina Lincoln and her family. The Ram Inn is a local institution. When, in 1985, George and Mary Hufflett retired only three families had held the tenancy in 300 years. Today it is run by Hayley Bayes with five bedrooms.

²² The Estate directly employ 15 full-time and as many seasonal posts. This mixed workforce covers a wide range of activities including management and administration, repair maintenance and facilities, sales and marketing, horticulture and security. Indirectly the Estate contracts building trades, agricultural contractors, hospitality and catering - a significant proportion of this spend and indirect employment being in the local economy, often within the immediate Estate area. Whilst direct employment is lower than the historic past, indirect employment connected to Estate activities is significant within the local rural economy.

²³ For over a century Firle has had a serious reputation for attracting and supporting artists as tenants. Many have worked at home or rented studios locally. The breadth of creativity is clear in local contributions to the annual Artwave Festival run by Lewes District Council.



²⁴ This creativity extends to new products: In 2013 Burning Sky brewery made its first craft beer in Firle and has grown to work out of two barns, arranged around a self contained yard, in Place Farm. Converting these barns, and several further outbuildings for storage, has been an ambitious project that the Estate led in phases. They are located in Firle as they want to work in an inspiring place, with a provenance to influence their beer.

²⁵ There are four pubs locally of which the Ram and the Barley Mow are owned by the Estate and tenanted. The Barley Mow is a country pub in Selveston village located next to the A27, with wide views of Firle Beacon, and a permissive path for walks up to the Old Coach Road.





(top and right) Nick Weston teaching a foraging course in Shepherds Barn

~ *Transitory and Remote Business*

²⁶ **Transitory Small Business:** the Estate aims to support a range of business sizes and is keen to help accommodate start-ups. An example of this was the Old Shire House in Firle, converted in 2003. Tenants included an events management company and a branding agency now relocated to another building. Having these companies locally has set a precedent for enterprise – showing that commerce and employment can continue to be a fixture of the rural landscape.

²⁷ **Remote Business:** outside of the villages there are businesses waiting to be discovered. These are places with a close relationship to their environment which they share with visitors.

²⁸ Foraging school Hunter Gather Cook work from a 19th century barn converted by the Estate in 2019. The school run courses in game butchery, foraging and outdoor cookery and source very local ingredients: milk from Charleston, game from the shoot, lamb from Cobbe Place, wine and cider from Middle Farm and herbs and vegetables from the Downs and their yard.

²⁹ The route to Hunter Gather Cook under Firle Beacon takes visitors past Tilton House, the home of the famed early 20th-century economist John Maynard Keynes and his wife Lydia, and Charleston Farmhouse.



³⁰ In 1916 Charleston became the home of Vanessa Bell's family and friends: the Bloomsbury Group. The Estate helped to save the house by transferring it to Charleston Trust which today opens the house annually to upwards of 35,000 visitors. In 2018 work was completed to build an auditorium and café in a converted barn connected to a collections store and gallery. Charleston now has the ability to expand its artistic programme with new facilities yet retains a simple charm and remains next to a working farm.



~ *Bigger Business*

- 31 Local transport connections permit several larger businesses to be able grow in locations that match their requirements. Middle Farm, located next to the A27, which was one of the earlier farm shops in the country. Parts of the farm are open to visit, and the premises has grown to accumulate multiple uses and significant volumes of visitors to Firle.
- 32 Whilst the trend in farming has seen a consolidation of farm operations to fewer farm yards and larger buildings more suited to modern farm machinery, buildings now unsuitable for modern agriculture will continue to provide opportunities on the Estate for rural business:
- 33 Close to Middle Farm, Motorline Engineering share the benefits of good access to the A27. Motorline is a garage and car servicing centre for classic cars. They are a specialist business and work with customers and cars from across the South East and Northern France. The proximity of Motorline’s location on Heighton Street to Lewes, Brighton and Newhaven is therefore key for their customers and for the recruitment of skilled staff and apprentices.
- 34 Futher along the A27, building contractors Cheesmuir Ltd employ a permanent staff of 20 people and have been based since 2005 in offices converted from traditional brick and flint estate barns at Beddingham.



(previous spread)
Shepherds Barn Opening
(top) Michael Light and
employees
(right) Machine Bottom
Pit SSSI



- 35 To the south of Lewes, next to the Southerham Roundabout on the A27, the Estate own Southerham Grey Pit and Machine Bottom Pit. Both sites are disused chalk quarries dug near the river Ouse. In the 1990s the chalk faces of these pits were designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) as the old quarry cuttings are the most complete sequence of Cenomanian chalk in Europe. In this fossilised landscape the Light brothers run a specialist waste recycling and waste management business. They process over 100,000 tonnes of metal every year in Machine Bottom and employ 140 people locally.
- 36 The Grey Pit’s disused working environment will be considered as a place of future rural employment to revitalise the quarry. The site has considerable potential to enhance the landscape of the National Park by restoring it to an appearance appropriate for a post-industrial SSSI near Lewes. The unique atmosphere of the Grey Pit, and its location close to Lewes, gives the chance to create an example of imaginative sustainable development that uses the river frontage and is linked to the Railway Lands Nature Reserve and the Ouse Valley.

~ Challenges

Challenges

The Estate does not have significant amounts of highly productive land but does have highly attractive landscapes, good environmental features that draw visitors. To make full use of these assets a balance of diversification and the consideration of new technology and land uses is crucial.

There are eighteen farmyards on the Estate with a variety of traditional and modern buildings. Many are beyond the end of their useful life. The distribution of replacement buildings to provide effective new infrastructure, and the conversion of traditional agricultural buildings to create broader, diversified, income will need careful consideration.

The key habitat on the Estate is the most species-rich of all British habitats, old chalk grassland. The growth of tor-grass on the Firle Escarpment is therefore a challenge. This dense and dominating grass needs reducing by targeted grazing. Achieving this balance, in a time of uncertain agricultural economics, will need continual collaborative learning to develop commercially viable grazing regimes and balance ecological priorities.

The Estate aims to facilitate a spread of business sizes. This will require developing small spaces to allow start-ups, especially for enterprises and artisans already associated with the Estate, and finding further space to let larger businesses expand and introduce new employment opportunities.



(top) Hayley Bayes, landlady of The Ram Inn with her Jack Russell

Strengths

The Estate is renowned for the beauty of its local villages which are encompassed by conservation areas with numerous listed buildings. The Estate currently manage a significant number of houses including farmhouses, farm buildings, commercial lettings and Firle Place. Approximately half are listed for architectural significance.

For over 500 years Firle Place and Firle village have coexisted with a shared history and culture. Firle Place remains a family seat with an atmosphere of warmth, community and a tangible closeness of history that makes it particularly interesting to visit. This quality helps to define the nature of the house’s commercial activity.

The small downland churches on the Estate bear the trace of hundreds of years of prayer and worship. Today there is a distinct sense of a local progressive parochial heritage and culture. This approach is most evident in the restoration and adaptation projects at Firle and Berwick Churches.

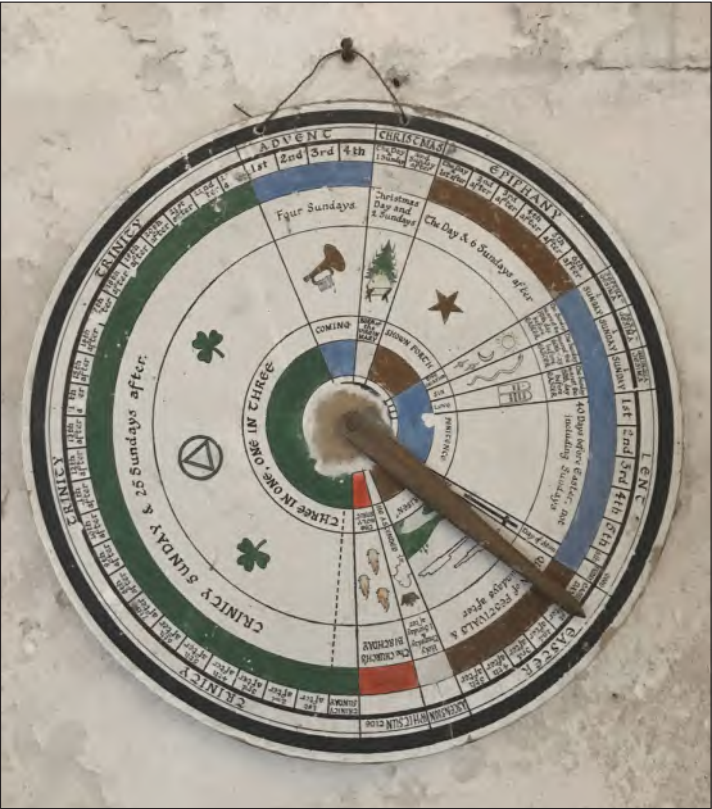
The Estate’s traditional agricultural buildings are richly eloquent of old rural ways of life. They are reminders of a much larger farming culture of shepherds, farmworkers and craftsman and continue to underpin the Estate’s working character and make an essential contribution to the local landscape.

There is quality in the Estate’s landscape, and in the way it has been shaped by craftsman and farmers, that has made it a place of inspiration and creation for generations. This tradition continues today with musicians, craftsmen, artists and writers living, working, exhibiting and performing locally.

4. ~Heritage in the Landscape

There is a sense of a deeply rooted heritage and culture in the landscape of the Estate, found in inherited customs, ideas and places still meaningful today.

- 1 The Estate in the past was a landscape defined by the feudal relationships within it. Today, it is such an interesting and affecting place because there is still the trace of this past order which linked villages and farmland.
- 2 It follows that a landscape is composed of layer upon layer of history. Over time, the accumulation and consolidation of heritage has formed a uniquely rich distribution of old routes, buildings and landforms. This scene has been captured by a succession of accomplished and distinguished visions of the Downs which have gained a permanent place in English literature and art. Historic regular artistic visitors and tenants of the Estate include Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster, Peggy Angus, Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden, Helen Binyon, Percy Horton, Paul Nash and John Piper. This chapter explores the quality of the Estate’s historic culture, appraises the need for conservation and restoration, and charts the influence of heritage on local artistic, architectural, agricultural and spiritual life.

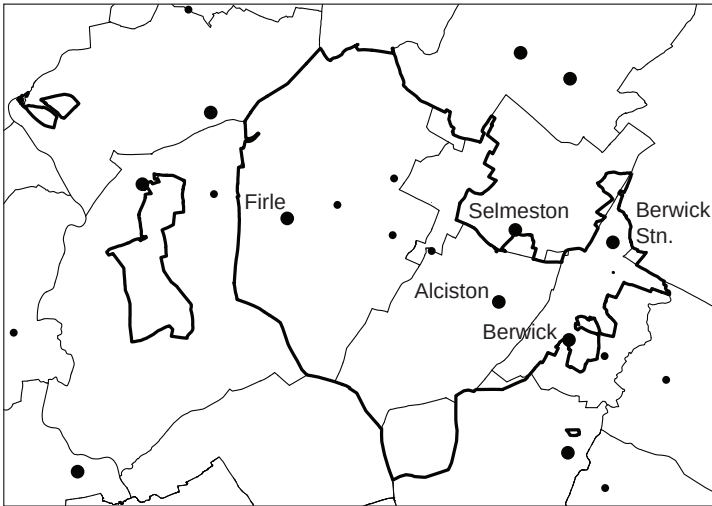


(top) Ecclesiastical calendar that hangs on the wall of Berwick Church

~ The Villages

3 The Estate is renowned for the beauty of its local villages. Essentially, each is a heritage asset in its own right. Firle, Alciston, Berwick and Selmeston are encompassed by Conservation Areas with numerous listed buildings. The Estate manage a portfolio of residential lettings as well as farmhouses, farm cottages, farm buildings, commercial lettings and Firle Place. Around half of these buildings are listed. Many are terraced or semi-detached so the actual number of listed properties is significantly higher. The variety of listed assets is huge: from the vast Tithe Barn at Alciston to the red telephone box outside Firle Village Stores.

4 The ‘sense of place’ particular to each of these villages does not depend on the style or placement of individual buildings. Rather, it is the simplicity of their arrangement, and the manner in which the village streets demonstrate an old working relationship with the landscape that define them. Looking forward, it is prescient to recognise that villages are living, not static, places. Villages are continuously subject to change and planning for the future is a priority. This task rests on twin pillars: first, the sequencing of restoration work to ensure no building - whether listed or not - deteriorates and second, the development of a concept for how to best extend or adapt each village. Understanding the ‘components’ that together produce a village’s character will help guide this process. The following statements and diagrams sketch a simple portrait of each.



(top) Diagram 6
Parish boundaries and
village locations on the
Estate



5 **Firle:** the village is arranged with two areas of houses linked by the village street. The character of this route changes along its length: starting as the wooded Firle Bostal, becoming The Street, and then joining the Old Coach Road. Distinctively, The Street is defined by a series of small junctions that are overlooked by community buildings and amenities. A belt of trees screen and shelter the village. These woods heighten the sense of enclosure created by the closeness of the houses and the series of flint and brick boundary walls. The Street, the Dock, Firle Church and Place Farm are distinguished by boundary walls that range from waist height to two storeys. By accident or design these walls create an intricate architecture of compounds that join the disparate types of buildings, linking Georgian and Victorian houses with groups of vernacular farm buildings.

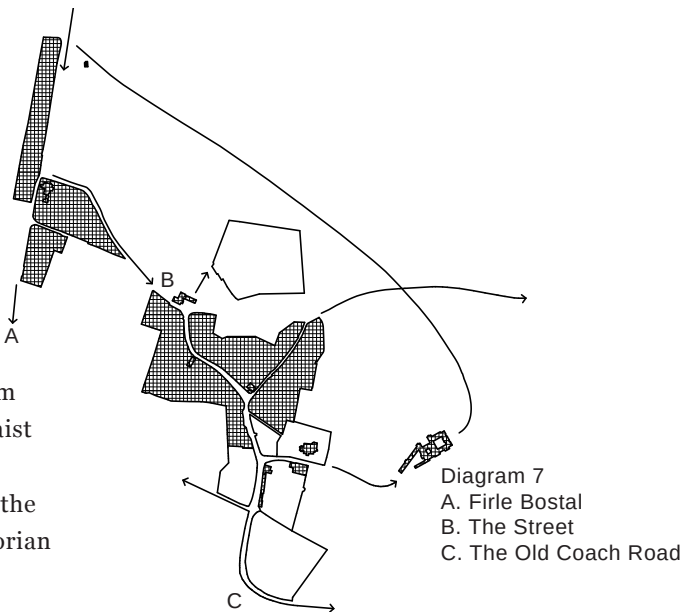
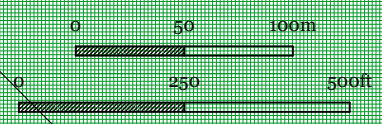


Diagram 7
A. Firle Bostal
B. The Street
C. The Old Coach Road

FIRLE VILLAGE DRAWING



- Area of important value
- ☁ Important tree groups
- Firle Estate
- ☺ Woodland
- Public right of way
- ▨ Listed Buildings
- 1 Firle School
- 2 The Ram Inn
- 3 The Cricket Pavilion
- 4 Firle Village Hall
- 5 Firle Stores/Post Office
- 6 Parish War Memorial
- 7 Firle Church
- 8 Riding School
- 9 Firle Place

All maps and drawings are part of the Firle Whole Estate Plan.
 Drawn by Rabble Place Limited





6

Alciston: the village street at Alciston branches directly off the A27 and rapidly gains a strong rural character as it leads south to the Old Coach Road. Along this route the village street curves around the medieval grouping of Alciston Church and Court Farm. The approach to the church and farm is notably dramatic as the village street is enclosed by hedges, flint walls and tree canopies which stop short of the church entrance to reveal a remarkable panorama from Firle Beacon to Wilmington Hill - with the great hipped roof of the tithe barn and the small church spire in the foreground.

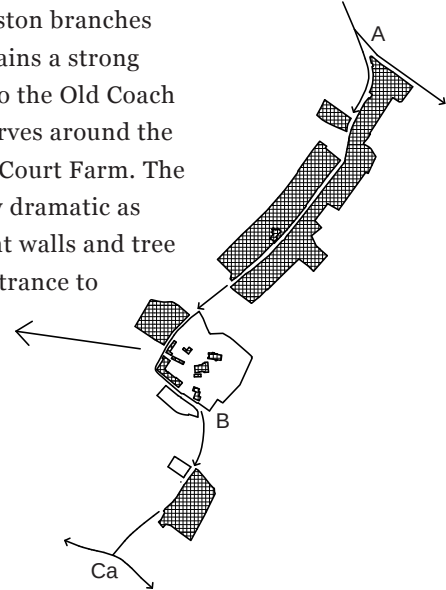


Diagram 8
A. A27
B. Alciston Court Farm
C. The Old Coach Road

7

Selmeston: the village is a small linear community stretched between the A27 and the East Coastway rail line crossing. Generously spaced houses with a range of ages, sizes and styles line the village street. A unifying factor along its length is the sense of an old bucolic rural character that is largely maintained by important tree groups, notably the bank of mature trees on the eastern side of the street, and the arrangement of boundary walls, hedgerows, grass roadside banks and verges. Three areas of the village define its appearance. First, the busy junction with the A27 where the village hall, cricket ground, war memorial and garage are separated from the Barley Mow pub. Second, the arrangement of Selmeston Church and its circular graveyard at the mid point of the street. Third, the two leafy sunken tracks which lead from the crossroads adjacent to the church east to Berwick Station and west to Sherrington Manor.

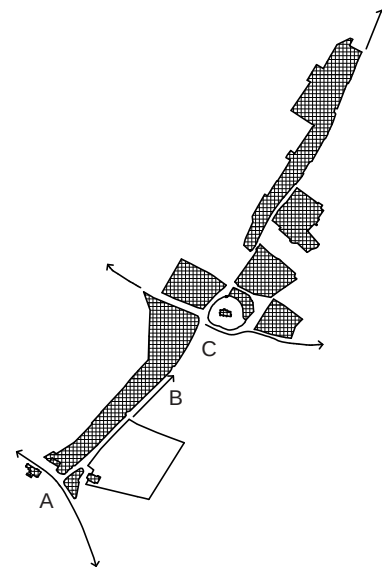
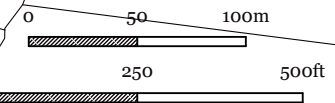


Diagram 9
A. A27
B. Wooded village street
C. Selmeston Church

ALCISTON VILLAGE DRAWING

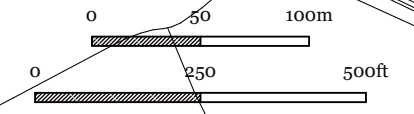


- Area of important value
- ☁ Important tree groups
- ▨ Firle Estate
- ☁ Woodland
- Public right of way
- ▨ Listed Buildings
- 1 Red Telephone Box
- 2 Rose Cottage Pub
- 3 White Lamp Standards
- 4 Parish Church
- 5 Court Farmhouse
- 6 Tithe Barn
- 7 Village Pond

All maps and drawings are part of the Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



SELMESTON
VILLAGE DRAWING



- Area of important value
 - ☁ Important tree groups
 - ▨ Firle Estate
 - ☁ Woodland
 - ⋯ Public right of way
 - ▨ Listed Buildings
- 1 Parish Church
 - 2 Alciston & Selmeston Village Hall
 - 3 War Memorial
 - 4 Selmeston Village Shop
 - 5 The Barley Mow Pub
 - 6 Cricket Pitch

All maps and drawings are part of the Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited

Bridleway to
Berwick Station

View to
Firle Beacon

Selmeston





⁸ **Berwick Station:** to the north of the A27 the village is arranged either side of a railway station on the main Lewes to Eastbourne line. Unlike the other villages on the Estate, Berwick Station has not been sited under the influence of agricultural and religious development. Instead a combination of modern travel and a brickworks made it a place where a village could be built away from the constraints of older downland settlements in a site unusually well-served by transport infrastructure. The centre of the village clusters around the station where there is a car park, a pub, a post office and a garage. A web of footpaths lead from the village out to Arlington Reservoir and to local lanes, woods and the neighbouring villages.

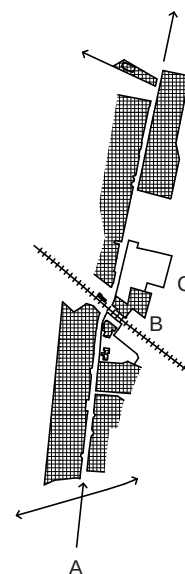


Diagram 10
A. To the A27
B. Berwick Station
C. Footpaths out to
Arlington Reservoir

⁹ **Berwick:** the houses in Berwick are sited above the sunken village street and setback behind front gardens and hedges. The street therefore has the character of a rural lane which creates a village scene that has more in common with farming hamlets rather than the enclosed village streets at Firle and Alciston. The village has a pin-wheel shape with a small junction in the centre off which routes lead to the pub, the church and the farm. Because no single building or activity dominates the centre of the village there is a strong sense of informality and a lack of obvious hierarchy.

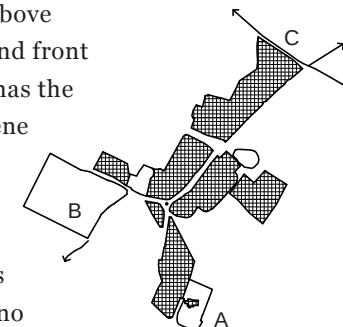
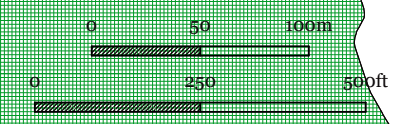


Diagram 11
A. Berwick Church
B. Church Farm
C. A27

BERWICK
VILLAGE DRAWING



- Area of important value
- Important tree groups
- Firle Estate
- Woodland
- Public right of way
- Listed Buildings
- 1 The Cricketer Pub
- 2 Parish Church

All maps and drawings are part of the Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



0 50 100m

0 250 500ft

--- Area of important value
 ☁ Important tree groups
 [Green Grid] Firle Estate
 ☁ Woodland
 ... Public right of way
 [Hatched Box] Listed Buildings

1 Berwick Village Hall
 2 Berwick Service Station
 3 Berwick Station
 4 The Berwick Inn
 5 Berwick Post Office

(Side Farm)
 (Side Farm)

~ *Firle Place*

¹⁰ For over five hundred years Firle Place and Firle village have coexisted with a shared history and culture. This relationship sets the tone for how the house is looked after, managed and enjoyed today. An image of Firle, Alciston or Berwick before 1700 would be a hazily familiar scene. The only buildings to appear noticeably unchanged would be the village churches and Firle Place - contrasting with the mud and wattle houses. For centuries these may well have been the only stone buildings of any substance and thus were the centre for all village occasions, religious and secular. Today the role of these key buildings is still important.

¹¹ The Gage’s connection with Sussex begins in the 15th century with the marriage of Sir John Gage and Eleanor St. Clere. Her parents owned the local manor of Heighton St. Clere which the couple inherited in 1446. They lived in Surrey, and it was their grandson John who finally established the family at Firle.

¹² John Gage was a rising star in the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII, knighted in 1525 and made a Knight of the Garter in 1541. In the 1530s he started to build Firle Place, on the site of an older medieval manor house, re-using the white Caen stone from the recently dissolved Priory of Lewes. Between his death in 1556 and the early 18th century little of the house was altered due to the Gage’s loyalty to the Catholic faith: they were fined and imprisoned for refusing to attend church and barred from public office.



(top) Filming ‘Emma’ at Firle Place in 2019
(right) The east range of the house first thing in the morning



¹³ When in 1713 Sir William Gage inherited Firle Place he readily converted to the Church of England and then re-modelled the Tudor house with Georgian facades, again re-using the old Caen stone, and fashionable Palladian interiors. His heir Thomas Gage, raised to the Peerage of Ireland in 1754 as Viscount Gage, continued this work with a second phase that completed the east range of the house with a distinctive rusticated gateway and prodigious long gallery.

¹⁴ Today the outside of Firle Place looks much as the 1st Viscount left it and remains the family seat. The current Lord Gage’s paintings hang in many rooms, Lady Gage makes herb balms in the old Gas House, Henry Gage has built a recording studio in the 19th century granary building and the village gather to carol sing on Christmas Eve.

¹⁵ It is over 260 years since the 1st Viscount’s final phase of building was completed and for decades in the late 20th century only the most essential maintenance was achieved. Looking after Firle Place, running it and repairing it requires significant expenditure. Finding the resources to do this needs the careful balance of ‘ends’, ‘ways’ and ‘means’: i.e. defining the objectives, how to achieve them and what is available to do it. The plan for Firle Place is to fund works identified by quinquennial surveys. There is the potential to achieve this by increasing the house’s income, by developing its commercial activities.

~ *Parts of the House*

5. Outbuildings: the Dairy is a small building located to the south of the house and is recorded to have been moved from an earlier garden and used to make and store cheese. The Granary was built on mushroom shaped staddle stones in order to protect stored grain from rodents. The grain used to be milled on site. The Gas House was designed to produce gas from coke coal. This gas was piped through to the gas lamps in Firle Place before electrical lamps were installed in the early 20th century.

2. Riding School: the size of the old sand school makes it an exciting space for weddings, parties and events. Planning permission has been granted for this, and works to the stables to provide lavatories have been completed. The Riding School sits above a croquet lawn, the Cherry Walk and Long Pond and next to the walled gardens and stables. Variations of each of these areas have been used for drinks parties and to pitch marquees.

1. Firle Place: the house welcomes visitors between May and October. All the old principal rooms are open and hung with Firle's fine collections of art and furniture. The history of each phase of building can be explored, including remnants of the first house, and enjoyed with paintings by Anthony van Dyck, Philips de Koninck, Thomas Gainsborough, Domenico Puligo, Joshua Reynolds, Johan Zoffany, Duncan Grant and John Piper.

4. Firle Church: St Peter's church was built in the 12th century. The chancel and tower were added in the 13th century. The origins of the church are presumed to be much older. A church existed before the Norman Conquest which was gifted to William the Conqueror's half-brother.

3. Walled Gardens: the walled garden produces fruits and flowers for the house and holds a very interesting specimen: one of the original greengage trees, introduced to the British Isles by the Gages in 1724. The Long Pond is the source of the watercourse which runs under the walled gardens to The Dock, then south to the Stew Ponds and Decoy Pond.

¹⁶ **Visitors:** Firle Place has been opened to the public since 1954. The Estate aims to admit visitors for approximately 100 days a year – a frequency that preserves some family privacy and maintains a degree of flexibility for commercial activity. Both the family and staff work to make sure that the most culturally important and interesting parts of the house and collection can be explored.

¹⁷ **Filming:** The Estate is proud of the films and photo shoots that have chosen the Firle Estate as a setting. Filming in the house can be intensive with some risk to heritage and staff must be experienced in the phases of preparation and reinstatement necessary to meet the needs of major productions. Production teams have regularly used the Riding School as a location which has clear space capable of complex sets. The Riding School was built in 1804 for equine dressage and training. It is elegant with high Georgian fan windows and exposed timber trusses. A programme of ongoing alterations, renovations and improvements has allowed the viable re-use of this building. As well as preserving these buildings, these alternative uses allow the Estate to generate income that helps to support the maintenance and heritage costs at Firle Place.

¹⁸ **Weddings:** The Riding School allows the most spirited part of the wedding celebration to be held outside of the delicate interiors in Firle Place. A unique and characterful venue in its own right, it can host up to 300 people and is a short walk from St Peter’s Church for couples seeking a religious or spiritual ceremony. Unusually for a country house wedding location, the closeness of Firle and its amenities, including The Ram, creates an environment where guests feel part of the house, downs and village.

¹⁹ **Events:** Firle Place, its gardens, parkland and wider landscape offers a variety of unique settings and spaces for a wide range of events and commercial activities that can also contribute to their preservation. The walled gardens at Firle Place provide an opportunity to enhance the link between the house and the village for the benefit of a wider visitor audience. The Park is the setting for events which have an atmosphere amplified by their setting and the backdrop of the Firle Escarpment. The immediate gardens and landscape around the house therefore balances competing demands. Each of its roles has particular requirements and needs careful management. Managing this commitment is the responsibility of numerous Estate staff, many of whom are part of the Estate’s varied resident community.



(top) Events on the west terrace of Firle Place

~ Churches on the Estate

²⁰ When Sir John Gage inherited the Estate in 1496, elements of the local churches would already have been hundreds of years old. Under each site lies a much older and forgotten history. The small downland churches at Firle, Alciston, Berwick and Selmeston bear the trace of hundreds of years of prayer and worship; of births, marriages and deaths and doing business - swearing on oath in the porch. Today there is a distinct sense of a local progressive parochial heritage and culture that is most clearly evident at St Peter's in Firle and St Michael & All Angels in Berwick - the lead churches in each Benefice.

²¹ Firle Church stands in a gently elevated position: its 13th century tower can be seen clearly over the village roof tops from The Ram, creating an iconic village scene of flint, brick and tile with Firle Beacon behind. Inside and out, traces of the past lives which have defined the Estate define the church. The most prominent are the Tudor alabaster effigies of Sir John and Lady Philippa Gage that lie below the east window, designed by John Piper in 1985 as a memorial to the 6th Viscount Gage, which blazes on a bright morning. The Firle Church community believes that the church should be open to the widest possible congregation, both religious and secular. The village have therefore had to consider how to fund the cost of ongoing conservation and repair and how to adapt it to meet contemporary needs and expectations.



(top) Peter Owen-Jones parish priest for Glynde, Firle, and Beddingham since 2005



(top) The south porch of 12th Century St. Peter's Church in Firle



- ²² For Firle Church the key to greater participation has been to increase the flexibility of its facilities. In 2018 an extension was built with a lavatory and kitchen. This small but detailed project was proposed by the village and PCC and supported by the Estate who helped fund the construction and the installation of services. All involved were delighted when it won an award from the Sussex Heritage Trust. A project of greater complexity was undertaken four miles east along the Old Coach Road at Berwick where the village church is renowned as a site that brings together art, faith and the local landscape.

²³ During the Second World War, Bishop Bell of Chichester was concerned about the plight of artists under war time restrictions. He aimed to try and restore the relationship between artists and the church that had existed before the reformation. Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, who lived at Charleston Farm, were chosen for the project. They created an interpretation of renaissance painted churches with murals of local people and places as the setting for scenes of the Annunciation, Nativity and Ascension. The paintings root ideas of faith in the immediate landscape - a rare idea that has made the church a place of popular pilgrimage, both spiritual and artistic.

²⁴ Berwick Church has undergone significant restoration of the murals. The physical challenge of the restoration is one aspect of a larger ambition to develop events to broaden the educational reach of the church. The Estate has closely supported the restoration and conservation project. One major limitation has been a lack of parking for the 10,000 visitors that come to the church over the course of each year. A 50-year lease has been granted by the Estate at a nominal sum for a new parking site by Church Farm.
- ²⁵ The underfloor heating system in Berwick Church is powered by ground source heat pumps for which the Estate have granted easements at no charge. The success of this great undertaking by such a small parish is important for the whole Estate because it shows the quality of project that can be achieved and re-emphasises the significance of imaginatively combining creativity and heritage. Both Firle and Berwick Churches are working examples of how the Estate continues to contain and support places of great historical continuity, modern creativity, natural beauty and enduring faith. The churches are tangibly alive and this is a quality the Estate wish to nurture for other historic buildings in need of repair and re-use.

(left) Berwick Church spire, home to the Bloomsbury Group murals, painted during WWII



~ *Traditional Farm Buildings*

²⁶ **T**he Estate’s traditional farm buildings have sheltered countless wagons, oxen and horses, and bear testament to centuries of threshing, shearings and harvest suppers from the days when most of the local workforce farmed. These traditional agricultural buildings are richly evocative of old rural ways of life. In Alciston the ancient Tithe Barn has been a place of work for over 500 years. It is the intuitive engineering and proportions of these buildings which make them so memorable. Many have roofs braced and tied with elegant timber trusses. These bays of wooden cross frames are seen in a soft light, gained indirectly from central doors and small lancet openings made through flintwork.

²⁷ In the landscape beyond the main yards, high farming on the Downs has left a scattering of outlying flint-built barns and outbuildings. These remote barns are a result of breaking-up of old downland sheep pasture at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and were built for sheltering cattle and oxen, lambing and shearing sheep and storing heavy corn harvests.

²⁸ The farms, yards, barns and outbuildings which remain on the Estate are the trace of a largely lost farming culture of shepherds, farmworkers, tradesmen and craftsmen. Yet, the barns they built and maintained still largely stand and make an essential contribution to the local landscape character and local distinctiveness. Most date from the early 19th century and only a fraction are protected through listing. Increasingly, many have become redundant for modern agricultural uses.



²⁹ Structural changes in farming have required new buildings to accommodate modern machinery and farming methods, storage and drying demands, smaller workforces and better animal welfare standards. It is therefore necessary to consider adaptations to yards in response to the restructuring and diversification of farm businesses.

(top and left) The Granary at Firle Place



(top) Place Farm Barn
used for agricultural
storage and as a
workshop

The Firle Estate Plan - 4. Heritage in the Landscape

³⁰ It is no longer economical to keep traditional barns, no longer suited to modern agriculture, in agricultural use. As a consequence, under-used buildings on the Estate can accommodate new economically viable uses with careful appraisal. Without appropriate uses that can fund long-term maintenance and repair, many could disappear from the landscape. Options for traditional farm buildings include:

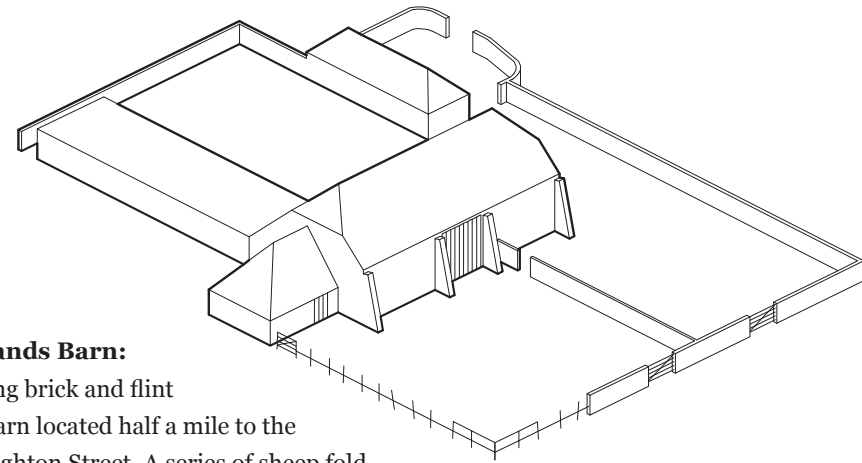
³¹ **Lose:** through continued dereliction or demolition.
Maintain: through modest investment and the use of traditional or non-traditional materials.
Repair: as features in the landscape or as significant historic buildings, with minimal or no alteration.
Adapt: accommodating a new, non-agricultural, use.
Replace: with a new building to support continued on-farm operations or non-agricultural business or housing.

³² In the majority of cases on the Estate, adaptation will be the only means of funding effective maintenance and repair. Whilst poor adaptation and conversion is a risk, the Estate is committed to carefully identifying and managing new uses that will improve a building's historic character. Achieving the successful adaptive reuse of a traditional farm or building depends on understanding and interpreting its significance, its relationship to the wider landscape setting and its sensitivity and capacity for change. Successful examples of this approach in action are the Estate's barn conversions in Place Farm for Burning Sky Brewery, Shepherd's Barn for Hunter Gather Cook foraging school. These projects made sure the barns were restored and that they remained looking and feeling like working buildings.

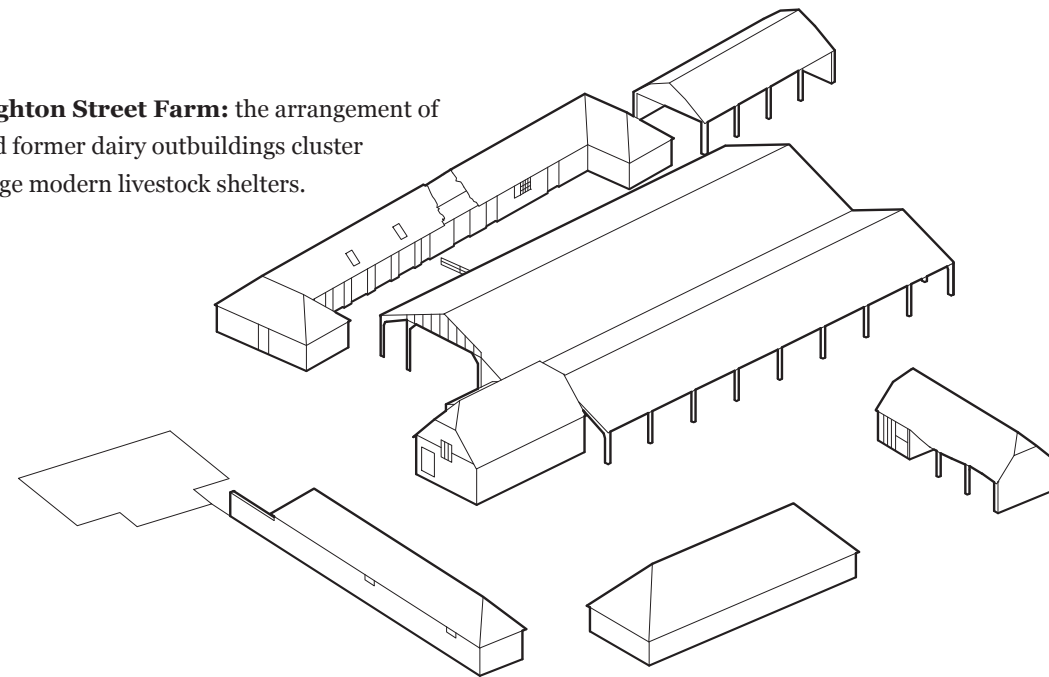
³³ Both tenants, although contemporary in ethos, are working in a spirit that continues the manner in which the barns and their yards were originally used. Rather than erase the barns' past, the changes of use have given the buildings a new sense of purpose that is rooted to their context. In addition, both conversions have been executed in such a way that future changes of use will be possible as economic requirements change.

³⁴ The barns and buildings drawn on the following pages are all in varying degrees of need. This inventory of agricultural heritage demonstrates the extent of the Estate's task. The principles which will inform this work follow the guidelines of the National Park and Historic England. The fundamental point being that keeping activity in a building is key to maintaining it in good order. In order to achieve this aim, adjunct extensions and adjacent new buildings may be required. It is not the intention of the Estate to restore or adapt these buildings in isolation. Rather, a collective approach will be developed to ensure each potential project is linked by a shared attitude towards balanced social, environmental and economic outcomes across the Estate.

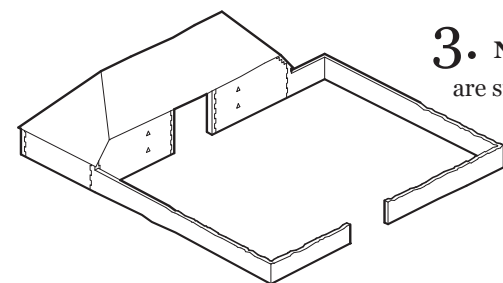
³⁵ A good local precedent that demonstrates the aggregate benefits of agricultural adaptations and conversions is Charleston Farmhouse, which remains a key link in the network of creative places which criss cross the landscape around Firle. From Monk's House in Rodmell, the Berwick Church murals, Glyndebourne, John Maynard Keynes' house at Tilton, Peggy Angus' house at Furlongs to Farleys House in Muddles Green and the numerous exhibitions, studios and workshops which extend between. The manner in which Charleston has directly and indirectly linked local creative sites is unique.



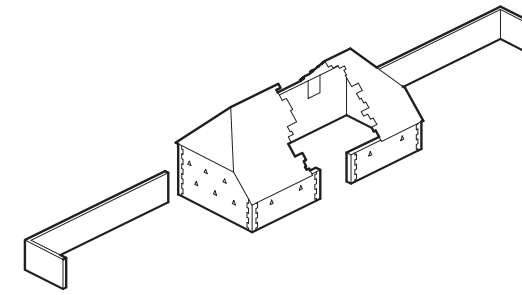
1. Petlands Barn: an imposing brick and flint outlying barn located half a mile to the east of Heighton Street. A series of sheep fold walls and shelters extend from the main building which is defined by buttresses and high central doors.



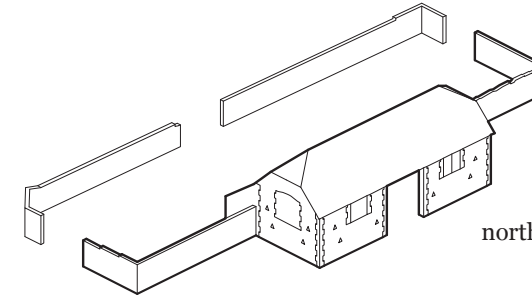
2. Heighton Street Farm: the arrangement of stables and former dairy outbuildings cluster around large modern livestock shelters.



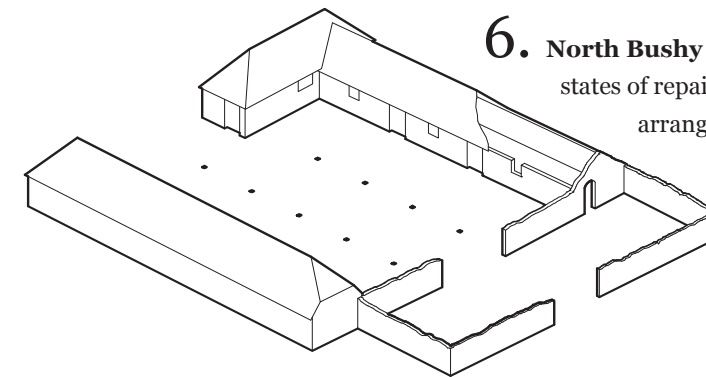
3. New Elm Barn: the flint barn and yard are sited in a hollow to the west of Firle Bostal below the Downs. The barn is roofed with corrugated sheet and has been recently restored as a venue for events.



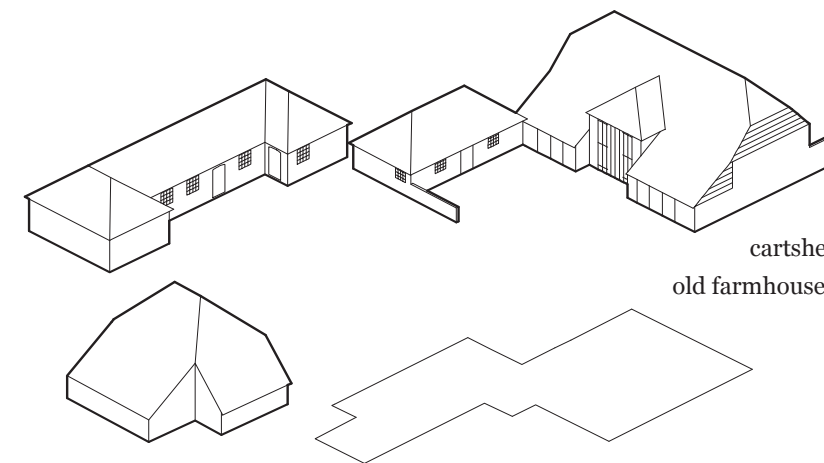
4. Swamp Barn: located a mile north of Bushy Lodge amongst the drained clays of the Laughton Levels. The roof has collapsed.



5. Jack's Barn: a large flint and brick barn with generous openings and an adjacent fold yard. The barn is located to the north of the rail line and Newhouse Farm.

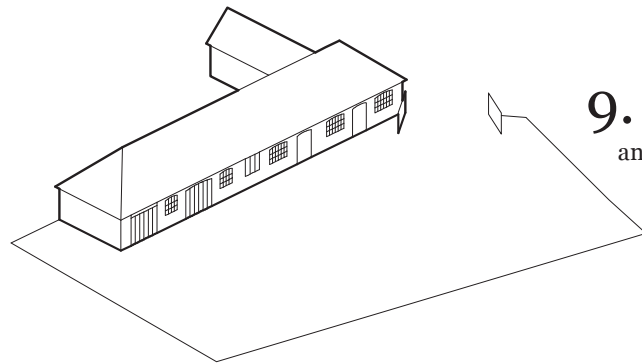
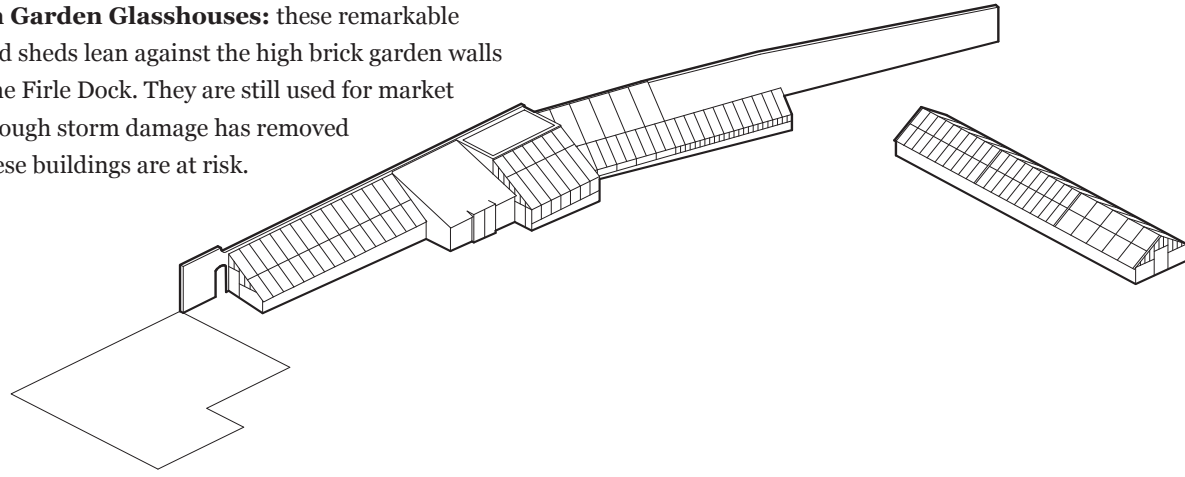


6. North Bushy Farm: outbuildings in varying states of repair and a flint fold yard form are arranged round a court currently filled by a concrete frame tractor shed.

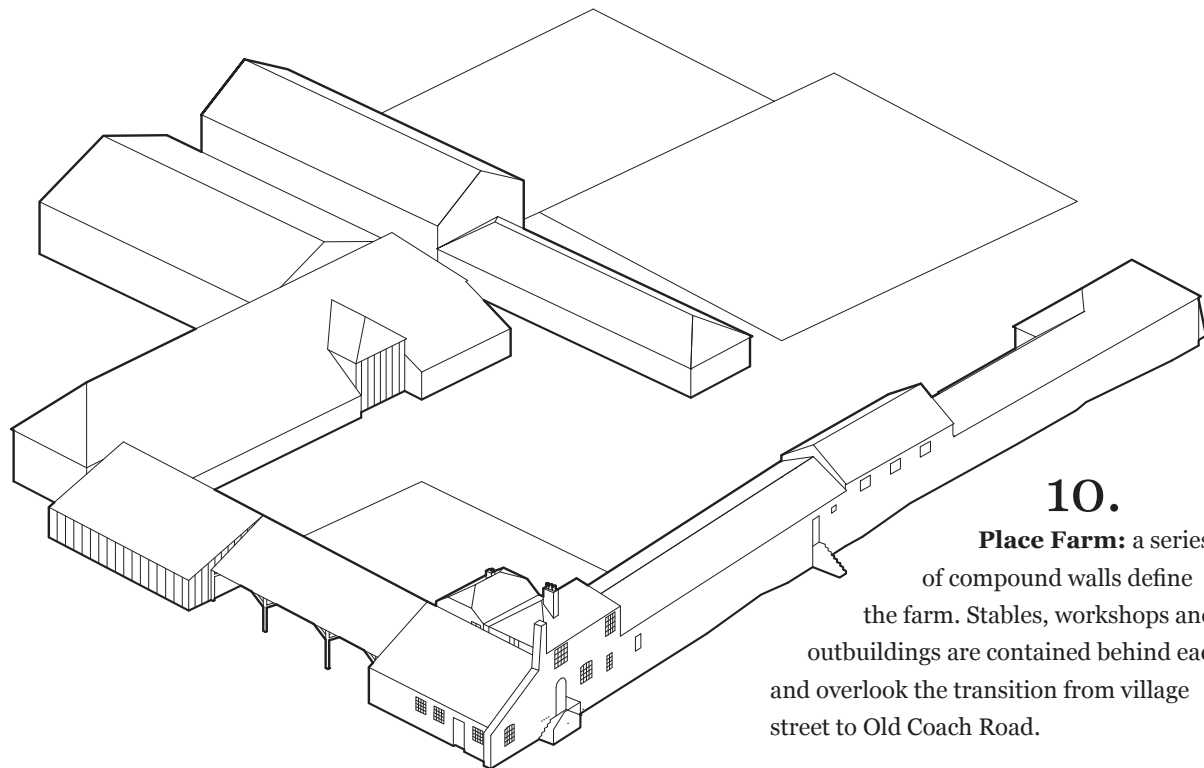


7. Bushy Lodge Farm: a threshing barn, outbuildings and cartshed form an attractive farmstead next to the old farmhouse. The buildings are well detailed.

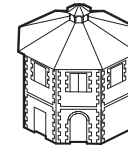
8. Kitchen Garden Glasshouses: these remarkable glasshouses and sheds lean against the high brick garden walls which define the Firle Dock. They are still used for market vegetables although storm damage has removed most glass. These buildings are at risk.



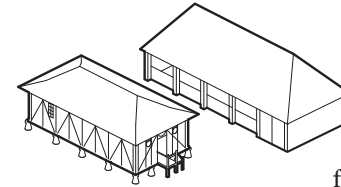
9. Estate Yard: This little and elegant workshop is located next to The Ram in the centre of Firle.



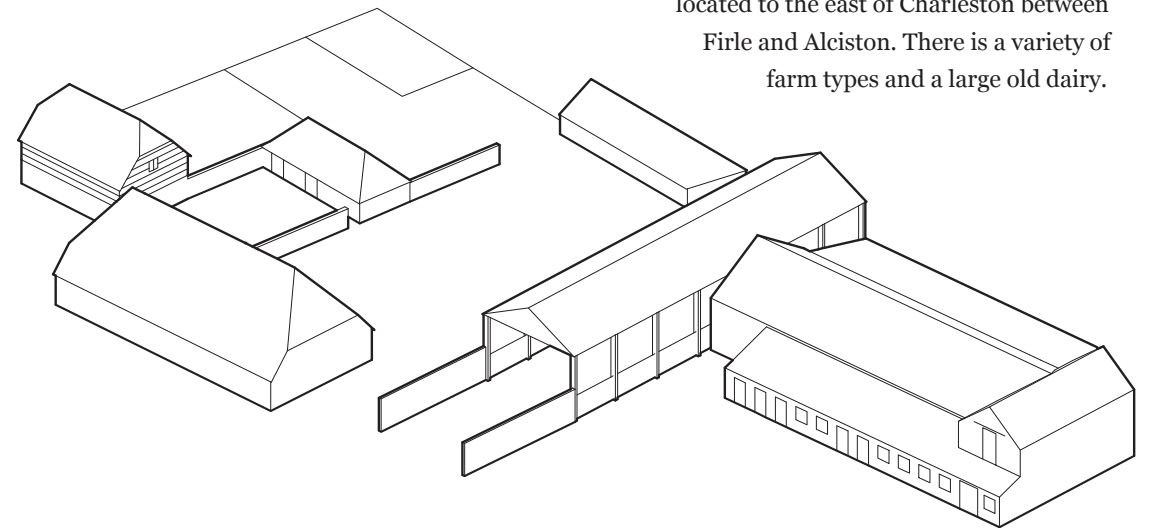
10. Place Farm: a series of compound walls define the farm. Stables, workshops and outbuildings are contained behind each and overlook the transition from village street to Old Coach Road.



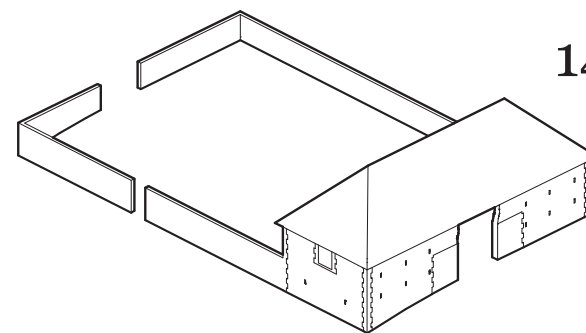
11. Firle Dovecote: this free-standing beautifully proportioned brick and flint building is sited between Firle Place and Place Farm and has not been used for generations.



12. Firle Granary: built to house grain after it had been threshed or winnowed the granary is raised off the floor on staddle stones and built from a timber frame with distinctive chevron pattern.

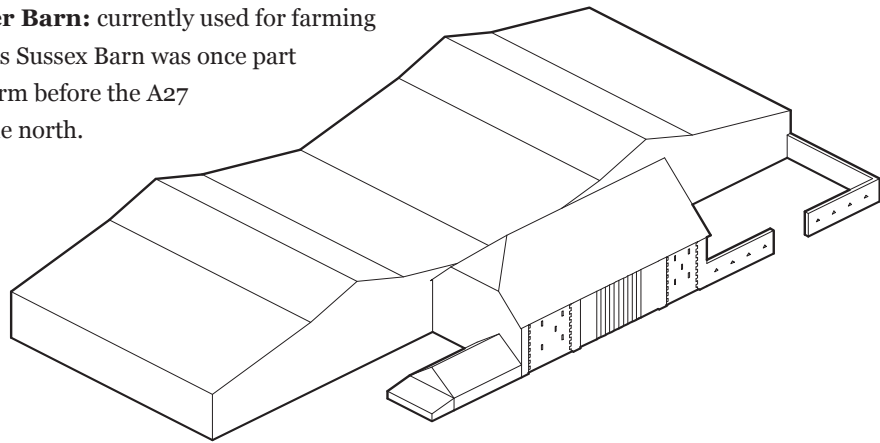


13. Tilton Farm: this farmstead is located to the east of Charleston between Firle and Alciston. There is a variety of farm types and a large old dairy.

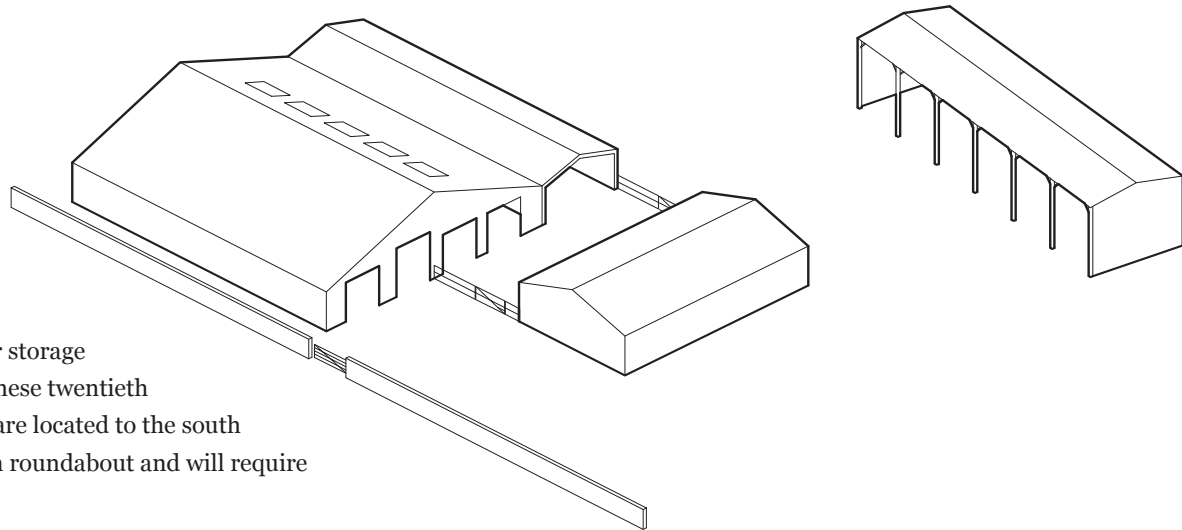


14. Shepherd's Barn: located to the south of Tilton on the Old Coach Road this barn and fold yard was used for threshing and storage with external space for livestock.

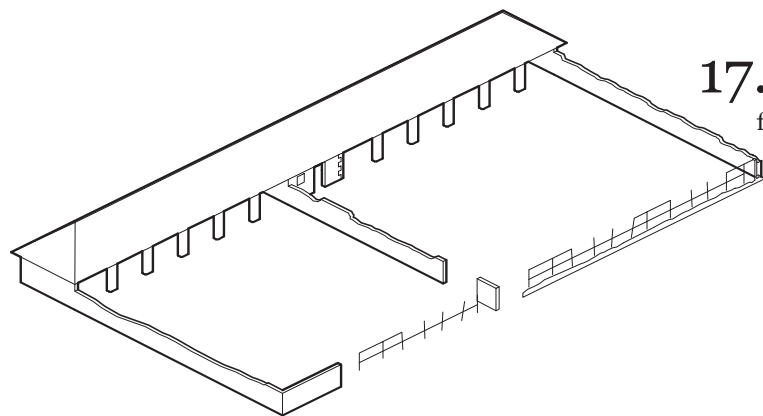
15. Loover Barn: currently used for farming and storage this Sussex Barn was once part of Gibraltar Farm before the A27 isolated it to the north.



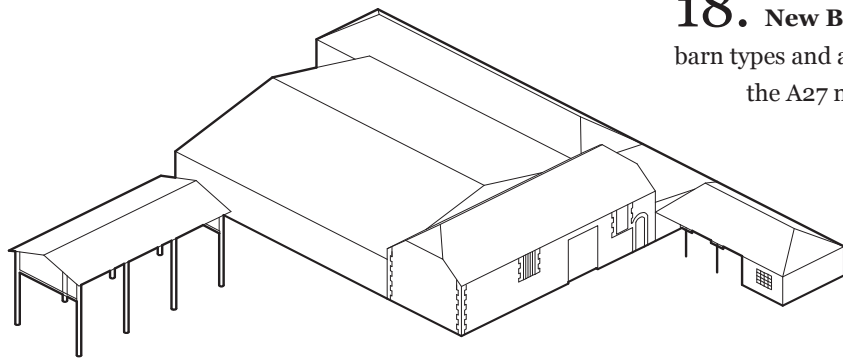
16. Cobbe Place Yard: used for storage and livestock these twentieth century barns are located to the south of Beddingham roundabout and will require refurbishment.



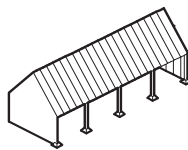
17. Overhill Lodge: a purpose-built sheep fold with shepherd's dwelling in the middle, Overhill is a remnant of high farming on the Downs once used for sheltering cattle and oxen, lambing and shearing sheep.



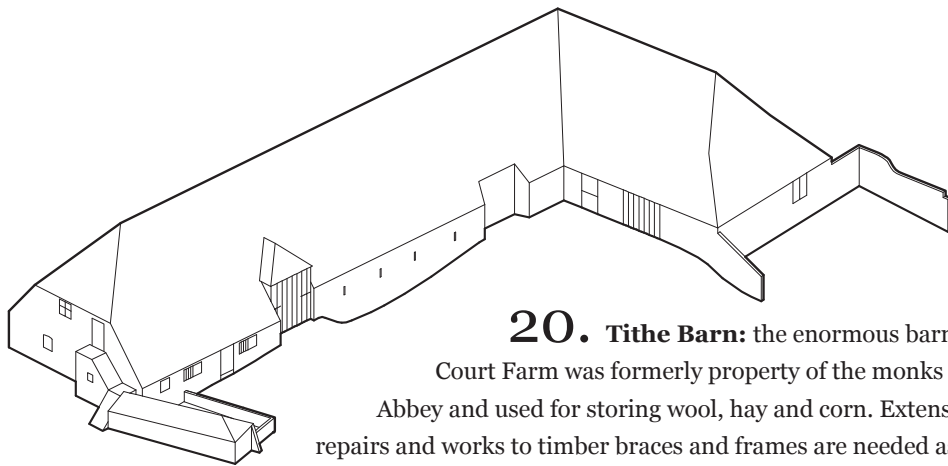
18. New Barn: Arranged from a variety of barn types and ages this farmstead is located close the A27 north of Alciston.



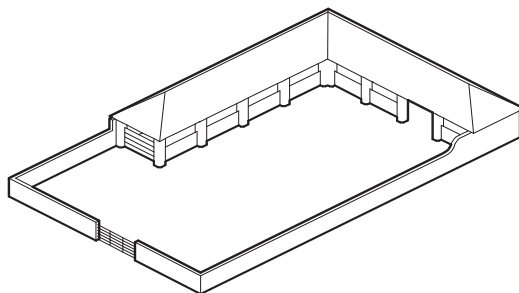
19. Sand Pit Barn: a small shelter used as stabling or a carhouse next to the old sand pits at Selmeston.



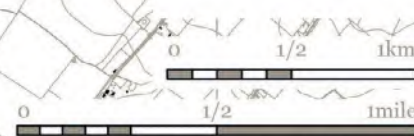
20. Tithe Barn: the enormous barn at Alciston Court Farm was formerly property of the monks of Battle Abbey and used for storing wool, hay and corn. Extensive roof repairs and works to timber braces and frames are needed as well as an economically viable use to meet its maintenance.



21. Stable Block: flint and brick stables arranged around yard to the south of Court Farm on the lane leading to the Old Coach Road.



~ Barn Locations



- | | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Petlands Barn | 1. |
| Heighton Street Farm | 2. |
| New Elm Barn | 3. |
| Swamp Barn | 4. |
| Jack's Barn | 5. |
| North Bushy Farm | 6. |
| Bushy Lodge Farm | 7. |
| Kitchen Garden Glasshouses | 8. |
| Estate Yard | 9. |
| Place Farm | 10. |
| Firle Dovecote | 11. |
| Firle Granary | 12. |
| Tilton Farm | 13. |
| Shepherd's Barn | 14. |
| Loover Barn | 15. |
| Cobbe Place Yard | 16. |
| Overhill Lodge | 17. |
| New Barn | 18. |
| Sand Pit Barn | 19. |
| Tithe Barn | 20. |
| Stable Block | 21. |

All maps and drawings are part of the
Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



~ Charleston

³⁶ Since opening its doors to the public in 1986, Charleston’s painted interiors, gardens, and eclectic collection of furniture, textiles and ceramics have been experienced by over half a million visitors. Charleston Farmhouse is located between Firle and Alciston. It is the preserved home of Bloomsbury group artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant who moved to Sussex in 1916 with their family and friends: Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry and David Garnett who were periodically joined by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey and E.M. Forster.

³⁷ What this group of friends achieved at Charleston was to bridge the gap between the fine and decorative arts, shifting the principles of modern painting into all aspects of their design, environment and behaviour. After the death of Duncan Grant in 1978 the Estate was instrumental in saving the house and garden. The freehold of the farmhouse and gardens was transferred to a trust founded with the aim of informing and inspiring the public about Charleston, Bloomsbury and the arts.

³⁸ Today the house appears as it was in the 1950s. Since 1990 the Charleston Festival has aimed to sustain contemporary artistic and intellectual debate on the site - evolving from 16 people in a shed, to 10,000 people attending a schedule of 40 speakers over 10 days. In September 2018 Charleston opened a series of new galleries, and a 200 seat events space and restaurant in two restored 18th-century barns - granted on a lease from the Estate.



(top and right)
Charleston Farmhouse
and gardens



³⁹ Charleston is an asset that generates wider interest in local businesses, the local economy and local heritage. The legacy of the artists is part of the intangible combination that draws people to visit the area. Charleston is a gateway into the National Park. Its car park, leased from the Estate, is free and its shop provides leaflets with walking routes between the farmhouse, Firle and Berwick.

⁴⁰ One issue is the limited number of opportunities to stay locally which hinders the ability for visitors to make a visit to Charleston last several days as part of a wider exploration of the Estate.

⁴¹ Charleston’s place in the heritage of the Estate is pronounced as it is a site that brings together many distinctive local qualities. Namely, creativity in a working landscape, imaginative connections between farms, churches and the villages, and the unique experience of artistic excellence and innovation. The history of the Estate and the Bloomsbury Group at Charleston is intertwined.

~ Challenges

Challenges

Villages are living, not static, places. Therefore, planning for the future is a priority. This task rests on twin pillars: first, the sequencing of restoration work to ensure no building - whether listed or not deteriorates - and second, the development of a concept for how to best to adapt or extend the Estate’s villages in keeping with local character.

It is over 260 years since the final phase of building at Firle Place was completed and for decades in the late 20th century only the most essential maintenance was achieved. Looking after the house, running it, repairing it and repurposing its outbuildings, requires significant expenditure.

Firle Park is the setting for events that have become well known waymarkers in the Estate’s calendar and is therefore a landscape with multiple demands. It is a bucolic parkland for Firle Place and a tranquil place, crossed by rights of way, for the village and visitors. It is also important pasture for sheep and an events space that attracts significant numbers of people. Achieving this balance requires significant coordination and resources.

The Estate’s agricultural income is not sufficient to keep all under-used barns in good repair. As a consequence, the potential for traditional buildings on the Estate to accommodate new economically viable uses needs to be carefully and urgently appraised. Without appropriate uses that can fund long-term maintenance and repair, many could disappear from the landscape.



(top) Firle Bonfire Society

Strengths

At the time of writing two thirds of houses are let below market rent with around one third at affordable levels on definition. Tenants who wish to send their children to Firle School are a priority and are encouraged.

There is an exceptional level of participation in each village. The local calendar is arranged around annual, regular and spontaneous events which often rely on community buildings and open spaces supported by the Estate.

Firle School is important for the sustainability and atmosphere of the village. Many pupils live locally, and its parent group ‘The Friends of Firle’ fundraise for the school and organise community events.

Against a background of falling attendance to rural services, the ancient churches on the Estate has helped keep them as anchors of continuity and places of burgeoning spiritual and artistic pilgrimage.

5. ~Living in the Landscape

Strong local passion for the villages is obvious. Something recognised in each village is a sense of community and a love of the landscape.

- ¹ The Estate’s communities may appear like subtle variations of archetypal downland villages. Underneath this historic image each community faces social and economic challenges mirrored in much of the South-East of England - high demand for housing and rising living costs. This is the context for the Estate’s role as both landowner and landlord - in villages characterised by different degrees of Estate ownership with independent histories, different landscapes, varying demographics and an assorted location of community buildings and facilities.
- ² The Estate seeks to play its part enabling housing that is responsive to local need and demand, balancing new development and renovation and conservation with its role as custodian of a heritage landscape. Through its properties the Estate provides access to a significant number of rented houses that would otherwise not typically exist at such scale and concentration in a rural location.
- ³ Each Parish Council has contributed to the Estate Plan by explaining their priorities and concerns. Information gained from questionnaires, maps and follow up meetings has been integral to this chapter’s explanation of the Estate’s housing provision and its sponsorship and maintenance of facilities, societies and clubs.



(top) Firle School heading up The Street through the village

~ Estate Demographics

4 The South East is the most densely populated part of the UK and by extension the South Downs are the most densely populated National Park. The sense of communities with a long history is the lifeblood of the Estate and the provision of housing is an indispensable factor. Four topics are pertinent for addressing the housing needs of the area: pressure, existing provision, demands and ambitions.

5 Pressure. A housing needs survey carried out in 2020 found that 17 households in the Estate area were in need of affordable housing. To set these findings in context the socio-economic characteristics of the parishes in the Estate area can be appraised using the last (2011) census. The combined population of Firle, Selmeston, Berwick and Alciston parishes at the time of recording was 832 people in 357 households. Looking at census parish profiles reveals a stable but ageing population with high levels of qualifications and economic enterprise yet also low income figures similar to the district (Lewes & Wealden) and county average. Several statistics and trends from the 2011 census are pertinent for considering the backdrop to the Estate’s housing provision..

6 The total average percentage of residents aged 0-14 living in Firle, Selmeston, Berwick and Alciston Parishes is higher than Lewes and Wealden District figures. By contrast, the percentage of 15-29 and 30-44 year-olds living in the parishes is lower.



(top) Woolpack Cottage and St. Peter’s Church
(right) Houses along The Street in Firle



7 A higher percentage of residents aged 45-65 indicates a static and ageing working population whilst a lower percentage 65+ year-olds suggests some movement off the Estate after retirement. Levels of economic activity are high in each parish implying many households have at least one and possibly two working adults.

8 The percentage of residents in each parish that work from home, who are self employed or work part time is higher than the Lewes and Wealden District Average. In addition, the percentage of residents employed in finance, the professions and education exceeds the average of both districts – notably a significant percentage of residents are employed in agriculture.

9 This local demographic structure and the numbers of economically active residents suggest it is unlikely a lack of economic opportunity is the reason for lower levels of younger people. The cause for the loss of younger working residents aged 15-44 is more likely to be a mix of modest wages, social factors, university and high living costs that make it difficult to find and compete for housing suitable to meet individual and young family needs in the open market.

10 Evidence of lower than average numbers of younger working and retired residents is symptomatic of a need for more housing on the Estate designed to meet both generation’s requirements. It is an important consideration; for the demographic profile of the local parishes is an indicator of the Estate’s vitality.



- ¹¹ Existing Provision. The Estate has over 100 residential properties across its ownership originally constructed to house a substantial rural workforce. Today this legacy of cottages and farmhouses provides tied or rent controlled accommodation to a retired rural community as well as housing staff working for the modern estate business, farmers and farmworkers and other connected local businesses. A significant proportion of these properties provide housing provision in the private rented sector that would otherwise not be available.
- ¹² Demands. The villages on the Estate, particularly those within the National Park, are considered desirable locations and they are in strong demand. The Estate acknowledges the inherent opportunities and challenges this situation presents, in particular against the background of the shortage of affordable housing in the South-East. An additional and underlying issue is the costs associated with maintaining historic, often listed, buildings. Increased regulation in the rented sector has further exacerbated the costs of managing and maintaining residential let property with additional administrative and compliance costs. As a consequence it is imperative that rising costs of maintaining and preserving this heritage asset is in part cross subsidised by enabling development and diversified activities.
- ¹³ Affordable Housing. The shortage of affordable rural housing is not unique to East Sussex, however the Estate recognises its ownership provides an opportunity to play a part in helping to meet this demand. In 2024 approximately two-thirds of the Estate’s residential property ownership was let on terms below Market Rent with around one-third of its houses let at an affordable level of 20% or more below market rent.

This level of ‘subsidy’ has become unsustainable against the backdrop of increasing costs and the Estate aims to facilitate sites for new build affordable housing where it considers it is economic and desirable to do so.

- ¹⁴ Ambitions. New build housing must meet sustainability criteria having access to services employment and public transport. Wealden District Council has identified the area around Berwick Station as the most appropriate land within the Estate’s ownership to meet local housing need. The Estate’s promotion of the land for residential development at Berwick Station provides an opportunity for it to facilitate additional local access to sustainable affordable housing on the Estate in partnership with the local authority.

(left) Firle from the Downs at dawn



~ Community Buildings and Open Spaces

¹⁵ **T**he Estate’s community is formed by the farming tenants, the cricket clubs, the Bonfire Society, the churches, the village halls, the pubs and the school. There is much interlinking, help and support between each.

¹⁶ A glance at the event pages in either of the two parish magazines circulated monthly across the Estate demonstrates the nature and organisation of local community life. There is an exceptional level of participation in each village that is not taken for granted. Participation is the basis of community and helps resist social isolation, improve mental wellbeing and encourage enterprise and empowerment. The local calendar is arranged around annual, regular and spontaneous events, club and society meetings and an array of voluntary tasks.

¹⁷ Three village fetes are held each year: Glynde Flower Show, Firle Fete and Alciston and Selmeston Flower Show. Later in the year Firle Bonfire attracts many visitors from nearby towns and villages. These annual gatherings raise funds for the local churches, village halls, facilities and societies.

¹⁸ Smaller events include the Firle Friday Cafe, FirleFest in the Park, the Alciston and Selmeston lunch club and community coffee morning, Firle cinema evenings, village hall lectures, plays and concerts and irregular celebrations of major village and national jubilees. The list of local societies and clubs is wide ranging.



¹⁹ A short list includes the Alciston pickle ball club, Selmeston and Alciston Cricket Club, Firle Cricket Club, Firle choir, Firle tennis club, the Women’s Institute, the Friends of Firle School, Firle Bonfire Society, the fifties club and after school clubs. This multitude of activities, meetings and clubs rely on a set of committees and community buildings and open spaces that are supported by the Estate.

(left) The Firle Fete sheep race
(top) Firle Bonfire Society badging night at The Ram

²⁰ **Firle Village Hall** was built by the Estate in 1913 in memory of Henry, the 5th Viscount Gage and gifted to the community. The building is managed by the Village Hall and Playing Fields Committee. They recently led a major refurbishment project to modernise the hall supported by both the Estate, financially and through provision of manpower, and local farmers who helped with machinery and removed spoil.

²¹ **Berwick Village Hall** was built in 1994 on land gifted to the parish by the Estate. Its construction was funded by Lord Lloyd of Berwick and the hall and playing field are managed independently by the Berwick Village Hall Trust.

²² **Selmeston & Alciston Village Hall** was opened in 1935 by Maynard Keynes after a campaign by to encourage ‘the social and intellectual life’ of the two villages. The hall was built on land gifted by the Estate and funded by local grants - kick-started by the New York Carnegie Trust. The hall is run as a charity by a committee of residents from both villages. In 2019 the Estate released an area of land on nominal terms to provide much needed additional car parking.

²³ **Firle playing field** is leased by the Estate to East Sussex County Council for the benefit of the school on nominal terms. For Firle School is it an invaluable PE space, marked in the summer as a running track, and in the winter as a football pitch and also used by after school clubs.

²⁴ **Firle allotments** are managed by the Firle Allotment Association. The entire allotment area is leased by the Estate for a peppercorn rent.

²⁵ **Firle Forest School** is run by the village school’s trained forest school leader as a place to experience craft, survival skills, outdoor cooking and sensory activities. The Estate provides woodland at no charge.

²⁶ **Selmeston & Alciston Cricket Ground** is leased to the village cricket club for a nominal sum on a 20 year lease. The ground is managed by club which dates from 1807.

²⁷ **Firle Cricket Ground**, and the adjoining tennis court and children’s play area are let to Firle Parish Council at a nominal rent. Founded in 1758, Firle Cricket Club is one of the oldest clubs in the world. Firle’s first actual game of cricket pre-dates the club – held in 1725 when Sir William Gage challenged the Duke of Richmond to a match. The current club are proud to have Lord Gage as their President.

(right) Judging the Firle Fete dog show on the August bank holiday



~ Challenges

Challenges

There is strong demand for housing and a short supply exacerbated by the desirability of the Estate’s villages and surrounding landscape.

The agricultural and rural communities of the past are changing. Traditional rural industries such as agriculture and forestry provide a decreasing number of opportunities for jobs and growth and local housing is under pressure from an ageing population, affluent in-migration and flexible working opportunities.

There are increasingly high costs associated with the letting of historic and listed buildings. Strong demand and high rental values can help to meet these costs, but a diverse and vibrant rural economy also needed access to housing that is affordable.

The demand on the Estate landscape to provide space for leisure and well-being activities continues to increase. Large numbers of visitors and tourists has potential to create issues around traffic, parking and unauthorised access. The Estate recognises the challenges and opportunities that leisure activities and tourism brings to the landscape.



(top) Firle Forge in the Old Smithy by Place Farm

Strengths

The Estate has 228ha of lowland calcareous grassland, a nationally rare habitat that supports a plethora of biodiversity. Maintaining and enhancing this habitat is a priority policy for the Estate.

Firle has fostered good relationships with its farmers and wider stakeholders. This forms the basis of a thriving Estate, where people and nature are integrated.

Nature conservation and food production can work together. Farmers on the Estate are already working hard to ensure their farming practices are as nature friendly as possible, investing in new technologies and equipment to deliver this. We support their innovation and want to encourage more, while maintaining food security.

The Estate’s geology, topography and land-use regulates an indispensable flow and quality of water. At the junction between bands of chalk, upper greensand and clay there is a series of clear running springs filtered through the chalk.

The scope and extent of access and tranquilly across the Estate are defining characteristics. Important local links between the ecological and social environment are maintained by a network of footpaths providing 29 miles of walking with a sense of independence and freedom.

6. ~ Ecosystem Services

Ecosystem services are the benefits the natural environment provides: these resources, functions and cycles create food, water, fuel and wellbeing.

- ¹ At the time of writing, the way land is used, viewed and valued is going through significant changes. Ecosystem Services are increasingly driving decision-making, with emerging carbon and biodiversity markets facilitating investment in natural resources outside of the traditional food and subsidy system. While this rapidly changing policy landscape creates huge uncertainty, the Estate recognises these themes and hopes to engage with new schemes as they unfold.
- ² As it is, Firle Estate’s natural environment already works hard. It provides natural goods, such as food and timber, as well as space for recreation; it helps to improve the quality of water and reduce air pollution; and it can help protect from heavy rainfall and flooding, high winds, and rising temperatures. The way in which Firle’s natural assets are arranged across the landscape also creates an identity that draws in residents, employers, and visitors. The supply of these goods, regulating and cultural services is highly valuable, and the ability of the natural environment to perform well will have a direct impact on Firle’s long-term prosperity and well-being.
- ³ Natural Capital refers to the stock of natural assets in an area that collectively underpin the supply of natural goods, regulating services, and cultural opportunities provided by the natural environment. The value of these goods and ‘Ecosystem Services’ is, however, not always fully accounted for in decisions around the way in which land and other natural assets are managed and used.



- ⁴ This chapter considers the Ecosystem Services that Firle Estate delivers on-site and to the surrounding area, including provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services. Together these act as building blocks for local prosperity.

(top) A ewe and her new lamb that are part of the flock which grazes Firle Escarpment and the Park

~ Supporting Services

5 Supporting services provide the basis upon which all other services are built. Without these critical processes ecosystems would not function effectively.

6 Biodiversity:
The Firle Escarpment SSSI is designated for its lowland calcareous grassland, a nationally rare habitat that comprises 228ha of the Estate, 193ha of which forms the SSSI. The biodiverse species supported in lowland calcareous grassland are rare across most other habitats, so there is a responsibility to maintain this seedbank. The chalk is important for water cycling, acting as a filtration system for nutrients leaching into the aquifer, so maintaining it will be excellent for water cycling and biodiversity.

7 The SSSI is home to a number of critical indicator species and rare or endangered species, including round headed rampion *Phyteuma orbiculare* and the protected early spider orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*. Currently, the site is in an unfavorable and declining condition due to the encroachment of scrub and tor grass. To address this, the Estate will work with our farmers to support scrub control measures and improve grazing. Exmoor ponies for example, are better equipped to get into the scrub and brash, browsing and trampling it as they go. They have harder mouths than most domestic livestock breeds, so they find the Tor grass and scrub species more palatable.



8 The Estate has several other biodiverse priority habitats alongside the Lowland Calcareous grassland, including 8ha of Lowland meadows, 30ha of flood plain grazing marsh, a traditional orchard and 137ha of woodland. A desk based Statutory Biodiversity Metric calculation estimates there to be circa 10,300 units of biodiversity present on Firle Estate.

9 The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, established at COP 2015 set a target to dedicate 30% of land to nature conservation by 2030. The South Downs National Park Authority furthered this by setting an ambitious target of 33%. Currently, the Estate has 26% of land dedicated to nature across the tenanted land, land farmed in hand and woodland areas.



10 The Estate has a policy of supporting these targets where it does not contradict with the need to protect the best and most versatile land for food. There is a focus on improving the condition of existing priority habitats where it is calculated that improving the condition from poor to good would result in a 32% uplift in biodiversity, which would align with the ambitions of the National Park.

11 Soil Formation:
With 1600ha of the Estate in cropping rotations, protecting and ensuring soil viability for the future is a priority. Firle will work with farmers and land managers to implement regenerative practices, including use of cover crops, companion cropping, conservation tillage. These practices will promote soil formation, producing stability in existing soils, making them more resilient to run off and leaching.

12 Nutrient Cycling
Most of our farmers on the Estate are mixed farmers, and the integration of cropping and grazing is a fundamental part of regenerative agriculture and nutrient cycling. Removing nutrients from the ground to feed livestock before returning in the form of manure is a practice the Estate hopes to maintain and encourage.

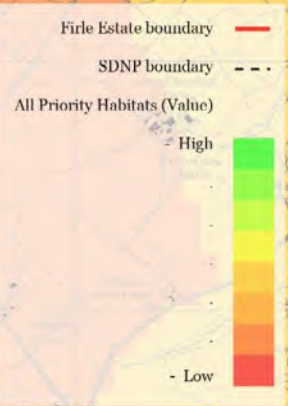
13 756ha of Firle Estate is within a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone. There are ongoing projects to mitigate nitrates in agriculture across the Eastern part of the South Downs, which can help fund measures such as over-roofing manure heaps, rainwater harvesting and water separation strategies, to prevent dirty water leaching into watercourses and wider ecosystems.

~ Habitat Connections

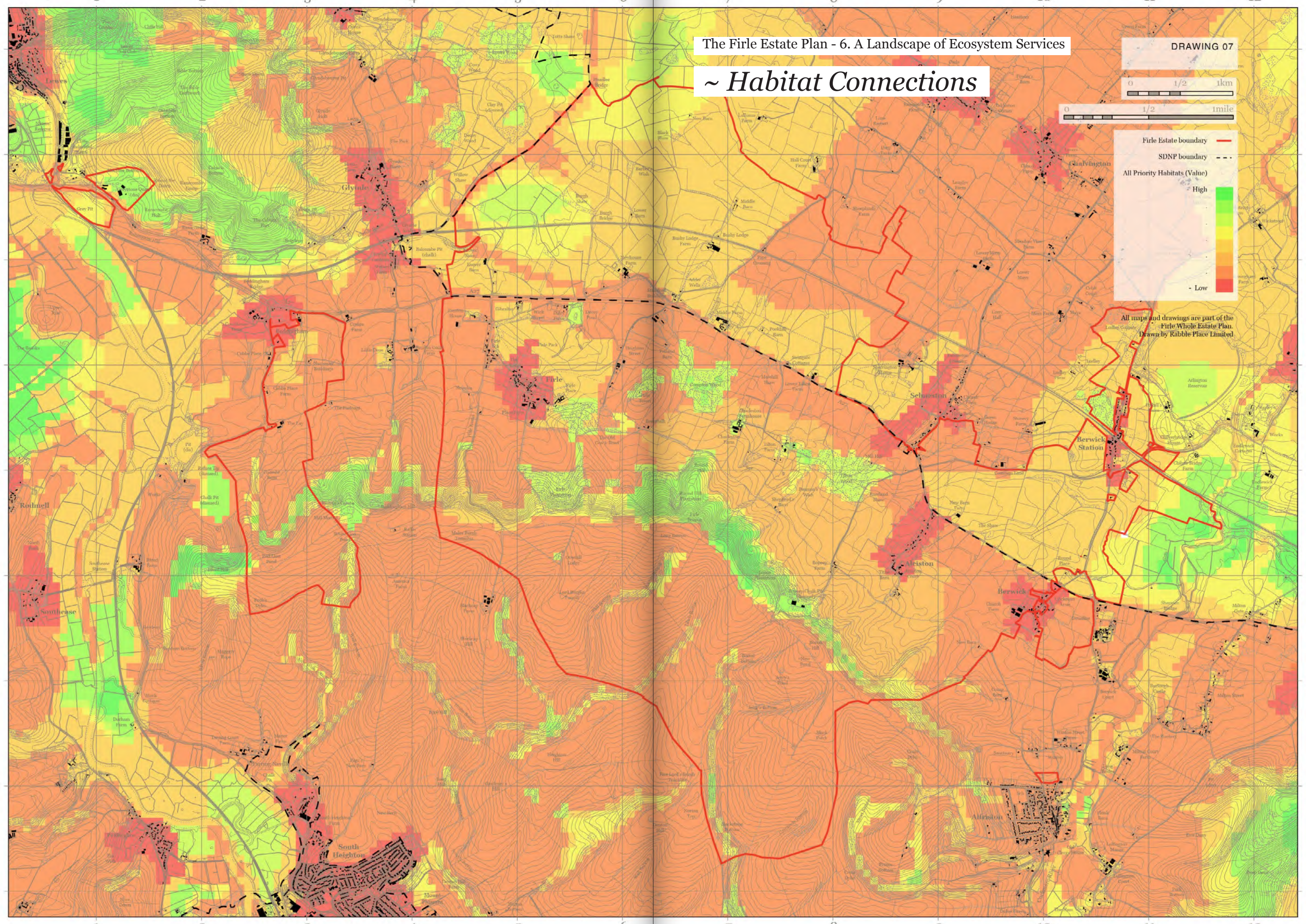
DRAWING 07

0 1/2 1km

0 1/2 1mile



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Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



~ *Regulating Services*

¹⁴ These are the benefits humans receive from the natural regulation of ecosystem cycles, including flood mitigation, climate and air quality regulation.

¹⁵ Air quality:
Standing on top of Firle Escarpment with a cold wind whipping up from the shores of Newhaven, it is difficult to comprehend air quality pressures on the area. However, the Estate is transected by the A27, and bordered by the A26, creating airborne particulates and run-off which are a threat for surrounding habitats.

¹⁶ Woodland and scrub can filter particulates and play a significant role in the carbon cycle. Firle will work with Natural England and Estate foresters to encourage sustainable management of woodlands and expansion of woodland in strategic areas to benefit air quality.

¹⁷ Preservation and improvement of priority permanent pasture also plays a role in air quality cycles. Grassland is active for longer growing periods throughout the year, meaning it can play an active role in air quality improvements and nutrient cycling into the winter months.

¹⁸ Climate regulation:
In the face of global climate change, any actions to moderate the environment on the Estate can help stabilise ecosystem processes for the future. One element that underpins all these processes that the Estate can influence directly is the carbon cycle.



¹⁹ The UK Government Net Zero Strategy set the target for UK businesses to be Net Zero by 2050. The National Food Strategy report 2022 and the emerging Land Use Framework acknowledge the importance of marrying carbon sequestration with prospering food production. Firle land sequesters roughly 1,700 tonnes of Co2 per annum, but this could be improved.

²⁰ The Estate will work with its farmers to encourage carbon targeted farming practices to help conserve existing carbon stores and build new ones, reducing carbon leaching and solar warming. Regenerative farming and woodland practices will reduce evapotranspiration and solar radiation, conserving soil moisture during water shortage and slowing the flow of water during heavy rainfall.



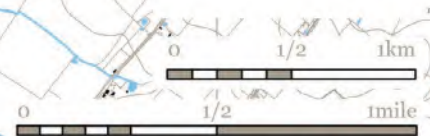
²¹ Water regulation:
Firle lies between the Ouse to the West and the Cuckmere to the East, and the Estate's floodplain wetlands are managed for breeding waders. This area retains water throughout the winter, slowing the flow of water into rivers, and filtering water to reduce pollution and sedimentation.

²² The Estate will look to expand the area of floodplain where appropriate, and will encourage over-winter cropping and regenerative practices near the river, to reduce runoff and sedimentation load on the Ouse and Cuckmere. With 18% of the Estate in a Source Protection Zone, management practices must promote sustainable water supply. 25% of the Estate is also in a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone, hence the concern for nutrient cycling. We will work with our farmers to secure compliance with the Farming Rules for Water.

²³ Food chain services:
Local native plant species, like Field Scabious Knautia arvensis found in the Firle Escarpment chalk grassland, support nationally significant pollinators like the Downland Furrow Bee Halictus eurygnathus. These pollinators are themselves a food source for birds and then mammals further up the food chain.

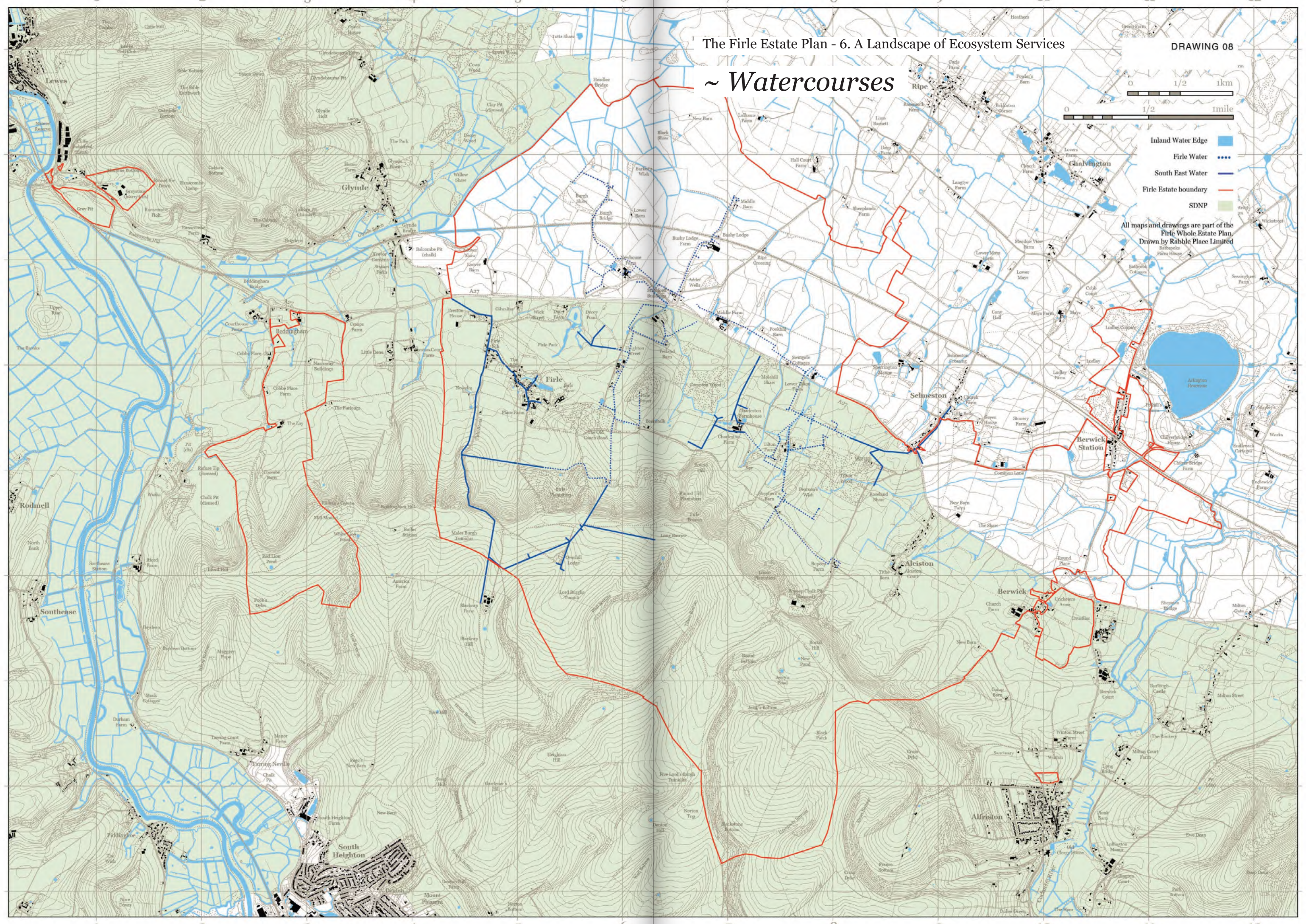
²⁴ Firle's farmers all play their part in managing pollinator habitat, foraging habitat for farmland birds and wintering waders. Climate-friendly farming practices boost soil fertility, reducing the need for fertilisers and reducing the nitrate demands.

~ *Watercourses*



- Inland Water Edge
- Firle Water
- South East Water
- Firle Estate boundary
- SDNP

All maps and drawings are part of the
Firle Whole Estate Plan.
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



~ *Provisioning Services*

²⁵ **P**rovisioning services are the products gained from ecosystems that we use, including water, food, fuel, and other raw materials.

²⁶ **Food production:**
The Estate has strong, longstanding relationships with our farmers, with most families having farmed on the Estate for multiple generations. Our farmers are environmental stewards and participate in Agri-environment schemes with sustainable land management practices.

²⁷ Farms across the Estate produce a variety of foods, including beef, milk, lamb, wheat and arable crops. Firle wishes to support farmers to grow their regenerative farming practices, to improve soil quality and carbon sequestration while continuing to produce quality food. Regenerative Agriculture is any practice, process or management approach that enhances the functioning of the systems on which it relies. By taking small changes to integrate regenerative practices on farm, such as minimum tillage, integrating livestock in arable rotations and maintaining year-round living roots and shoots in the soil, farmers can help deliver numerous ecosystem services.

²⁸ Fostering knowledge exchange, and supporting farmers’ access to new markets by encouraging the use of investment tools such as the GFI’s “farming toolkit for assessing Nature Market Opportunities” and the IPCC approved farm carbon toolkits, will help expand our Regenerative Agriculture and have a positive impact on the wider Ecosystem Services.



(top) Woodchip storage for the biomass boiler
(right) Tree belt along the bottom of the traditional sheepwalk



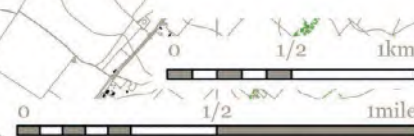
²⁹ **Timber and Energy:**
The Estate’s 142ha of woodland contributes a mixture of timber and biomass production alongside nature restoration. The woods are sustaining ecological shocks from leaf miner, acute oak decline, Dutch elm disease and ash dieback. Half of Estate woodland is ash, of which 90% is predicted to be effected by the dieback fungus. Work is needed to fully understand the implications of dieback, to replace ash and restock and extend woodland. For every tree that is felled multiple others will need to be planted. A recent incentive is the Estate’s 400kW biomass district heating system which uses local timber to provide heating to Firle Place, tea rooms and other properties on the Estate. Exploring further ways to generate revenue from woodland will help promote sustainable management in the long term.

³⁰ **Water supply:**
554ha at the south of the Estate is within an aquifer Source Protection Zones which protects public potable ground water supplies on the south face of the South Downs. South East Water operates in the area, abstracting water from chalk aquifers to supply nearby towns and villages. Firle will work with water companies to protect the aquifer while optimising water use across the Estate to ensure sustainable water supply for the future.

The Firle Estate Plan - 6. A Landscape of Ecosystem Services

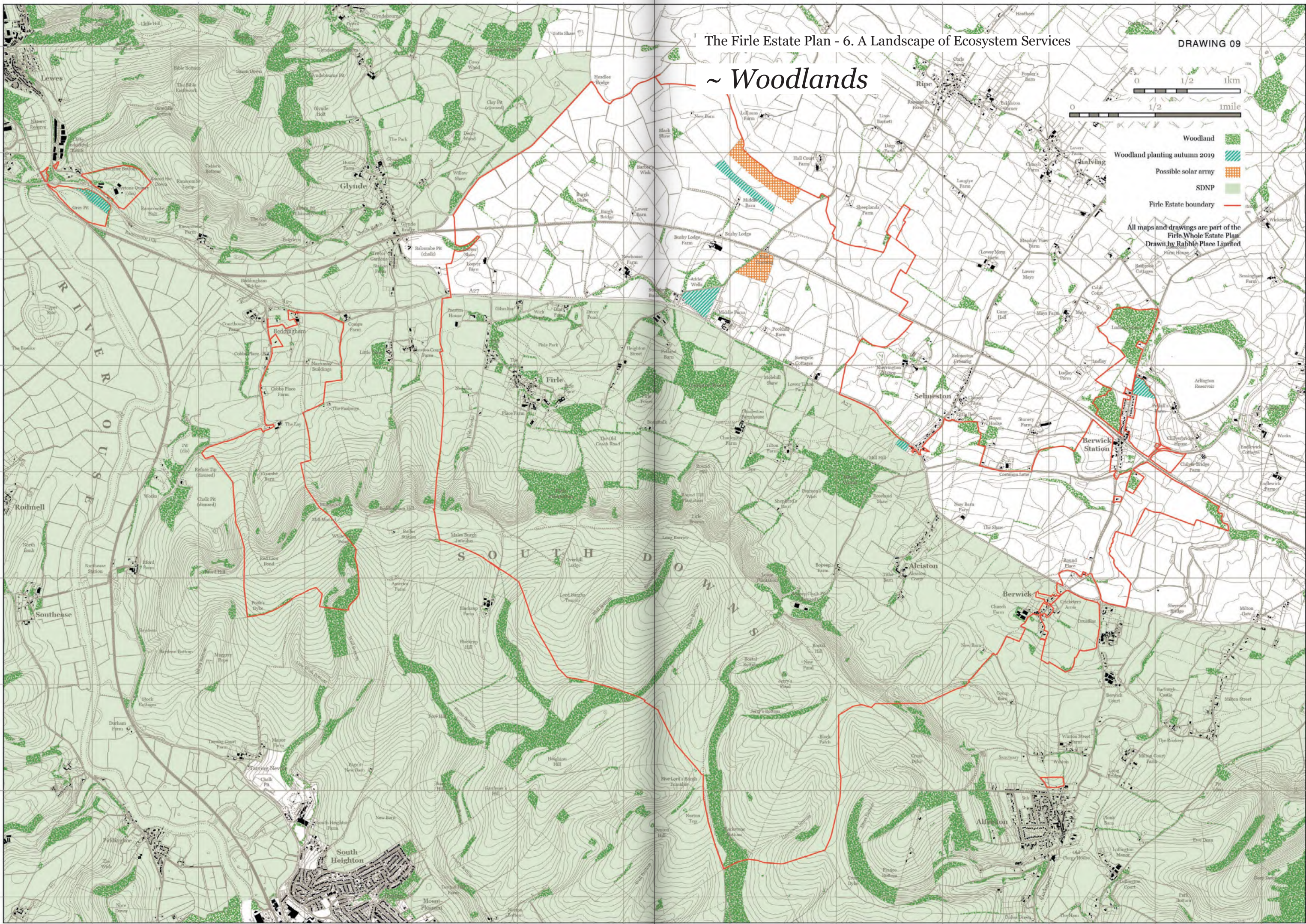
DRAWING 09

~ Woodlands



- Woodland
- Woodland planting autumn 2019
- Possible solar array
- SDNP
- Firle Estate boundary

All maps and drawings are part of the Firle Whole Estate Plan
Drawn by Rabble Place Limited



~ Cultural Services

³¹ Landscapes create benefits that can be described as cultural services - providing inspiration, identity and heritage. There are challenges in mapping and valuing these services due to the subjective nature of designating areas of cultural importance and the scarcity of useable datasets. Yet, the remarkable links between the Estate’s ecological and social environment are founded on several discernible factors.

³² Firle is a landscape that people plan to visit time and time again. The Estate has a special atmosphere that allows visitors and residents to feel they are exploring and finding afresh a working downland landscape. This sense of freedom is marked by a network of trackways to the crest of the Downs deeply worn into the chalk.

³³ Below the hilltops, the sense of place particular to each local village remains agricultural, close knit and active. Small downland churches bear the trace of hundreds of years of prayer and worship, lambing starts like clockwork in April, pubs serve Lewes and Firle beer and cricket is played every summer weekend on the 4ha of playing fields. Well-tended allotments bear testimony to hours of effort. These qualities have made the Estate a place of inspiration and creativity for generations. Historic regular visitors and tenants include the Bloomsbury Group, Peggy Angus, Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden, Helen Binyon, Percy Horton, Paul Nash and John Piper. This tradition continues today with lots of musicians, craftsmen, artists and writers living, working, exhibiting and performing locally.



(top) Foraging along the Old Coach Road
(right) The memorable line of Firle Beacon

³⁴ The subtle quality of the Estate’s infrastructure is the backcloth for all this historic and contemporary culture. The nuanced nature of public rights of way and the balance between public and private access are important factors. The SDNPA tranquillity study illustrates areas with high and low indicators of calm, quietude and feelings of peace. The picture to emerge from this pattern is the baseline from which to consider changes in the Estate’s aural and visual environment and confirms the impact of having most of the Firle Escarpment as CROW open access land (around 187ha) that traverses the slopes below the well trodden South Downs Way. Beneath this is the Old Coach Road from which branches a 29 mile network of foot paths, bridleways and cycle routes within the Estate.

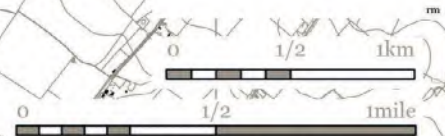
³⁵ These routes are the conduits to deliver environmental gain for public good. The changes required to develop new farming methods will need to be designed to make people feel they are part of a shift in attitude: understanding that landscape is being cared for and looked after well relies on changing the way it looks. Seeing blossoming hedgerows, flowering margins and woodland enterprises will create engagement and increased support. Landscape management is the tool to engage and inspire the public who are also customers for the farms and the Estate – encouraging people to stay the night, linger in the pubs, stay for supper, buy direct from farms, visit local businesses and tell their friends. The output of this strategy is the aim for everyone that lives, works or visits Firle to invest in an environmental culture that is significantly more sustainable.



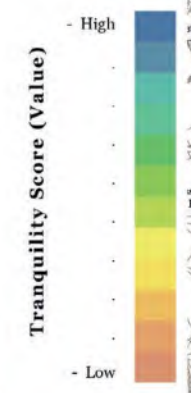
The Firle Estate Plan - 7. A Landscape of Ecosystem Services

~ Tranquillity

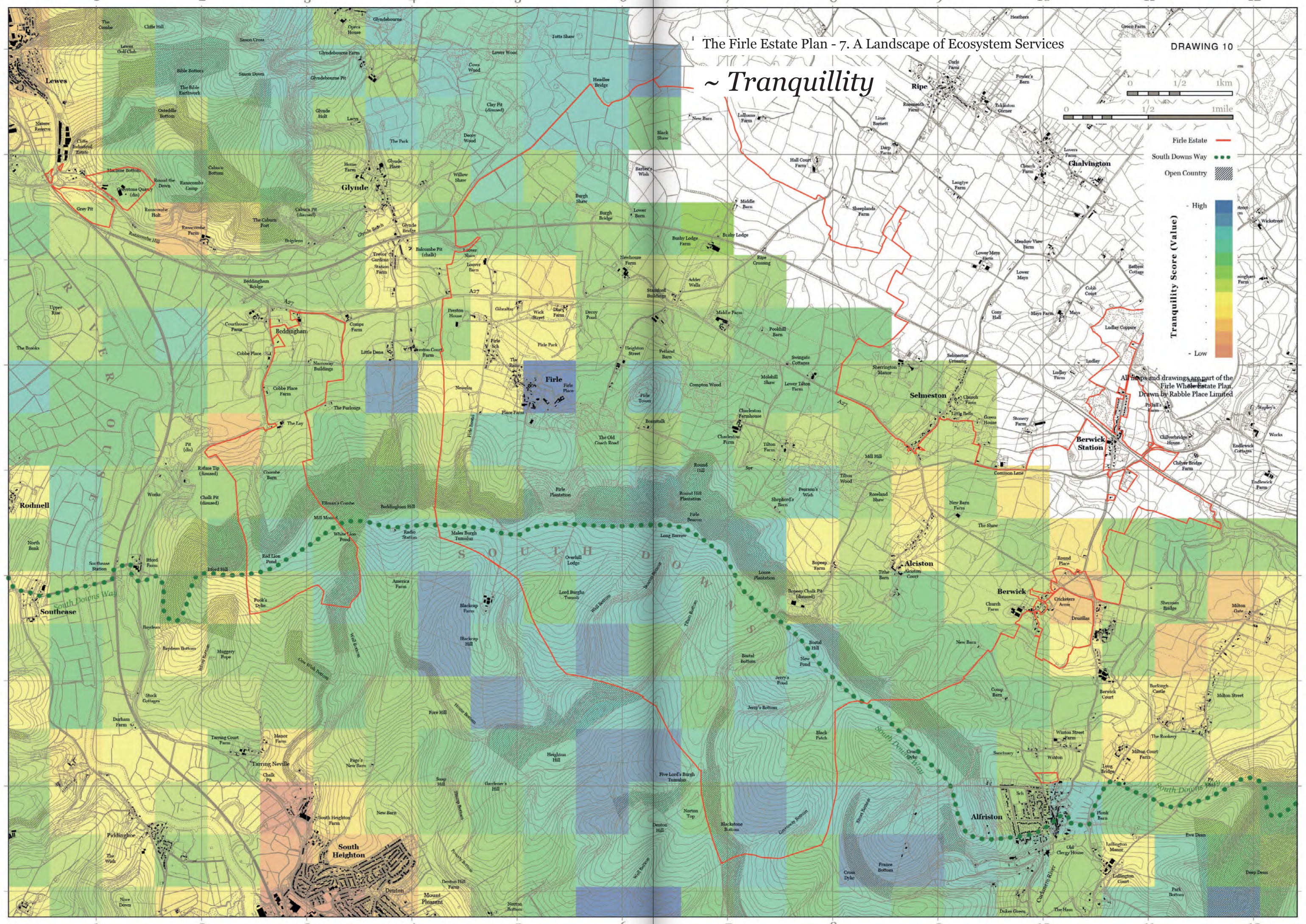
DRAWING 10



- Firle Estate
- South Downs Way
- Open Country



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~ Challenges

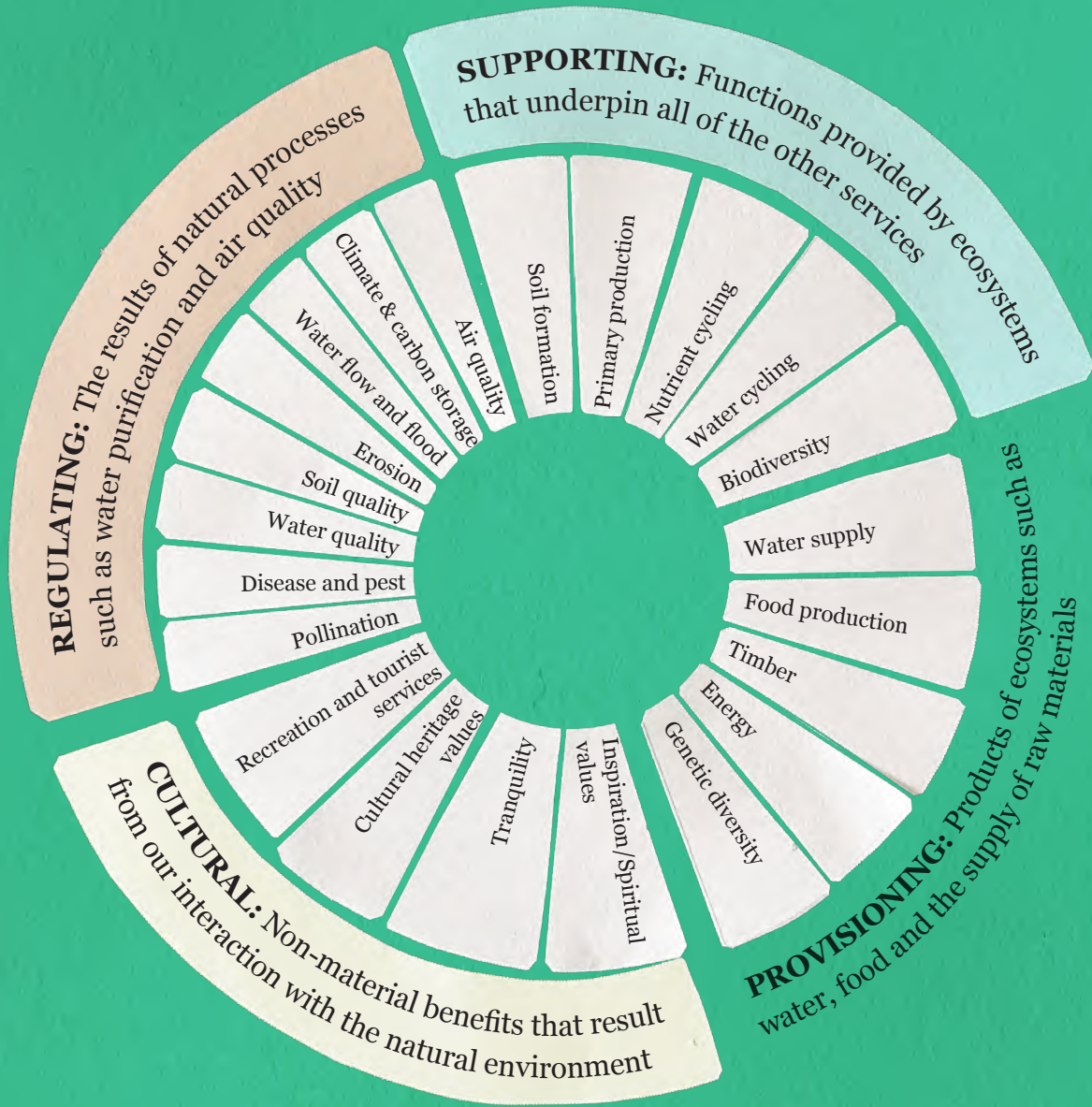
Challenges

The Estate’s biodiversity is fragmented in areas of newer farmland. Improved delivery of environmental outcomes, whilst maintaining food production, will require research and shared learning across the Estate’s farms and the use of new tactics and techniques.

Long term soil restoration and water quality management will in some cases require a leap of faith to reduce the use of chemical inputs and ploughing. Farming with minimal soil disturbance through low or zero tillage combined with cover crops and targeted herbicide will need steady development.

The Estate remains relatively under-wooded (330 acres / 4.5%) and is facing the ecological shock of ash dieback to compound the continuing challenge of Dutch elm disease.

The tranquillity of the Estate is a vulnerable quality. The A27 has a major impact on landscape, congestion, noise and light pollution. The manner in which increasing visitor numbers is addressed will require careful management.



(top) Ecosystem Services diagram

The National Park’s Management Outcomes

- Outcome 1. Landscape & Natural Beauty. The landscape character of the South Downs, its special qualities, natural beauty and local distinctiveness have been conserved and enhanced by avoiding or mitigating the negative impacts of development and cumulative change
- Outcome 2. Increasing Resilience. There is increased resilience within the landscape for its natural resources, habitats and species to adapt to the impacts of climate change and other pressures
- Outcome 3. Habitats and Species. A thriving and connected network of habitats and increased population and distribution of priority species now exist in the National Park
- Outcome 4. Arts and Heritage. Cultural heritage of the National Park is enhanced and widely understood and enjoyed
- Outcome 5. Outstanding Experiences. Outstanding experiences for communities and visitors are supported by high quality access and sustainable transport networks
- Outcome 6. Lifelong Learning. There is widespread understanding of the special qualities of the National Park and the benefits it provides

- Outcome 7. Health and Wellbeing. The South Downs National Park is a well-used and recognised asset for sustaining mental and physical health and wellbeing
- Outcome 8. Creating Custodians. More responsibility and action is taken by visitors, communities and businesses to conserve and enhance the special qualities and use resources more wisely
- Outcome 9. Great Places to Live. Communities in the National Park are more sustainable with an appropriate provision of housing to address local needs and improved access to essential services and facilities
- Outcome 10. Great Places to Work. A diverse, sustainable, dynamic economy which is positively linked to the special qualities of the National Park

7. ~ Our Future Landscape

The Estate’s aspirations for the future of the landscape are principles rather than proposals, each has an ethos that is both forward-minded and traditional.

- ¹ This final chapter collects together many of the concepts, practices and observations uncovered by the plan and suggests the onwards momentum of the Estate using 26 aspirations. These are presented as the ways and means for acting on the strengths and challenges presented as bookends to each chapter. For each, there is the twin task of both maintaining and restoring old and enduring landscapes and villages whilst also creating alternative conditions for a sustainable future.
- ² Encompassing each tier of the Estate Plan’s structure and delivery is the Vision of the South Downs National Park Authority which explains the ambitions for downland landscapes, communities and visitors by 2050. The SDNPA Vision is supported by 10 Outcomes in the Partnership Management Plan. These in turn inform 92 core, strategic, development, and allocation policies.
- ³ The 26 aspirations for the Estate use the 10 SDNPA Outcomes as a backcloth. No action plan or schedule is presented. This is because the future delivery of each aspiration will need much testing, detailed appraisal and consultation. Many will rely on parallel diversification and cross subsidy through enabling development. The details of these contingencies lie outside the scope of this plan which is instead concerned with showing leadership, a duty of care to the environment and an ambition for excellence.



- ⁴ This chapter is intended as a reference point which the Estate will return to again and again. The tenets which have emerged from the process of preparing this plan will be used for cross-checking whether subsequent ideas, proposals and strategies fit with Firle’s character - helping to share information and guide decisions.

(top) New board and batten barn doors painted Firle green

Title	Whole Estate Plan		
	-	-	-
Section ESTATE ASPIRATIONS			
01  Habitats. The Estate will work to improve existing habitat features and to bolster connections between them. Coordination will be required for a combined strategy of conservation grazing, agri-environment support, woodland management, better hedge management and a reduction in artificial inputs. 02  Chalk Grassland. Stewardship of the Firle Escarpment SSSI with rotations of livestock will restore and protect its rare biodiversity, recognising the sensitivities of the chalk landscape. 03  Access. The Estate will continue to encourage wider access to its landscape, to research sensitive parking solutions and review proposals to improve accessibility issues between areas of the Estate to further local connections. 04  Visitor Management. The Estate will aim to carefully manage recreational uses. Erosion and pressures on public rights of way will need to be monitored and managed.  3-5 year outcome  5-7 year outcome  8-10 year outcome			
Page A	2025	The Estate Office, The Shire House, Firle, BN8 6LP	

Title	Whole Estate Plan		
	-	-	-
Section ESTATE ASPIRATIONS			
05  Archaeology. The Estate will protect and manage the archaeological earthworks on the Firle Escarpment. These sites will be conserved as they are key indicators, and the most significant and obvious traces of the landscape's ancient history. 06  Tranquillity. The Estate will seek to conserve the tranquillity of the Downs through appropriate land use decisions, looking to strike the right balance between competing interests. 07  Views. The Estate will maintain the open and undeveloped skyline of the Firle Escarpment and consider views back down to the villages, farms and fields when considering future projects. 08  Patterns. The historic character of the Estate's landscape will be used to guide woodland management, habitat creation and future farming practices. 09  Tourism. The Estate is committed to provide for tourism that references the historic qualities of the South Downs yet is forward thinking and ecologically and commercially sustainable. Tourism should touch the landscape lightly and not take more from the locality than it puts back.  3-5 year outcome  5-7 year outcome  8-10 year outcome			
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Title	Whole Estate Plan		
	-	-	-
Section ESTATE ASPIRATIONS			
10  Farm Infrastructure. The Estate will work with farming tenants and stakeholders to examine where investment is needed to facilitate effective and viable farming practices well into the future. 11  Mixed Farming. The Estate will support the combination of the best traditional mixed farming methods using knowledge and technology to minimise agrochemical inputs, pursuing the restoration management of the Firle Escarpment to regenerate and maintain chalk grassland. 12  Diversification. The Estate will explore opportunities for increasing its income derived through diversification activities. New practices and land uses will be tested and the thoughtful conversion of traditional agricultural buildings will be supported. 13  Business. It is an ongoing priority to provide services and spaces that support local business and employment. The Estate will work to identify commercial property space to ensure a vibrant working countryside providing employment opportunities.  3-5 year outcome  5-7 year outcome  8-10 year outcome			
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Title	Whole Estate Plan		
	-	-	-
Section ESTATE ASPIRATIONS			
14  Firle Place. The Estate is committed to fund maintenance works at Firle Place identified by careful monitoring and quinquennial surveys. There is the potential to achieve this by increasing income through commercial activity at Firle Place including visitors, filming, weddings and events. 15  Georgian Riding School. The Estate has made significant strides in restoring and refurbishing the Riding School and Stables at Firle Place to secure its use and provide a year-round space for weddings, events and filming. 16  Buildings in Need. The Estate does not wish to see any viable building, whether listed or not, deteriorate to the point that it is at risk. Keeping activity in a building is key to maintaining it in good order. Where the economic maintenance and repair of farm buildings can be best supported by their re-use the Estate will work to identify uses and adaptations sympathetic to their character. 17  Creativity. The legacy of artists that have been inspired by the Estate's landscape is part of the intangible mix that draws people to visit the area. The Estate will work to facilitate creativity in a working landscape.  3-5 year outcome  5-7 year outcome  8-10 year outcome			
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Title	Whole Estate Plan		-	-
	Section ESTATE ASPIRATIONS			
Living in the Landscape				
18	■	Development. The Estate is open to business and will support appropriate enterprise for the rural environment to continue as a place of community and work.		
19	●	Housing. To ensure that the right balance is struck between accommodating need and preserving heritage, new housing will be promoted at Berwick Station.		
20	◆	Facilities. The Estate recognises its past and future role in helping to facilitate buildings and spaces that support a thriving local community. Many of these places have long histories and we will continue to support desirable new opportunities.		
21	◆	Education. Through its stewardship and by enabling appropriate access the Estate will support education, learning and creativity within the landscape.		
22	■	Leisure and Tourism. The Estate will support and promote the villages within the Estate landscape as a valuable and unique resource for all whilst seeking to ensure that any increase in visitor numbers brings benefits and opportunities to local people and services.		
	●	3-5 year outcome		
	■	5-7 year outcome		
	◆	8-10 year outcome		
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Title	Whole Estate Plan		-	-
	Section ESTATE ASPIRATIONS			
A Landscape of Ecosystem Services				
23		Biodiversity. The Estate will work to deliver environmental gain. To achieve this future land use decisions will involve an integrated approach to farming and ecology using field realignments, multifunctional crops, managing inputs to improve yields and boost biodiversity. The Estate will seek to assist SDNPA to achieve its own targets for dedicating land to nature.		
24		Water Quality. The Estate will support farming practices that disturb the soil as little as possible, continue traditional mixed rotations, and improve the quality of groundwater, surface water features, and watercourse corridors.		
25		Timber. The commercial management of woodland and hedgerows across the Estate can benefit from continued improvement. We will aim to increase hedgerow habitat and woodland cover and therefore biodiversity and local biomass resource.		
26		Recreation. The Estate's 47km of public rights of way are conduits which can demonstrate environmental gain for public good. Work to increase the Estate's Natural Capital needs to be seen to be understood. Projects to engage with new farming and land management practices will be important to support increases in biodiversity and ensure a sustainable environment that can be appreciated by all.		
		3-5 year outcome		
		5-7 year outcome		
		8-10 year outcome		
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