

Case Study

Kingley Vale Interpretation

Background

Kingley Vale, north of Chichester in West Sussex, was designated one of the country's first National Nature Reserves in 1952 and is a key site in the South Downs National Park (SDNP). The Reserve is a mosaic of habitats including superb chalk grassland with excellent biodiversity.

It is famous for its ancient yew woodland, home to veteran yew trees dated at over 500 years old. It is considered one of the most archaeologically significant places in southern England encompassing 14 scheduled monuments, including 'The Devils Humps', four bronze age barrows, and 'Goosehill Camp', a prehistoric Earthworks site.

The Reserve experienced increased visitor pressures during the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions resulting in some negative behaviours. There was a lack of understanding from the public about how precious the landscape is on the Reserve, with damage caused to the ancient monuments, chalk grassland and yew trees through fires, barbeques and wild camping.

The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and Natural England (NE) saw an opportunity to work in partnership to develop new and improved interpretation that could increase awareness about the importance of the landscape and encourage visitors to access and enjoy the space in a responsible way.



The new Welcome Board at Kingley Vale Nature Reserve

The project

The project initially came about after Natural England was awarded a 'Tree of the Year' grant from the Woodland Trust for the 'Grandfather Yew'. This grant was to fund a new interpretation panel all about the history and folklore surrounding the yew woodland.

A site visit with the NE Reserve Manager was carried out in 2019 with SDNPA staff. This helped to identify the needs of the site and what interpretation to include in the project scope. This included:

- Refreshed panels in the West Stoke car park with a more user-friendly map and positive behaviour messages
- Refreshed 'Welcome' panel
- New SDNP panel in the Field Museum
- Development of a Yew Tree trail
- Three new habitat panels to cover chalk grassland, yew woodland and life underground

A few technical hiccups, combined with Covid restrictions and a broken door, meant that install of the final panel was delayed due to the Field Museum being inaccessible. In addition, a few materials for the SDNP lectern had to be adapted to allow for the floor which couldn't take heavy timber. However, all works have been completed successfully.

Funding for the project totalled £13,500 comprising of £9000 from the SDNPA and £4,500 from NE which included a £500 grant from the Woodland Trust.

“The new interpretation is spot on. I feel they really give out the right messages, and are also engaging and attractive to the public.”

Rachel Guy, Reserve Manager

The outcome

This project has strengthened the South Downs National Park Authority’s relationship with Natural England through close partnership working. The SDNPA has supported NE at a time when their site was experiencing increasing issues with anti-social behavior. Natural England’s response to the outputs of the project has been very positive and they are confident that the interpretation will have the desired impact on visitors.

This project is an important part of ongoing visitor engagement work. Anecdotally, the NE seasonal warden commented “we’ve had lots of excellent feedback from members of the public on the signs too, so really do feel they’ve been a success.”

The Reserve Manager also said “Personally, I found the whole process really easy. There was great communication on all sides and every tiny detail and comment was taken into consideration.”

The introduction of the Yew Trail, both on the maps and through waymarkers, means it is now much easier for visitors to find the yew trees, which are often one of the main reasons for visiting the site. Context about Kingley Vale in the SDNP has been woven throughout the messaging, design and, in particular, through the addition of an SDNP panel in the Field Museum. Visitor messaging is consistent across the site, reinforcing positive behaviour messages.

The future

This new interpretation is part of a wider plan to address visitor behavior on the Reserve.

Quality interpretation is one tool to positively engage with visitors and impart the right messages. In the future, there will be further opportunities for the SDNPA to work with Natural England at Kingley Vale through outreach and engagement activities and collaboration with Rangers.



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The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2020–25 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 10 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 4.1: To increase conservation, awareness, access to and understanding of South Downs cultural heritage.

Outcome 6: There is widespread understanding of the special qualities of the National Park and the benefits it provides.

Outcome 8: More responsibility and action is taken by visitors, communities and businesses to conserve and enhance the special qualities and use resources more wisely.

Outcome 10.2: To increase awareness and desirability of the South Downs as a special place to visit.

southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/