

Scarred Slopes

by Marion Shoard

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What is the most peculiarly English of our landscape types? Is it our bosky woods, our luxurious meadows or our heather-clad moors? No. It is the gaunt, whale-backed chalk downland of the south country, which outside England occurs only in France and New Zealand.

As befits its exclusivity, downland is richly endowed with special qualities. The turf it sustains is one of the most ecologically diverse habitats to be found on earth. In a way, that ecologists are only now beginning to understand, the shortage of minerals on its thin, permeable soils, combined with their low acidity, allows extremely varied assemblies of plants to grow cheek by jowl without any one species coming to dominate the rest.

A small area of downland turf may harbour 20 different kinds of grass and over 120 different types of flowering plant, including orchids rare elsewhere, as well as more familiar but no less well loved plants like cowslips and viper's bugloss. This 'fairy flora', as it has been called, supports an equally rich fairy fauna': over 100 different species of spider can be found on one small stretch of downland turf, and chalkhill blue and marbled white are two of the many exquisite butterfly species that flutter over the downland turf.

The Downs harbour human treasures too. Where the turf has lain untilled for hundreds, sometimes thousands of years, it preserves more clearly than anything else the structures built by our prehistoric forebears. But most precious of all perhaps is the peculiar atmosphere which exists nowhere else but among these female but not feminine hills clad only in springy turf, an atmosphere which has entranced writers as different as Rudyard Kipling, Hilaire Belloc and Edward Thomas.

Unique though the Downs may be, we have allowed them to suffer destruction on a far greater scale than any other valued landscape type. Much has been made of the threats to the moors, but we have lost only 10% of our total area of moorland since 1940. The comparable figure for chalk downland turf is 80%.

Agricultural change has been mainly to blame, as the sheep-and-corn system of mixed farming on the Downs has come to be replaced by arable alone. Where stock rearing persists, intensification is having just as devastating an effect on the downland turf as ploughing. The 'fairy flora' depends on nutrient deficient soils: once artificial fertilisers are added the orchids and harebells quickly disappear, often helped along by the application of herbicides and the reseeding of the ground with specially-bred strains of perennial ryegrass.

Marion Shoard:

Writer | Broadcaster | Lecturer
www.marionshoard.co.uk

None of our stretches of downland have suffered more from these processes than the most celebrated stretch of all - the South Downs. Flaunting their unparalleled northern escarpment, these hills march magnificently for 80 miles between the sea and what Kipling called 'the wooded, dim, blue goodness of the Weald'. Sweeping into Sussex from the Gilbert White country of Hampshire, the Downs reach their highest point at Butser Hill near Petersfield, before they cross the border.

As they proceed east, hanging beechwoods clothe the scarp face, disappearing as the hills march on to meet the sea at Beachy Head. Five river valleys cut through the range at right angles, carving the hills into six distinct chalk islands, each with its own blend of looming shapes enfolding empty expanses and then little settlements marked by the squat, square flint towers of the downland churches.

In 1947, the South Downs were proposed as one of the first new national parks. The government appointed committee on national parks for England and Wales chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse said: "There is no other area within easy reach of London which provides such opportunities for the enjoyment of lovely scenery and peaceful walks and, it should be added, such perfect terrain for riding." But this proposal was eventually rejected on the tragic grounds that so much of the freely accessible downland turf had been ploughed up that the area was no longer worth protecting and promoting as a national park.

Downland turf now covers barely 6% of the South Downs, most of this in odd pockets too awkward for the combine-harvesters to get to. Elsewhere barley prairie extends into the distance, interrupted only by ryegrass stocklands, and conifer plantations that seem particularly out of place in this rounded landscape. As well as downland flora and fauna, archaeological remains, including those of Iron Age hill forts and Bronze Age settlements, have suffered badly.

Last autumn, the transformation of the South Downs unleashed a new horror. On what soon became known as 'Black Wednesday' in October three inches of rain fell in 24 hours. It sent an avalanche of mud and water off the Downs and into houses and gardens at Rottingdean causing around £1 million of damage. Other similar incidents have occurred at places along the northern edge of Brighton and Hove where gardens face the bottom of slopes of arable land. Rainwater runs through turf but can drive before it the thin soil that now lies exposed on the steep ploughed slopes of the Downs. Some fields lost 10% of their soil on Black Wednesday alone.

Soil erosion, Nature's revenge for the destruction of the grassland, may make the South Downs unfarmable by the middle of the next century. This gives new urgency to the question we ought to be asking as agriculture's need for land declines. Isn't it time that we set about returning areas like the South Downs to the grassland cover which made them so attractive and important?

A small step in this direction has already been taken. In the 'environmentally sensitive area' established over much of the South Downs within the past year, the Ministry of Agriculture pays farmers £14 per acre for agreeing to conserve downland and to refrain from applying fertilisers and pesticides to it. But of course there is very little downland left to conserve. So, unlike most other 'ESAs', there is another type of payment as well. Farmers are given £64.75 per acre if they agree to convert arable land to downland turf. So far 6,300 acres of existing downland have been entered into the scheme along with 1,400 acres of arable land which is to be returned to downland. But is the scheme going to catch on?

William Bellamy of Brighton Polytechnic has tried to find out through a survey of farmers. And the message seems to be that farmers are quite taken with the payments for conserving downland but consider that those for reconstitution are too low. In their eyes £91 - £100 per acre would be nearer the mark.

The ESA arrangements therefore seem unlikely to do the job on the own, and to press for higher payments would be unproductive in the current climate. At present funds go haphazardly to whichever farmers feel like participating in the system. It would make more sense to concentrate funds on stretches of potential downland that are of most value to conservation and recreation. These could include areas close to the South Downs Way like Graffham Down (ploughed up 1980) and Charlston Bottom (fertilised and reseeded in 1985); areas close to towns and villages like Jevington Down (ploughed up many years ago); areas close to national nature reserves, like Kingston Downs (sprayed last year), and areas most affected by soil erosion, like fields at Rottingdean, Woodingdean and Mile Oak on the northern and eastern edge of Brighton and Hove. It would also make sense to ensure that payments are accompanied by a requirement for general access: once the turf has established itself, which is not imposed at present.

To establish which are the key areas and how access should be introduced, a more sensitive body than a Whitehall bureaucracy whose primary interest is agriculture needs to take charge. At present the Ministry of Agriculture's dealings with farmers over the ESA are confidential. An overall plan is required in which the public can have a say both at national and local level.

One day perhaps we shall have national system for managing the countryside which will encourage such things as landscape reconstitution, providing incentives both for the protection and the creation of desirable landscapes. A way of achieving this could be through rural land tax-and-grant system (and outlined in my recent book, *The Land is Our Lard*).

It will be a while, however before any such radical measure are considered and the South Downs cannot wait. They need reconstitution programme that is more vigorous and precisely targeted than is provided by current arrangements. And to implement and draw up such a programme they need a flexible, locally-based organisation that is responsive to public demands both nationally and locally.

So why not bring back the national park proposal for the South Downs? The requirement that national park authorities be given advance notice of the agricultural improvement' of moorland in national parks could be extended to downland turf and would provide a means of preventing the ploughing up, or other agricultural `improvement', of the bits of downland that still survive. A national park authority would also be better placed than existing local authorities to prevent other undesirable landscape change in the Downs such as the conversion to other uses of redundant but unattractive farm buildings and to secure more stringent landscape conditions on the erection of new farm buildings. And the extra government funds park designation would bring with it could help finance more access facilities in the form of public paths, access agreement lands and Sunday bus services into the heart of the Downs for people without cars.

Above all, the South Downs National Park could be given the special objective of reconstituting chalk downland turf on a large scale. The national park authority should be allocated the ESA funds currently deployed by the Ministry of Agriculture but could also use the extra funds for landscape enhancement which national park designation would bring. It could try to bring in extra funds, perhaps from local business, and devise non-financial incentives for reconstitution as well.

It is not widely appreciated that Parliament intended the national parks not only to preserve our best countryside but to provide countryside for recreation within easy reach of population centres. At present, the nearest national park to London, the Brecon Beacons, is 130 miles away - a major deficiency which should be corrected now.

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Marion Shoard is based at the Faculty of the Environment, Polytechnic of Central London.