

**HAWKSHILL FREEDOWN  
WALMER  
KENT  
MANAGEMENT PLAN**

BY

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1** Walmer Free Down is an area of public open space owned and managed by Walmer Parish Council. The site consists of grassland on a level plateau and some locally – dense scrub / light woodland on a steep south - west – facing bank that is partly chalk grassland but mostly scrub of varying ages and densities. There is public access throughout the whole site.
- 1.2** There are two previous reports upon which to base a management plan. These are Newcombe (2000)<sup>1</sup> and Alexander (2000)<sup>2</sup>. The first report is an ecological survey which contains an initial management plan as well as lots of supporting information. The second report is simply a management plan which is based upon the recommendations in the first report.
- 1.3** The original management plan offers the opportunity to find a balance between conserving the biodiversity of the site and enhancing the environment for the users of the site and local residents. The recommendations from the plan could have formed the basis for grant bids for works on the site. There was also a possibility of the site gaining some formal nature conservation status based on additional survey findings and the completion of prescribed management.
- 1.4** This management plan has been prepared in order to review what has been accomplished to date and to provide additional opportunities for the future. It is in a simple format rather than the more commonly – used format given by Nature Conservancy (1991)<sup>3</sup>, although it has been based upon that document. This is partly because of the fact that the Nature Conservancy Council document is rather daunting to work through, and partly because of the need for overall simplicity. It is also partly because of the fact that there are very few volunteers, with limited time available to devote to the conservation of the site, and it is felt that they would be better working practically out of doors rather than having to wade through large amounts of documentation.
- 1.5** A lot has been achieved by the volunteers at the site over the last ten years, but the problem has been, is now and probably always will be that there are too few people doing too big a job. Add to that the financial constraints of parish councils which limit the use of contractors and other paid staff, and it is clear that a serious problem looms in the near distance viz. That sooner or later there will be no management simply because no volunteers are forthcoming. Those who have volunteered to date are to be commended for what they have achieved; without them the chalk slope with its crow garlic and invertebrates would have become covered in dense scrub as the area on either side of the public footpath steps has become. There are effectively only three ways in which the site can continue to be managed if it is not to become a piece of chalk woodland in years to come. One is to carry on as now and hope that the number of volunteers increases. The second is to bring in some extra help such as British Trust for Conservation Volunteers or White Cliffs Countryside Project or similar, but these, too, have many calls on their time and do not always find it easy to do as much as they wish. These two options assume that there

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<sup>1</sup> Newcombe, M. J. T. 2000. Hawkshill Freedown, Walmer, Kent. Ecological survey and management proposals. Unpublished report for Walmer Parish Council.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, K. 2000. Hawkshill Down, Walmer. Management Plan. Unpublished document for Walmer Parish Council.

<sup>3</sup> Nature Conservancy Council. 1991. Site management plans for nature conservation - a working guide. Peterborough, Nature Conservancy Council / British Petroleum.

may be some limited financial help from the parish council in terms of machinery, training and professional help for the more dangerous or difficult tasks. In the past it was suggested that grazing the down could be possible, but leaving aside all the problems associated with a public open space of this type, the cost of the fencing needed would be prohibitive. It seems that, if the long – term scientific interest of the site is to be maintained, then serious thought must be given as to whether or not the site can continue to be managed or even owned by the parish council. The time has possibly come to consider finding a third party which would take the land and possibly even the volunteers and integrate all of it into a larger – scale organisation which has the expertise and size to successfully look after the site as it should be looked after.

## **2.0 SITE DETAILS<sup>4</sup>**

- 2.1 Site Name:** Hawkshill Freedown, Walmer, Kent.
- 2.2 Grid Reference:** TR374479.
- 2.3 Location:** The site lies east of the village of Walmer.
- 2.4 Area:** c. 5 hectares.
- 2.5 Access:** Public access throughout including public footpaths.
- 2.6 Tenure:** Freehold of Walmer Parish Council, 3 Stanhope Road, Walmer, Deal, Kent, CT4 6AB.
- 2.7 Status:** The site is a Site of Nature Conservation Interest designated by Kent Wildlife Trust.
- 2.8 Local Planning Authority:** Dover District Council.
- 2.9 Contact:** The Parish Clerk, Walmer Parish Council, 3 Stanhope Road, Walmer, Deal, Kent, CT4 6AB. Telephone 01304 381506..

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<sup>4</sup> Further details can be found in Alexander (2000).

## **3.0 DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE<sup>5</sup>**

### **3.1 PHYSICAL**

The site lies in the North Downs massif close to where it stops at the English Channel. The whole area was open ground during World War 1 as shown by various historical sources. The site is basically a plateau on the chalk with varying depths of clay – sand, sloping steeply down to the south – west side. The site surrounding area is rural in character to the south and east, but developed to varying extents to the north and west. The north of the site is dominated by the Walmer Castle and grounds, with the latter consisting largely of woodland where it adjoins the site. The whole site is fairly dry due to its position in relation to the local landscape. It is high and very exposed on the plateau area to the prevailing winds, although the south – west slope is very sheltered.

### **3.2 GEOLOGY**

The underlying rock is chalk covered to varying depths on the plateau with clay – sand plateau drift of periglacial origin.

### **3.3 BIOLOGICAL**

**3.3.1** The site is largely composed of the following National Vegetation Classification (NVC) types;

- Rodwell's (1998)<sup>6</sup> CG5 Bromus – erectus – Brachypodium pinnatum grassland in places on the south- west slope and nearby on the edge of the plateau.
- Rodwell's (1998) CG3 Bromus erectus grassland dominant on most of the plateau.
- Rodwell's (1991)<sup>7</sup> W22 Prunus spinosa - Rubus fruticosus agg scrub and its variants dominant on the southern half of the south – western slope.
- Rodwell's (1991) W8 Fraxinus excelsior – Acer campestre – Mercurialis perennis woodland W8e Geranium robertianum subcommunity on the northern part of the south -, west slope.

**3.3.2** The site is remarkable due to the presence and intermingling of several vegetation types. It is also notable for the following:

- Crowsfoot Garlic (*Allium vineale*) – a few plants on the central, open part of the south – west slope.
- Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) – locally common in the plateau grassland.
- Kidney vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) – a few plants on the central, open part of the south – west slope.
- Pallid Cockroach (*Ectobius pallidus*) –on the central, open part of the south – west slope. Rare on the plateau.
- Rose chafer (*Cetonia aurata*)
- Lesser Stag Beetle (*Dorcus parallelipipedus*). In the larger scrublands.
- Bumble – bees *Bombus hortorum*, *B. Lapidarius* and *B. Terrestris*.
- Whorled Snail (*Trochoidea elegans*) – on the scrub / grassland interface.

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<sup>5</sup> Further details can be found in Alexander (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Rodwell, J. S. (Ed.). 1998. British plant communities. Vol. 3. Grasslands and montane communities. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Rodwell J.S. (Ed.). 1991. British plant communities. Vol. 1. Woodlands and scrub. Cambridge University Press.

- Slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*) – especially on the slope.
- Common Lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) – throughout the site.
- Linnet (*Acanthis cannabina*) – in the scrub.
- Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) – on the edge of the scrub.
- Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) – roosts in the scrub in winter.
- Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) – has nested in the scrub.
- Badger (*Meles meles*)

**3.3.3** Birds travel through, but it is likely that the site could be useful for feeding by winter migrants and possibly even for use by passage migrants in season.

#### **3.4 HISTORICAL**

The site is of historical interest as the site of a World War 1 aerodrome, which is commemorated by a memorial on site.

## **4.0 EVALUATION**

- 4.1** The site is a reasonably good example of a steep chalk grassland and scrub bank on chalk soil with associated plateau drift grassland. The scientific interest has been maintained by limited conservation work during the period since the original management plan (Alexander,2000) was written, with the limitations caused y lack of voluntary and professional input in its management. In addition, there has been little additional ecological investigation over and above that reported in Newcombe (2000). However, in time, additional plants, invertebrates, small mammals and birds of note are all likely to be recorded on the site. Rabbit grazing is an important contribution to the value of part of the plateau area of the site.
- 4.2** An ongoing ecological assessment of the site should be carried out over the course of the management plan, in particular to monitor the effects of the management prescriptions on fauna and flora.



## 5.0 CONFIRMATION OF IMPORTANT FEATURES

| SITE FEATURES                 | IMPORTANCE OF SPECIES |          |         |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|----------|---------|
|                               | National              | Regional | Local   |
| <b>Plant Species</b>          |                       |          |         |
| Crowsfoot Garlic              | Low                   | Low      | High    |
| Pyramidal Orchid              | Low                   | Average  | High    |
| Kidney Vetch                  | Low                   | Average  | High    |
| <b>Insect Species</b>         |                       |          |         |
| Pallid Cockroach              | High                  | High     | Average |
| Rose Chafer                   | High                  | High     | High    |
| Lesser Stag Beetle            | Average               | Average  | High    |
| Small Garden Bumble Bee       | Average               | Average  | High    |
| Large Red – tailed Bumble Bee | Average               | Average  | High    |
| Buff – tailed Bumble Bee      | Average               | Average  | High    |
| <b>Mollusc Species</b>        |                       |          |         |
| Whorled Snail                 | High                  | High     | High    |
| <b>Reptile Species</b>        |                       |          |         |
| Slow worm                     | Low                   | Average  | High    |
| Common Lizard                 | Low                   | Average  | High    |
| <b>Bird Species</b>           |                       |          |         |
| Linnet                        | Average               | Average  | High    |
| Spotted Flycatcher            | High                  | High     | High    |
| Tree Sparrow                  | Average               | High     | High    |
| Turtle Dove                   | High                  | High     | High    |
| <b>Mammal Species</b>         |                       |          |         |
| Badger                        | Low                   | Average  | High    |

## **6.0 MANAGEMENT AIMS**

- To maintain and enhance the present grassland ecosystems by maintenance of the existing state so as to continue to benefit the plants and animals that live in it.
- To maintain habitat for the crowfoot garlic, pyramidal orchid and kidney vetch by maintenance of the existing grassland habitat.
- To maintain habitat for the pallid cockroach and rose chafer by maintenance of the existing light scrub habitat.
- To maintain habitat for the lesser stag beetle by maintenance of the existing mature scrub habitat.
- To maintain habitat for the bumble bees by maintenance of the existing flowery grassland habitat.
- To maintain habitat for the whorled snail by maintenance of the existing sloping calcareous grassland and scrub mosaic habitat.
- To maintain habitat for slow – worms and lizards by the provision of hibernacula and feeding sites and the continuation of existing basking sites.
- To maintain small areas of scrub for species such as linnet, spotted flycatcher, tree sparrow and turtle dove that require it as a breeding or roosting habitat.
- To provide continued feeding and sett habitat for badgers in the scrub and on the grassland.
- To continue biological recording.

## **7.0 MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTIONS**

- 7.1** The grassland is particularly rich in flowering plants, but the variable presence of rabbits and their droppings is important to coprophilous insects and other invertebrates. Combined with localised human trampling and annual machine cutting of the sward, it is maintained as a result.
- 7.2** The aim should be to increase the grassland wherever light scrub is present, by removing the scrub as practicable. Where scrub has developed further to tree canopy level, the short – term aim must be to prevent further spread.
- 7.3** In addition, although a few fallen trees and rabbit holes are present, a few artificial hibernacula should be provided.

## **8.0 MANAGEMENT PLAN**

### **COMPARTMENT 1**

#### **Current state**

- Light woodland / overgrown scrub.

#### **Ideal future state**

- Scattered scrub.

#### **Work to date**

- Negligible apart from a tiny amount of scrub clearing.

#### **Rationale for change**

- Provision of a habitat buffer between adjacent off – site woodland and woodland in management compartment 2.
- Provision of a woodland edge to the off – site woodland edge /scrub to the north.
- Provision of a sun trap for butterflies, hoverflies and reptiles.

#### **Methods**

- Removal of scrub using volunteers and professionals as practicable.

#### **Timing**

- Between September and mid - March inclusive so as to avoid the bird – breeding season and damage to the late – summer invertebrates.

#### **Special requirements**

- None.

#### **Priority**

- High; scrub has been allowed to take over former open chalk grassland areas.

### **COMPARTMENT 2**

#### **Current state**

- Tall woodland.

#### **Ideal future state**

- Coppiced woodland with 2 – 3 retained standards. Coppice to be cut on every 12 – 15 years cycle.

#### **Work to date**

- None.

#### **Rationale for change**

- This area of woodland is shading out the chalk grassland on the slope adjacent.

#### **Methods**

- Initial thinning of woodland by contractor with trees and overhanging branches next to chalk downland being removed as a matter of priority.
- Trees and shrubs to be removed within 5m of chalk grassland edge and thereafter maintained as scrub.
- Deadwood to be piled on site in woodland to provide hibernacula for reptiles and nesting sites for small birds.
- Retain a length of scrub next to road and car Park c. 2m wide so as to act as barrier to rubbish dumping/.

- Give consideration to long - term management of roadside and car park scrub as hedge, whether laid or machine – managed.
- Retain 2-3 trees as standards for bats and birds.
- Removal of all trees and scrub over 60 cms dbh and maintenance thereafter as scrub / coppice on a rolling programme.

**Timing**

- Between September and mid -March inclusive so as to avoid the bird – breeding season and damage to the late – summer invertebrates.

**Special requirements**

- Piles of lop and top should be placed in such a way as to discourage access to the chalk slope.

**Priority**

- Very urgent; this is probably the single most important factor affecting the survival of the chalk grassland area on this site.

**COMPARTMENT 3**

**Current state**

- Relict chalk quarry and grassland with relict flora, good invertebrate and reptile habitat and considerable potential.

**Ideal future state**

- Open chalk downland.

**Work to date**

- Localised scrub cutting within a limited area.

**Rationale for change**

- Preservation of the chalk grassland habitat.
- Maintenance of reptile populations.

**Methods**

- Removal of all scrub.
- Annual trimming of rank grasses e.g. tor – grass.

**Timing**

- September to March.

**Special requirements**

- None.

**Priority**

- Extremely urgent; insufficient work has been carried out so far due to lack of a suitable voluntary labour force. This habitat will disappear and turn into far more common scrub within twenty years if no regular action is taken.

**COMPARTMENT 4**

**Current state**

- Semi – improved chalk grassland, machine - cut annually.

**Ideal future state**

- Maintain existing state.

**Work to date**

- Annual cut in most years by machine has maintained and slightly increased diversity.

**Rationale for change**

- Maintain the existing state and diversity.

**Methods**

- Maintain existing annual machine cut with removal of material.
- Allow retention of occasional shrub as token presence for breeding birds.

**Timing**

- Late summer (August?).

**Special requirements**

- Reduce nitrogen content by encouraging use of dog faeces bins.

**Priority**

- Medium, due to the need to maintain the habitat for the flora.

**COMPARTMENT 5**

**Current state**

- The boundary hedge and associated footpath. The hedge forms a discontinuous wildlife corridor.

**Ideal future state**

- A mixed – species hedge with no gaps, albeit with low points where views are required.

**Work to date**

- None.

**Rationale for change**

- Need for as continuing wildlife corridor along this edge of the site.

**Methods**

- Conduct a programme of mixed – species planting to close all gaps.
- Maintain annual machine cut once shrubs are established and thereafter annually.

**Timing**

- Planting in autumn.
- Machine cut after year three in late autumn or winter before birds start breeding.

**Special requirements**

- None, other than retaining existing sea views.

**Priority**

- Low; hedges are common in the parish.

**COMPARTMENT 6**

**Current state**

- Scattered scrub and relict chalk grassland.

**Ideal future state**

- Scattered scrub and relict chalk grassland.

**Work to date**

- Intensive removal of chalk scrub on much of the bank, with extremely good grassland recovery.

**Rationale for change**

- Conservation of the open aspect of the site and of the chalk downland flora and fauna.

#### **Methods**

- Removal of all scrub.
- Annual trimming of rank grasses e.g. tor – grass.

#### **Timing**

- Scrub removal between September and mid -March inclusive so as to avoid the bird – breeding season and damage to the late – summer invertebrates.
- Annual strimming between October and March of any year.

#### **Special requirements**

- None.

#### **Priority**

- High, due to the rarity of chalk grassland.

### **COMPARTMENT 7**

#### **Current state**

- Dense scrub with young trees.

#### **Ideal future state**

- Scrub of varied ages and density.

#### **Work to date**

- None.

#### **Rationale for change**

- Provide variation in the natural succession and allow habitat for calcareous scrub plants and animals including nesting birds.

#### **Methods**

- Patch coppice on 200m x 200m cants.

#### **Timing**

- Between September and mid -March inclusive so as to avoid the bird – breeding season and damage to the late – summer invertebrates.

#### **Special requirements**

- None.

#### **Priority**

- Low, but the scrub must not be allowed to creep up the hillside any further.

### **COMPARTMENT 8**

#### **Current state**

- Old scrub becoming woodland.

#### **Ideal future**

- Mixed calcareous high forest woodland.

#### **Work to date**

- None.

#### **Rationale for change**

- None.

**Methods**

- No action required.

**Timing**

- Not applicable.

**Special requirements**

- None.

**Priority**

- None.

**COMPARTMENT 9**

**Current state**

- A partly – exposed fence and some patchy scrub on the edge of the site.

**Ideal future state**

- Patchy scrub along the boundary.

**Work to date**

- None.

**Rationale for change**

- No change required; scrub is currently controlled by mowing.

**Methods**

- None required.

**Timing**

- Not applicable.

**Special requirements**

- None.

**Priority**

- Not applicable.

**MANAGEMENT APPLICABLE TO THE WHOLE SITE**

- Retain all standing dead wood where safe to do so.
- Continue the monitoring programme and lodge the results with the parish council.
- Maintain a fixed – point photographic record throughout the site.
- Maintain a written record of all work carried out.
- Review the management plan every five years.



## APPENDIX 1: PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE WORK

| PRIORITY         | LOCATION      | ACTIVITY                                                                         | Notes                                                                                                              |
|------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Extremely urgent | Compartment 3 | Removal of all scrub                                                             |                                                                                                                    |
| Extremely urgent | Compartment 3 | Annual trimming of rank grasses e.g. tor – grass.                                |                                                                                                                    |
| Very urgent      | Compartment 2 | Initial thinning of woodland by contractor                                       | This is probably the single most important factor affecting the survival of the chalk grassland area on this site. |
| High             | Compartment 1 | Removal of scrub                                                                 |                                                                                                                    |
| High             | Compartment 6 | Removal of all scrub.                                                            |                                                                                                                    |
| High             | Compartment 6 | Annual trimming of rank grasses e.g. tor – grass.                                |                                                                                                                    |
| Medium           | Whole site    | Maintain a written record of all work carried out.                               | Important in order to provide feedback to success or failure of management plan.                                   |
| Medium           | Whole site    | Review the management plan every five years.                                     |                                                                                                                    |
| Medium           | Whole site    | Continue the monitoring programme and lodge the results with the parish council. | Important in order to provide feedback to success or failure of management plan.                                   |
| Medium           | Whole site    | Maintain a fixed – point photographic record throughout the site.                | A visual indicator of success or failure.                                                                          |
| Medium           | Compartment 4 | Maintain existing annual machine cut with removal of material.                   |                                                                                                                    |
| Low              | Compartment 7 | Patch coppice on 200m x 200m cants                                               |                                                                                                                    |
| Low              | Compartment 5 | Conduct a programme of mixed – species planting to close all gaps.               |                                                                                                                    |
| Low              | Compartment 5 | Maintain annual machine cut once shrubs are established and thereafter annually. |                                                                                                                    |

## **APPENDIX 2: COMPARTMENT DESCRIPTIONS**

- 1 The area from the top of the steps to the edge of the castle fence where no mowing occurs.
- 2 The woodland area from the edge of the car park north to the property boundary.
- 3 The steep chalk slope and an area that is normally not cut on the plateau at the top to within c. 3m of the edge of the slope.
- 4 The main grassland plateau.
- 5 The area either side of the public footpath including the edge.
- 6 The track and the chalk slope immediately above it, including the edge of the plateau to within 3m of the edge of the slope.
- 7 The scrub below the track and above the road.
- 8 The small area of woodland forming the southern tip of the property above the road.
- 9 The southern unmown edge of the plateau from the scrub to the war memorial.



