

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve

MANAGEMENT PLAN

2020-2030



Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	7
Strategic management objectives 2020-2030	8
Habitat Management Objectives 2020-2030	10
Future Challenges	12
The story behind Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve	15
Review of 2010 – 2015 management plan	16
Site based information	18
Enviromental information	22
Physical	22
Cultural	27
People	30
References	36

Foreword

It is with great pleasure and a sense of pride I present the latest management plan for Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve. The plan sets a 10 year vision for the reserve to ensure its unique habitats are protected and the local community and visitors continue to enjoy this wonderful coastal nature reserve.

The plan is published at a critical time for wildlife and nature conservation in the UK and beyond. The planet is facing both a climate and biodiversity crisis. Our protected landscapes and native wildlife are under threat as never before with habitat loss the single biggest threat to our native species. We are determined to tackle both our climate emergency and the threat to our native wildlife and habitats.

We are very proud of the quality of our parks and nature reserves. They range from small pocket parks to historic heritage listed parks to designated nature reserves. They are very special places for

our local community and visitors to the town. It is well known that having access to natural areas is essential for our mental and physical wellbeing. Having some of the most deprived communities in the UK means it is essential that Hastings Borough Council ensures our local communities have access to good quality open spaces on their doorstep.

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is a one of the most cherished and iconic landscapes for local people. It also represents one of the most important biological and geological coastal landscapes in Europe. As community leaders, owners and managers, we have been managing the farm and SSSI as a nature reserve since 2000. We have pushed the boundaries of nature conservation management to conserve biodiversity, reverse habitat decline and provide an extraordinary green space for the local community and visitors.

Our new straw bale visitor centre will provide opportunities to learn about nature and the challenges the planet faces from habitat destruction and climate change. By constructing the the centre with low carbon technology we are helping address our climate emergency.

We could not have done this alone. A huge thank you is extended to all the dedicated volunteers who give their valuable time to collecting data, monitoring species and habitats and welcoming members of the public. Their dedication is very much appreciated.

We will continue, through the implementation of this plan, to work to conserve and manage the most diverse and protected landscape in the Borough, ensuring Hastings Borough Council plays its part in tackling our climate and biodiversity crises for future generations.

Councillor Maya Evans
Lead Councillor,
Natural Environment and Leisure.

• In 2006 the farm and designated areas were declared a Local Nature Reserve



- Local authorities own and manage almost as much land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest as the Wildlife Trusts and National Trust put together



Introduction

In 2018 the Government published an ambitious 25 year plan for the environment which recognises our natural environment is our most precious inheritance. It outlines a blueprint to protect our cherished landscapes from exploitation and protect threatened species and wildlife habitats. Biodiversity in the UK is still in decline and the rate at which some species and habitats are disappearing is increasing. Hastings Borough Council is committed to addressing the national biodiversity emergency head on by managing our nature reserves so wildlife can thrive and people have access to nature areas on their doorstep.

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is one of the most important coastal nature reserves in the UK. The reserve we are managing today is significantly different from the failing, overstocked farm and neglected habitats we inherited in 2000. Following 20 years of hard work to reverse the impact of intensive farming, the reserve is now nationally recognised for its important coastal habitats and its

innovative conservation management. This turnaround has been due to an enormous commitment on the part of the council and its partners.

We have been able to do this through bold management initiatives funded by Hastings Borough Council and grant aid through the countryside stewardship scheme. We have changed the landscape of the coastal areas and glens by removing large areas of invasive gorse, encouraged the recovery of coastal heathland, introduced free roaming conservation grazing with native breed cattle and wild Exmoor ponies. We mechanically stripped large areas of bracken to expose the natural soils and sandstone, introduced wildflower margins on our arable fields and sown entire farm fields with pollen rich plants.

We have used Highland cattle, Sussex cattle, British Whites and Exmoor Ponies over the years. Grazing animals manage the reserve naturally, reaching areas impossible for mechanical management. We now have a small team of wild Exmoor ponies and a small herd of native Belted Galloway

cattle. We have fitted the cattle with radio tracking collars to help monitor their welfare and track where they graze. Our ambition to graze the coastal heathland has been thwarted by continual vandalism of our innovative underground fencing. Underground fencing is a new approach to fencing in nature areas and sensitive landscapes which is an alternative to wooden post and wire fencing. We will explore new ways to graze the Firehills through satellite technology to restore this internationally threatened habitat.

Bringing heavy horses to the site annually, to roll and bruise the bracken, opens up areas for natural acid grassland and heathland restoration. They also provide a wonderful opportunity to explain our management principles to a wider audience.

These management activities have made the reserve a haven for our coastal wildlife. Through the implementation of this plan we will continue to ensure our threatened wildlife has space to flourish and our local community has access to a vibrant, quality natural open space.

Strategic management objectives 2020-2030

The management plan and the strategic objectives of the site are the responsibility of the Hastings Country Park Management Forum, a cross-party group of councillors. They have been advising the executive on the strategic management of the reserve since 2000 and continue to drive strategic thinking and on-going priorities for the future management of the reserve.

The Council’s continuing challenge is how to retain and deliver success and commitment with ever reducing resources and reductions in grant funding posed by leaving the European Union.

By establishing clear management priorities, working with partners, accessing grant aid and continually reviewing the way we manage the site we are determined to ensure the long term conservation of one of the most unique habitats and cherished open spaces in the borough of Hastings.

Our vision is to have the best managed and accessible coastal nature reserve in the South East of England; recognising and enhancing its biodiversity importance and its significance within the cultural and historic landscape of the town.

The management plan sets out the broad management principles for the reserve for the next 10 years. The plan will take us beyond our current stewardship grant and onto the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM) following our departure from the European Union and the Common Agriculture Policy. The ELM will be based on paying land managers to provide environmental benefits. Through this plan we aim to ensure our management activities give us the very best opportunity to maximise our grant under the new ELM scheme.

- The reserve is one of the foremost coastal nature reserves in the UK and internationally, designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a European designated Special Area of Conservation and a Country Park

Within the life of this plan we will;

- Implement and complete our Higher Level Stewardship Agreement and work with the relevant authorities to access the most advantageous successor grant aid
- Continue work to reverse the decline in UK species and habitats and implement management objectives aimed at the recovery and restoration of coastal habitats
- Continually review environmental and economic opportunities for arable and grazing management
- Work with partners to enhance the visitor experience though the highest quality interpretation, and community engagement
- Work with partners to provide a new visitor centre that will be the first public building in the borough built from straw and sustainable materials
- Review and update our individual habitat management plans every 5 years



Habitat management objectives 2020-2030

Our stewardship agreement requires us to produce individual habitat management plans for heathland, grassland, scrub, arable and grazing. These plans provide the detailed management specifications and techniques for the individual habitats on the reserve. Each management plan provides objectives, constraints and threats, details of associated wildlife, designation information, historic management, and specific site analysis and management proposals.

The habitat management plans help us fulfil the details of the stewardship agreement and help achieve the strategic objectives of

this plan. They will be reviewed and updated every 5 years. The habitat management plans are separate to this document.

The broad principles for the habitat management plans are set as follows;

Restore nationally scarce coastal heathland

- Provide areas of open heath, dwarf shrubs, acid grassland and scrub
- Extend the conservation grazing project allowing free roaming grazing in the more remote and hilly parts of the reserve

- Explore grazing opportunities on the coastal clifftop and heathland areas to manage coastal heathland naturally
- Use innovative technology such as satellite managed fencing to target and monitor grazing on specialist habitats.
- Create a diverse habitat for threatened and rare species such as the Dartford Warbler and notified invertebrate populations

Manage scrub

- Reduce the bracken and scrub and other invasive species on threatened habitats and farm fields

- Create a varied composition and age structure
- Increase the habitat value of scrub for important species
- Create and maintain scrub free areas near the cliff top, critical to protecting rare invertebrate assemblages

Allow freely eroding cliffs

- Maintain internationally important areas of maritime soft rock cliff and slope by natural processes
- Maintain habitats for breeding bird populations, rare and threatened invertebrate and plant species that exist on the cliffs

Maintain geologically important rock faces

- Keep sandstone quarry faces free of scrub and available for the study of the sedimentation and paleo environments of the weald

Manage woodlands

- Manage gill woodlands through natural processes and minimal intervention to retain the conditions within the deeply incised gill for rare bryophytes and invertebrates
- Manage remaining woodlands to provide a varied structure of ground flora, shrub and canopy layers, maximising biodiversity benefit

- Maintain the water and habitat quality of the gills to allow rare and specialist plants to flourish

Restore species rich pastures

- Increase the range and populations of wild flowers to provide pollen and nectar sources for invertebrates
- Provide a varied grassland coverage through grazing to provide food sources and nesting opportunities for farmland birds and habitats for small mammals
- Reverse the decline in species rich grasslands which have declined nationally by 97% since the 1930's

Manage the arable block

- Maximise opportunities for farmland birds, pollinators and other wildlife to flourish.
- Improve soil structure and condition through constant review of our arable cropping regime and spreading material arising from composting our green waste on site

Manage hedgerows

- Maintain hedgerows for the benefit of wildlife
- Maintain the landscape character of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Surveys and Monitoring

- Ensure good quality surveys and monitoring data informs our management decisions.
- Work with partners to commission annual species surveys and more specialist surveys such as invertebrates when required.

• The reserve is wholly owned and managed by Hastings Borough Council



Future challenges

Local authorities face continual challenges to deliver high quality services with reduced central government funds. This has a direct impact on the delivery of all the council's services, including Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve and our other parks and nature reserves.

We no longer have a dedicated site based ranger service at the reserve. Regular and daily maintenance tasks at the reserve are now undertaken by our grounds maintenance contractor. Specialist contractors implement our arable works. In partnership with a local farmer their grazer looks after the conservation grazing animals

to extend our management into hard to reach areas, and conservation volunteers and other partners help provide additional benefits for people and wildlife.

With current and future partners Hastings Borough Council and the Hastings Country Park Management Forum will continue to review the way we manage the site, seek further grant aid and make our limited funds stretch further. The council cannot rule out further cuts to services. Despite the pressures on budgets we have transformed our site from a failing farm to an award winning site that pushes the boundaries of

conservation management and one where innovation thrives.

We are building a new visitor centre with our partners Groundwork Trust with funding from the council and the European Union, North West Europe Interreg programme. Our new centre will provide a great new experience for visitors to the reserve and will be the first straw bale public building in the borough.

Groundwork Trust have been awarded Heritage Lottery funding for community and infrastructure projects at the site. We anticipate Groundwork Trust will be a key partner for the council over the coming years.



- Local authorities have a statutory duty to have regard to biodiversity and take reasonable steps to conserve and enhance the special features of sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) they own and manage

- The first UK breeding population of the sickle-bearing bush-cricket was discovered in Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve in 2006



The story behind Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve

It is worth reminding ourselves how far we have journeyed since 2000 when Fairlight Place farm was an intensively managed, tenanted farm and the country park was a separately managed land unit without a management plan.

- Following serious slurry pollution in 2000 from the tenanted farm to the SSSI, the council terminated the farm tenancy, brought the management of the farm in-house and set out a vision to manage the farm, the country park and the Site of Special Scientific Interest under one management plan, prioritising biodiversity and public enjoyment
- We established a cross-party councillor led Management Forum to steer the strategic management direction. The Management Forum continues to provide strategic direction for the reserve
- We invested in major renovation and conversion of dilapidated farm buildings. The restored buildings now act as the management hub for the site
- **2004** the farmland and parts of the country park were awarded a 10 year Countryside Stewardship grant
- **2006** we brought the farm, the Country Park, Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation under one Local Nature Reserve designation, creating the largest area of managed natural green space in the town
- **2006** we embarked on an ambitious programme of landscape restoration through conservation grazing by native breed cattle and Exmoor Ponies, removed extensive areas of gorse, scrub and bracken and established biodiversity monitoring programmes
- **2013** Natural England moved the council onto a new ten year Higher Level Stewardship Agreement to restore threatened habitats and manage the designated sites
- **2014** we bought our own small herd of Belted Galloway cattle and in 2019 bought our own Exmoor ponies to further extend our conservation grazing programme
- **2017** the reserve received a special award for innovation for our conservation grazing and habitat restoration project
- **2019** we started building our new Visitor Centre. The centre will be the first public building in Hastings built from straw bales and sustainable materials.
- **2020** a survey revealed Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve has the largest population of the rare, oceanic bryophyte, Dumortier's liverwort, *Dumortiera hirsuta*, in England.
- **2020** we fitted our Belted Galloway Cattle with radio tracking collars to monitor conservation grazing
- The reserve has been awarded the national accolade of Green Flag annually since 2006

Review of 2010 – 2015 management plan

The 2010-2015 management plan extended the successes of the 2005 – 2010 management plan. Here are the key things we achieved from the previous management plan;

- Early transfer to Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreed with Natural England commencing in November 2013
- Green Flag award retained
- Planning permission granted for new visitor centre

- Management plans completed for heathland, grassland, scrub, arable and grazing, providing detailed management specifications and techniques for individual habitats
- Major cliff top scrub clearance undertaken to increase areas of heathland and acid grassland together with a programme of scrub management throughout the country park
- Conservation grazing introduced to large area of Warren Glen to control scrub and increase areas of acid grassland
- Introduced annual programme of bracken management using heavy horses to roll and bruise the bracken

- Established biodiversity monitoring surveys for botany, breeding and wintering birds and invertebrates
- Commissioned the Hastings Area Archaeological Group to undertake the first archaeology survey of the entire reserve
- Geological rock faces exposed.
- Created a new pond on the farm and restored the Saxon pond
- Visitor centre information refreshed by volunteers on a regular basis, creating and updating educational and interpretive information

• Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is one of 7 local nature reserves in the borough, which means there are more nature reserves per head of population than any neighboring authority



Site based information

Policies, Legislation and Designations

- Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve includes units 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10 of the Hastings Cliffs to Pett Beach SSSI as designated by the Wildlife and Countryside Act. The SSSI was originally notified in 1953
- Consent is required to carry out any work in the SSSI that falls under the 'Operations Likely to Damage' list. Approval of this management plan and the individual habitat management plans by Natural England implies consent for all operations detailed within them. Any emergency work required for site safety reasons will be carried out with due regard for the SSSI, ensuring minimal physical damage using materials that will not cause pollution
- In 2005, the SSSI was designated a Special Area of Conservation (Hastings Cliffs) under the European Union Habitats Directive
- The site sits within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural beauty which was designated in October 1983. The legal framework for the AONB is covered by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000
- Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve was designated a Local Nature Reserve in 2006
- Part of the site to the north of Fairlight Road sits in a surface water nitrate vulnerable zone, ID 502
- The Iron Age cliff castle and site of St Georges churchyard on East Hill is designated as a scheduled monument and the majority of the reserve is designated a site of archaeological importance
- As a public authority, Hastings Borough Council is bound by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and must show due regard for biodiversity in all their actions
- Hastings Borough Council is responsible for the condition and structure of all buildings and car parks, ensuring that compliance with the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995)
- Under the Occupiers Liability Act (1957 & 1984), Hastings Borough Council is obliged to hold public liability insurance and has a duty to take reasonable steps to give warnings of known dangers or discouraging persons from taking risks
- The reserve is included under The Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act (1996). This makes it a criminal offence if an owner fails to clear up after their dog
- No horse riding is allowed in the reserve

- **Our new Visitor Centre is built from straw bales and sustainable materials to reduce our carbon footprint.**





Location and site boundaries

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is located in the borough of Hastings with the exception of a small area at the north eastern part of the site which sits in Rother District. The site is bounded by the English Chanel to the south, the town of Hastings to the west, the village of Fairlight to the East and Fairlight Road to the north (with the exception of the North Seat area and Helipad car park which sit to the north of Fairlight Road.). The main areas of the reserve are North’s Seat, Firehills, Warren

Glen, Fairlight Glen, Covehurst Bay, Ecclesbourne Glen, East Hill, the arable land and the farmed grassland block. The map reference for Fairlight Place Farm which forms the working hub of the reserve is TQ851112 and the postcode TN35 5DT. The site is mapped at 1:50000 OS Landranger 199 Eastbourne and Hastings and 1:25000 OS Explorer 124 Hastings and Bexhill.

Landownership/tenure

Hastings Country Park Local Nature Reserve is owned freehold by Hastings Borough Council.

Management and organisational infrastructure

Hastings Borough Council is responsible for and implements all management of the reserve using rangers, volunteers, graziers, contractors and partner organisations. Friends of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve run regular events and promote the Country Park.

The Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Forum consists of elected councillors, council officers and the Friends of Hastings Country Park.

The Management Forum provide the framework for the agricultural and habitat management activities and this is set out in individual management plans for arable, grassland, scrub and heathland. An independent agricultural adviser monitors the site, provides management guidance, all administration and compliance, liaising with Hastings Borough Council, the arable contractor and grazier.

The grounds maintenance contractor provides maintenance services including mowing of recreational grass areas. The arable land is worked by an arable contractor with specific recommendations for fertilizer and agrochemical use provided by a FACTS and BASIS qualified agronomist. A grazier manages the permanent and temporary pastures, providing mixed stock for grazing and arranging hay and silage cuts.

Site Infrastructure

The ex-farm buildings at Fairlight Place Farm and farm yard are vital as an operational hub for site and council parks’ management. The farm buildings provide storage and working facilities for a range of uses in the reserve and for the wider borough. The council’s tree contractors are based here. The old silage clamps are used to recycle green waste from our grounds maintenance contract. The product is put back on the on our arable fields and on flower and shrub beds in our parks.

The visitors centre, a pay and display car park and toilets are located at the Firehills end of the park. East Hill, the area of the country park closest to the town has a BBQ area and a cliff railway from the town. To the north of Fairlight Road is a picnic site, a pay and display car park, toilets and a BBQ area. A further car park is located off Barley Lane.

There is an extensive network of public footpaths including some which have been upgraded to access for all paths.

• The reserve sits within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is the only place the High Weald is exposed at the sea

Environmental information

Physical

Geology and soil

The soils are classified as slightly acid loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage. The sandstone and clay geology is unique on the South East Coast of England which is dominated by chalk cliffs and alluvial plains.

The site is internationally important for its geology, notably the soft rock maritime cliff but also for exposed sandstone outcrops and the former quarries. The 6 km of eroding sea cliffs are the furthest south exposures of the lower Hastings Beds group and are continuous from Basal Ashdown sands formation to Lower Wadhurst clay formation. The cliffs contain numerous fossils and dinosaur footprints can be found in the Covehurst sandstone. The soft rock cliffs are affected by numerous landslides and the vegetation changes from year to year.

The sandstone quarries are important for the study of sedimentation and the paleo environments in the Weald.

Topography and Hydrology

The reserve contains the only area of the High Weald ridge that meets the sea. The ridge here is intersected by 3 gill streams cutting through steep sided wooded valleys running to the sea. The area stands out dramatically from the alluvial plains of Rye Bay and Pevensey on either side.

There are drainage ditches around some of the farmed fields and ponds are distributed around the site. Wet flushes occur throughout the site, in both farm fields and the heathland areas of the Firehills.

Biological

A brief description of the main habitats and important species associated with them is given below. More detailed descriptions of the heathland, grassland, scrub and arable habitats can be found in the habitat management plans. The unique combination of soft rock cliffs, heathland and acid grassland provides habitat for a wide range of rare species making the reserve particularly important for its invertebrate assemblages, birds and flora.

Vegetated sea cliff

The cretaceous clays, silts and sands that make up the soft rock coastal cliffs from Rock-a-nore to Cliff End support a rich flora, invertebrate fauna and cliff nesting bird population.

A diverse mosaic of soft rock cliff and undercliff habitats can be found from extensive areas of bare ground and early successional vegetation to mature undercliff woodland. In places where the cliff is steep and actively eroding, only landslip debris, bare ground, or salt tolerant vegetation dominated by thrift *Armeria maritima subsp. maritima*, sea carrot *Daucus carota subsp. gummifer*, rock samphire *Crithmum maritimum* and sea-beet *Beta vulgaris subsp. maritima* occurs. At Rock-a-nore hoary stock *Matthiola incana* can also be found and the rare weevil *Lixus scabricollis* is common on its food plant sea-beet. The rocky supralittoral zone and undercliff is also rich in lichens and at Covehurst the very rare lichen *Tornabea scutellifera* was once present but this species is now



- The reserve has received a Green Flag award annually since 2006

considered extinct although could still occur as much of the cliff and undercliff is inaccessible to lichenologists.

A few dozen pairs of fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* and herring gull *Larus argentatus* nest on cliff ledges as well as smaller numbers of lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus*. Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, raven *Corvus corax* and kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* breed as well as up to five pairs of black redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*.

The extensive areas of undercliff vegetation range from pioneer communities, flower rich coastal grassland, pockets of reedbed & marsh as well as mature woodland. Seepages and trickles have produced large areas of wet mud that provide habitat for nationally scarce ground beetles such as *Acupalpus*

falvicollis and *Tachys micros*. Where the gill streams reach the cliff edge more permanent channels of flowing water form which support the only south-east England population of the rare water beetle *Hydraena pygmaea*.

The dryer areas of undercliff, with its extensive bare ground and flowery vegetation, are very rich in invertebrates especially bees, wasps and ants. Many nationally scarce and nationally rare species have been found including a large population of the long-horned bee *Eucera longicornis* which breeds on the undercliff. This is a greatly declined bee and a Species of Principal Importance in England.

A small population of small blue *Cupido minimus* occurs here due to large patches of this butterflies foodplant kidney vetch

Anthyllis vulneraria which is also a pollen resource for long-horned bees. The undercliff here also produced the last British records of the endangered weevil *Lixus angustatus*. This species has not been recorded in Britain for many years.

Mature woodland has developed on the largest and most stable area of undercliff at Covehurst Bay. Bird's-nest orchid *Neottia nidus-avis* has been found here but due to the dangerous unstable ground this woodland sits on it is very inadvisable to look for them. Some interesting bryophytes have been found here including fragrant crestwort *Lophocolea fragrans*, which occurs at very few sites in south-east England. In recent years this wooded undercliff area has been actively eroding and is now inaccessible.

Maritime cliff-top heath and acid grassland

The small pockets of cliff-top maritime heath and acid grassland that remain still support populations of the nationally rare lizard weevil *Cathormiocerus myrmecophilus*, the nationally rare ant mimic ground spider *Micaria albobittata*, and the nationally scarce ant mimic jumping spider *Myrmarachne formicaria*.

Amongst the heather the lesser cockroach *Ectobius panzeri* can be found and the heather bumblebee *Bombus jonellus* is commonly seen foraging on heather and bell heather.

Bare ground amongst the heather and on eroded paths throughout Firehills and Warren Glen is used by many species of ground nesting bees and wasps many of which are important pollinators.

Greater broomrape *Orobanche rapum-genistae* grows erratically on the many patches of gorse scrub and Dartford warblers *Sylvia undata* have been attempting to nest here in recent years amongst the stonechats

Saxicola torquata, yellowhammers *Emberiza citrinella* and linnets *Carduelis cannabina*.

Semi-natural neutral grassland and meadow

Some large areas of semi-improved neutral meadow still exist on the cliff-top and all the old cliff-top arable land has been reverted to legume rich semi-natural grassland mainly to provide a pollen and nectar source for many of the bees that nest on the cliff, undercliff and cliff-top heathland such as the long-horned bee *Eucera longicornis*.

Ancient Gill woodland

Where springs and streams have cut through the softer clays and sands over millennia steep sided gill woodlands have developed. These are very rich in rare and scarce bryophytes (mosses & liverworts) and diptera (two-winged flies).

These humid, frost-free wooded valleys are a refuge for species that require mild humid conditions all year round similar to conditions present in the northern and

western parts of Britain but rare in south-east England. These include the rare liverwort Dumortier’s liverwort *Dumortiera hirsuta* and Killarney fern *Trichomanes speciosum*. Almost 50% of the English population of Dumortier’s liverwort occurs within Fairlight Glen.

Other scarce bryophytes found here include Freiberg’s screw-moss *Tortula freibergii* and river pocket-moss *Fissidens rivularis*. The shade loving orchid violet *helleborine Epipactis purpurata* can also be found growing within the gill woodlands.

Many scarce diptera have been recorded recently including a number of county firsts. Other interesting invertebrates recorded here include the nationally scarce water beetle red-legged moss beetle *Hydraena rufipes* and the nationally rare money spider *Diplocephalus protuberans*. Hop *Humulus lupulus* grows along the woodland edge and beside paths in Ecclesbourne Glen and is probably the source of the adult buttoned snout *Hypena rostralis* records for the site. Hop is the foodplant of this nationally scarce moth.

Hedgerows

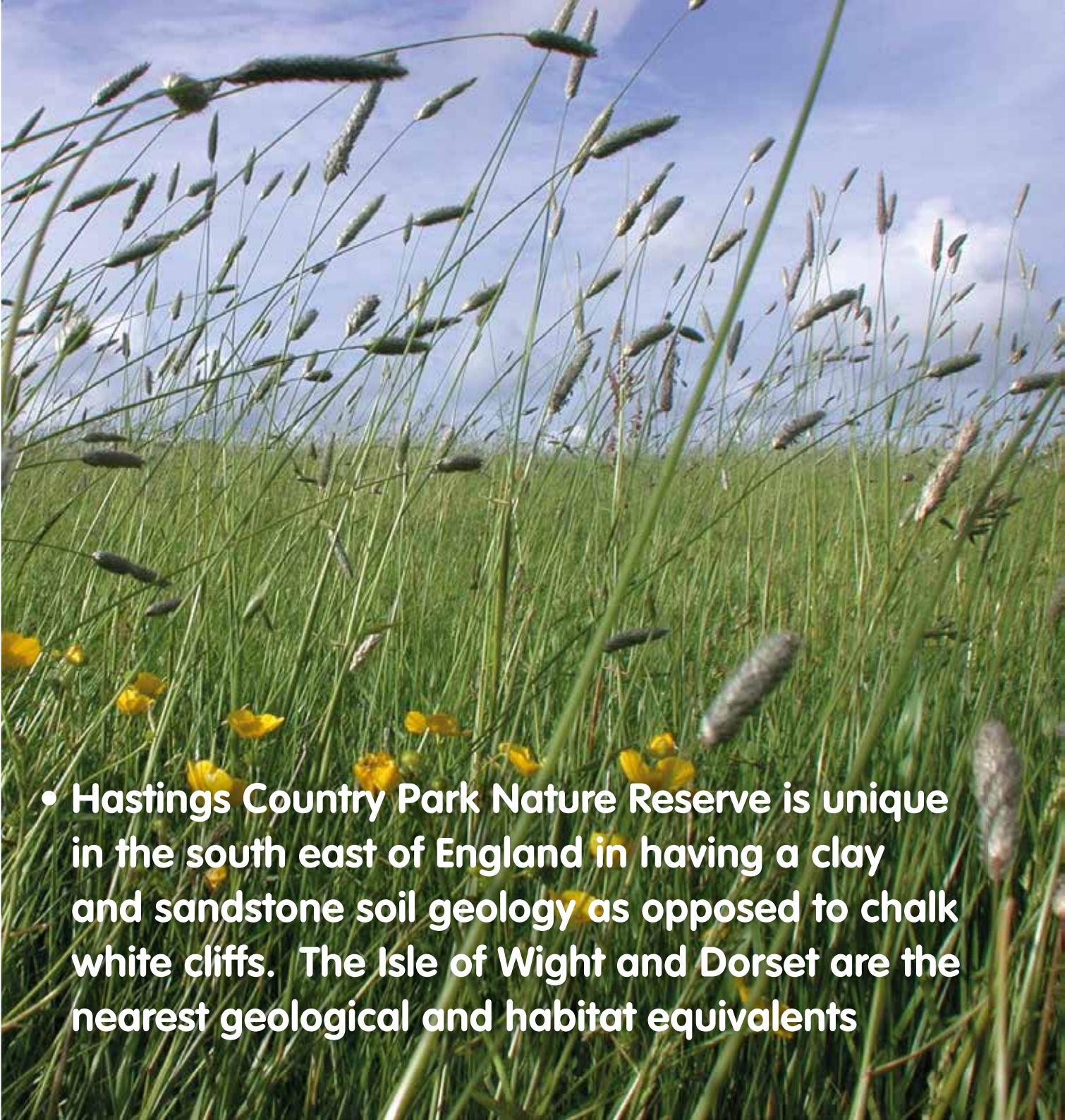
There is an extensive network of species-rich hedgerows around the ex-farm fields. Along with adjacent flower-rich margins these provide important habitat for wildlife including nesting habitat for yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* and linnet *Linaria cannabina*. The early spring blossom provided by hedgerows and scrub throughout the reserve are especially important for early spring pollinators.

Standing fresh water

There are several man-made and natural ponds around the reserve providing habitat for a great diversity of aquatic species. Wet flushes contribute to areas of wet heath on the Firehills area and are important for a number of wetland plants and invertebrates.

Arable

Although not a natural habitat the arable land adds an important element to the mosaic of habitats found in the reserve. It is actively managed for wildlife, in particular for farmland birds.



• **Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is unique in the south east of England in having a clay and sandstone soil geology as opposed to chalk white cliffs. The Isle of Wight and Dorset are the nearest geological and habitat equivalents**



Cultural

Archaeology

The reserve is hugely important for its wealth of archaeology dating back to Palaeolithic times. Most of the area is designated as an archaeological notification area. The part of East Hill which is designated as a scheduled monument is perhaps the most significant area. This is the site of an Iron Age Cliff castle and within this also lies the remains of St George's churchyard dating back to 1291.

The discovery of many artefacts and some limited excavation has identified a large number of prehistoric sites across the whole of the Country Park. Archaeology found on the site dates from these prehistoric times through to both world wars.

The Hastings Area Archaeological Group, HAARG, have undertaken much of the archaeological work at the reserve over the years. Over the life of this Plan, HAARG will undertake systematic surveys of the entire reserve, including farm fields and

build up the most comprehensive analysis of the archaeology of this important area of landscape in the borough. A comprehensive base line archaeological survey was carried out by Archaeology South East in 2006.

Historic Land Use

Finds of flint tools point to evidence of hunting across the reserve during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. Many of the place names in the reserve indicate extensive farming in the Saxon period (410 - 1066). For example Fairlight was Farnlege meaning bracken clearing. The reserve has long been used as a source of sand and rock and the earliest records of quarrying date back to medieval times in 1367.

During the medieval period (1066 – 1500) Fishponds Farm and Warren Farm appeared on the site. Farming consisted of small islands of open arable fields around the farmhouses surrounded by a patchwork of enclosed pastures, woodland and heath. Warren Glen is so named as it was used as a free rabbit warren between 1254 and 1317.

From the 1500's farming became more intensive and much of the common waste land became enclosed. During the 18th and early 19th centuries most of the reserve was owned by large land owners, the Milward, Collier and Lucas Shadwell families and the land was farmed by two tenants from Fishponds and Tilekiln Lane Farms. Fishponds farm included the pasture on East Hill, which had a mixture of arable and pasture. There was only around 40 acres of woodland which apart from the steep sided gills was coppiced. Early drawings from around 1800 show common land in the North's seat, Firehills and Warren Glen areas.

It is interesting that many of the existing fields can be clearly seen on the 1st edition OS map. A few fields have been merged to create larger parcels convenient for modern arable farming and the areas of wood and scrub have expanded considerably.

In the 18th and 19th centuries smuggling was a major activity in the reserve. Smugglers used pulleys to wind the

contraband up the cliffs and the deep dark glens provided the routes to transport the goods inland.

Recreational use of the area stems back to when Sarah Milward inherited the estate in 1833 and encouraged local people to roam on the cliff tops and in the glens. In the 1850's the railway lines established Hastings as a popular resort for visitors from London. The Country Park was popular with the visitors and cafes, camp sites, a golf course, football and cricket pitches sprung up along the cliff tops.

East Hill was purchased by Hastings Borough Council from the Milward/ Collier family in 1888. A further 251 acres of cliff tops and glens was bought by the council in 1951. In 1963 Fairlight Place Farm and Church Farm were purchased from the Milwards. Five acres of the Spoon reservoir was bought in 1924 and North's Seat in 1938. Following a landslide in 1959 about 21 acres of clifftop was given to the council. The land at Firehills was bought from a local resident in 1927.

In 1974 the council set up the Country Park which consisted of East Hill, the cliff top areas and the three glens. The farmland remained tenanted out to a local dairy farmer. In 2000 Hastings Borough Council terminated the tenancy and regained control of the farmland. In 2006 the farmland was amalgamated with the Country Park to form Hastings Country Park Local Nature Reserve.

- **Hasting Cliffs to Pett Beach was one of the first Sites of Scientific Interest declared in the UK in 1953**

Past Management

Until 2005 the Country Park had no management plan and lacked a coherent long term vision for managing key habitats. Habitat restoration is now focusing on a reduction of scrub levels although following the Great Storm in 1987 volunteers planted gorse and blackthorn complete with rabbit guards!

Fairlight Place Farm was managed as an intensive dairy farm with arable. The farming became increasingly intensive as new technologies developed. This led to ever more pollution with silage effluent, dirty water and slurry leaching into the ecologically sensitive habitats of the reserve.

Regaining control of Fairlight Place Farm enabled the council to stop the main source of pollution to the Site of Special Scientific Interest and to manage the farmland in an environmentally friendly way.

The production of the first management plan in 2005 put in place a vision and objectives for the management of the whole area. Management since then has focused on converting the farmland to a low input system and reverting some arable areas back to grass. An area of Warren Glen densely covered with bracken was fenced off and grazing with highland cattle commenced to restore acid grassland/heathland. This is now undertaken by our Exmoor Ponies and Belted Galloway Cattle.

380m of new hedges were planted and large lengths of hedgerow and some ponds were restored under Countryside Stewardship.

Present Use

Hastings Country Park Local Nature Reserve is managed for wildlife under an HLS agreement, maintaining the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in good condition and for recreation as a Green Flag Award winning Country Park.

- The grassland is grazed with sheep and cattle according to the grassland and grazing management plans
- The arable land is farmed with a crop rotation following the arable management plan
- Large scale heathland restoration commenced in 2014 following a heathland restoration plan
- Scrub is being managed across the site according to the scrub management plan
- Recreational areas are maintained with mown grass distinct from more natural grassland areas

- The gill woodlands in the reserve are home to species that are some of the rarest in the UK and some found nowhere else



People

Community

The adjoining town of Hastings has a population of just over 90,000 (2011 census) and is the most deprived area in East Sussex. The reserve provides a large, accessible, natural green space for the local population and visitors to enjoy. Our new visitor centre will provide a hub for learning about and respecting our natural environment and highlighting the enormous challenges the planet faces from habitat destruction and climate change.

Volunteers and partner organisations provide a vital contribution to the running of the reserve. Conservation volunteers now work

to an agreed annual work plan, performing a range of maintenance and management tasks including scrub clearance, footpath maintenance and fence repairs. Volunteers manage the visitor centre. Biological monitoring is conducted by volunteers covering a range of habitats and species. Archaeological surveys are undertaken by Hastings Area Archaeological Group.

The Friends of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve was formed in 2007 and runs regular events and promotes the reserve. They are the largest community based friends group in the borough.

Heritage Lottery funded projects managed by Groundwork Trust aim to encourage greater use and participation in the site.

- **Funding for the site is through government grants, core funding from Hastings Borough Council and other grant aid.**



Access

Hastings Borough Council is committed to ensuring that all sections of society have access to Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve and other green spaces in the town.

Getting to the reserve

There are numerous points from the Old Town, Clive Vale and Ore areas where people can access the reserve on foot. A large number of visitors enter the reserve via the cliff railway at East Hill.

The reserve is easily accessed by car and pay and display car parks can be found at Firehills, Barley Lane and the Fairlight Road Picnic site. The Stagecoach bus service 101 run along Fairlight Road.

There is a bus service along Fairlight Road to the main entrance to the reserve.

The reserve can easily be accessed from the Old Town by cycling along the National Cycle Network route 2. There is an ambition to extend this route as far as the new visitor centre. However, cycling is not currently permitted within the reserve itself.

Within the reserve

Access is focused on East Hill at the Western End of the reserve where people can easily enter on foot from the Old Town and at Firehills at the eastern end of the reserve where the visitor centre and main car parks are located.

The reserve has an extensive network of footpaths which provide spectacular views, including the Saxon Shore Way and England Coastal Path. Two ‘access for all tracks’ at the western end of the park provide access for people with impaired mobility. The toilets at the picnic site and the main vehicular entrance have disabled facilities.

The footpaths are well marked with a system of bollards and map boards at key points. The bollards are numbered with emergency contact numbers on them. Some of the routes are challenging and alternative options are described on the maps and leaflets which are offered free of charge at the visitor centre. The occurrence of landslides on the cliffs

- The Council received a Special Innovation Award in 2017 from Keep Britain Tidy for our conservation grazing project



presents a challenge to maintaining some of the footpaths in a safe condition. Alternative routes are provided where possible when original routes have become unstable.

The beach can be accessed from the town but access is discouraged from the reserve due to dangerous terrain and the risk of landslides. Fairlight Cove has been used by naturists for many years despite it not being designated as a naturist beach. Access to the beach from Fairlight Glen is particularly dangerous due to eroding and unstable cliffs. Visitors should not access the beach from Fairlight Glen.

Dog Control

The reserve is widely used by dog walkers. In 2015 single purpose dog bins were replaced by dual purpose litter and dog waste bins throughout the reserve. Plastic bags for the collection of dog mess are available free from the visitor centre and rangers. The Dogs Fouling of Land Act covers the majority of the reserve and it is an offence if an owner fails to clear up after their dog.

With grazing animals in much of the reserve including sheep, ponies and cattle, dog owners are encouraged to behave responsibly and follow the countryside code, keeping dogs under close control and ensuring they are not a danger or nuisance to livestock, wildlife or other people.

Horse Riding

Horse riding is not compatible with maintaining the reserve in a good condition for walkers and for biodiversity and is not permitted on the reserve.

Visitor numbers

There are no official figures but, visitor numbers are estimated to be in excess of 1/2 million a year.

Customer Care

The Council has an on-line reporting system to cover all services in the borough. The public can report any issues to My.Hastings.gov.uk. Grounds maintenance issues will be directed to the contractor. All other issues will be actioned by the parks service at the council.

Interpretation and promotional material

The Council is working with partners Groundwork Trust South to provide a new visitor centre and managing Heritage Lottery grant aid to improve interpretation on site. Information boards are located throughout the reserve to inform visitors about the habitats and the work being undertaken to restore them. Information about the reserve is regularly posted on the Hastings Borough Council Facebook page.

The Friends of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve operate a website with up to date information about forthcoming events and an overview of the biodiversity on the reserve.

Local naturalists, ecologists and nature reserve managers record wildlife sightings from the Hastings, Rye Bay and Dungeness on RX wildlife <http://www.rxwildlife.info/>

Education

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve provides an outstanding learning opportunity to promote an understanding of nature, farming, history and geography. It is an ideal site for field trips and outdoor learning. The new visitor centre will provide a focus and educational resources for groups from primary school age through to adult learning. Heritage Lottery grant provides additional educational resources for visitors, schools and the local community.

Finance and management of the reserve

Hastings Borough Council revenue supports the borough wide rangers and contributes to the ongoing management of the site. Additional income is received via Higher Level Stewardship and the Basic Payment Scheme although this will change when we move to the new Environmental Land Management scheme in 2023. Additional grant aid or partnership funding opportunities are explored where they can contribute to the

enhancement, enjoyment or management of the site.

The charge made for car parking contributes to the management costs of the site.

Our grounds maintenance contractor, is responsible for the maintenance of the site through the grounds maintenance contract. Specialist contractors undertake habitat works required to meet our stewardship agreement.

Future years’ budgets will be extremely challenging. The council will continue to review the way we manage the site while ensuring we fulfil the aspirations of our management plan, government grants and our responsibilities to conserve biodiversity and protected sites.



References

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve
Management Plan 2005 - 2010
(Revised Edition, January 2007),
Hastings Borough Council.

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve
Management Plan 2010-2015,
Hastings Borough Council.

Higher Level Stewardship Agreement

Habitat Management plans – Heathland,
Grassland, Arable, Scrub and Grazing

Review of 2010-2015 Management plan

High Weald AONB Management Plan

Hastings Cliffs to Pett Beach SSSI

Special Area of Conservation
(Hastings Cliffs)

Defra (2004) Major Landowners Group;
SSSI PSA Target for England

**Hastings Borough Council extends
thanks to Andy Phillips and Joanne
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Photographs courtesy of Hastings Borough Council, A Phillips, J Spickett, Indiana Hamilton-Brown.

