



Historic Environment Action Plan East Wight Chalk Ridge

**Isle of Wight County Archaeology
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HEAP for East Wight Chalk Ridge.

INTRODUCTION

This HEAP Area has been defined on the basis of geology, topography and land uses which differentiate it from other HEAP areas. It forms the eastern half of a central chalk ridge that crosses the Isle of Wight, the western half having been defined as the *West Wight Chalk Downland* HEAP Area. Another block of chalk and upper greensand - the *South Wight Downland* - occurs in the south of the Isle of Wight. Obviously there are many similarities between the *East Wight Chalk Ridge*, the *West Wight Chalk Downland* and the *South Wight Downland* HEAP Areas. However, each of the three Areas occupies a particular geographical location and has a particular character differentiating it from the other two Areas although a variety of different historic landscape types occur within each Area.

The *East Wight Chalk Ridge* is cut in half by a gap through which the Eastern Yar flows and in which the settlement of Brading is located. This low-lying land has been included within the *Brading Haven and Bembridge Isle HEAP Area*.

This HEAP document identifies the essential characteristics of the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* as its open windswept aspect, superb views to north and south, and surviving areas of unimproved or unploughed chalk grassland within which are preserved archaeological earthworks of several periods.

The document sets out the most significant features of this HEAP Area, lists the most important forces for change and identifies key management issues. Actions particularly relevant to this Area are identified from those listed in the Isle of Wight HEAP Aims, Objectives and Actions.

ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT

Location, Geology and Topography

- Eastern part of Island's central chalk ridge, stretching from Arreton Down in west to Culver Down in east.
- Steep slopes with fairly narrow summit plateau widening out in places.
- *East Wight Chalk Ridge* is interrupted by a gap between Brading Down and Bembridge Down through which the Eastern Yar River flows.
- Geology is Upper Chalk and Middle and Lower Chalk with small patches of Angular Flint Gravel on Mersley Down and Brading Down.
- There are combes on the north face of the ridge at Duxmore and Eaglehead.
- Streams rise at the base of the chalk ridge on both sides.

Defining Attributes and Principal HEAP Types

- The landscape character of this HEAP Area is defined by its open aspect, superb views to north and south and sparse windswept hedgerows.
- A busy road runs along top of ridge from Downend to Brading. East of Brading a road runs from the foot of Bembridge Down to Culver Down at the eastern extremity of the Island. Roads run off the ridge to north and south at Downend, Mersley, Knighton and Ashe.
- Ridge terminates in coastal chalk cliffs and rock outcrops at Culver Cliff and Whitecliff Ledge.
- Less unimproved chalk grassland than in *West Wight Chalk Downland Area*.
 - Chalk grassland survives on the south side of Arreton Down, on the north and south slopes of Mersley Down, on the north and east sides of Ashe Down and on parts of Brading Down, with smaller patches on Middle West Down and Nunwell Down. Much of Bembridge Down has been ploughed but chalk grassland survives around its north and south edges. Chalk grassland also survives on the eastern and southern faces of Culver Down.

- Fairly large arable fields on north side of ridge. Smaller fields and areas of uncultivated grassland on south side of ridge. Much of Bembridge Down is divided into large enclosures.
- Limited *secondary woodland* to north-east of Arreton Down and on north side of Nunwell Down. Small area of *ancient woodland* east of Ashe Down at Eaglehead Copse.
- Sparse, wind-distorted hedgerows beside road on ridge from Arreton Down to Ashe Down. Isolated group of Beech trees beside road near Ashe Down.
- Between Arreton and Brading dispersed farmsteads occupy the base of the ridge on either side, at the interface with other HEAP Areas, but there is a lack of settlement on the ridge itself.
- Large chalk quarry on Arreton Down and smaller quarry site at Duxmore. Elsewhere there are disused chalk pits.
- Pedestrian trail ('The Downland Way') runs along ridge beside road from Arreton Down to Brading but is not marked on the Definitive Map or OS 1:25,000 Explorer Map.
 - There are a relatively small number of Rights of Way within this Area, mainly running for fairly short distances, although the long distance 'Bembridge' and 'Nunwell' trails cross the ridge to the east of Ashe Down.

Principal Historical Processes

- At the end of the Ice Age Britain's climate warmed and most of the landscape, including chalk downland, became covered in woodland.
- Earliest farmers on the Isle of Wight cultivated small areas of cleared woodland on chalk downs and greensand from 4th millennium BC.
- Much of the chalk and greensand remained wooded until the Bronze Age from c. 2300 BC when extensive clearance took place, allowing grazing and cultivation.
- *East Wight Chalk Ridge* is likely to have been used as a route for travelling across the eastern part of the Island from prehistoric times.
 - The road along the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* from Arreton to Brading may be on the line of a prehistoric trackway although this cannot be proved.
- Burial mounds were constructed on chalk downs in Bronze Age times.
- Archaeological evidence for prehistoric, Roman and medieval field systems suggest that parts of the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* were cultivated from early times.
- Archaeological Finds suggest Iron Age and Roman use of land to west of Ashe Down.
- During Pagan Anglo-Saxon period secondary cremations were made in Bronze Age burial mounds on chalk downs.
- Ashe Down lay within the Anglo-Saxon estate of Meolocdune granted to Winchester New Minster in 982 AD.
- Anglo-Saxon mother parishes on the Island all included a section of the central chalk ridge.
- Mother parishes were divided into smaller parochial units from late Saxon times onwards but these smaller parishes nearly all included some open downland (either on central ridge or on southern downs).
- The chalk downland was apportioned between individual manors within each parish and was often named after these manors.
 - Much of this land was used as manorial common grazing in medieval times but there is evidence of arable cultivation on Ashe Down. This may have been a temporary episode.
- Defensive beacons were sited on the chalk downs and other high points during medieval times to warn of French attacks.
 - One of these beacons was sited at Bembridge Down on the *East Wight Chalk Ridge*.
- Ashe Seamark was erected on Ashe Down in 1735 and in the late 1700s there was a semaphore station on Ashe Down (Jones 1989, 94).
- Enclosure of chalk downland started in early post-medieval period. By time of 1793 OS map much of East Wight Chalk Ridge was divided into enclosures.
 - Tithe surveys of 1830s and 1840s record arable land use within some of these large downland enclosures.

- Small chalk pits at base of downs are probably mainly of post-medieval date and associated with the *marling* of fields or the making of lime.
 - 'Lime Kiln Shute', leading from Mersley Farm to Mersley Down, passes close to disused chalk pits. Mersley Limekiln was located in one of these pits and is marked on the OS 25" map of 1898.
- Chalk was also used as a building material close to the downs.
- Military use of Bembridge Down and Culver Down in 19th and 20th centuries.
 - Bembridge Fort built in 1860s.
 - Culver Battery was completed by 1906 (Bannister 2003, 32).
 - Both Bembridge Fort and Culver Battery were in use during the 1st and 2nd world wars, with a 2nd World War Radar Station based at Bembridge Fort.
- Monument to Lord Yarborough erected on Bembridge Down in 1849 and moved to Culver Down by 1862.
- A coastguard station was established on Culver Down in 1890 but the present coastguard cottages date from 1903. (Bannister 2003, 37-38).
- A reservoir is shown on Brading Down on the OS 25" map of 1909.
- During 20th century there was more intensive arable cultivation on *East Wight Chalk Ridge*, the ploughing of unimproved chalk grassland to allow reseeding as improved grassland (e.g. on Ashe Down) and a decline in grazing on chalk grassland.
- The large chalk quarry on Arreton Down was first opened in the 19th century although a small chalk pit is shown on the OS 1793 map.
- Bembridge Down and Culver Down were acquired by the National Trust in 1967. Public access by car was permitted and parking space was made available on Culver Down.
- Brading Down came under care of South Wight Borough Council in 1974 and of the Isle of Wight Council in 1995. Scrub clearance, car park management work and interpretation work was carried out by IWCC Countryside Management Service in late 1980s.

Archaeology and Built Environment (details in HER)

- Unploughed Bronze Age burial mounds (*round barrows*) survive as individual earthworks along the ridge on Arreton Down, Nunwell Down and Culver Down but only at Ashe Down have numerous round barrow survived, grouped into two distinct clusters or cemeteries.
 - Individual ploughed or destroyed burial mounds are recorded from Arreton Down, Mersley Down, Ashe Down, Bembridge Down and Culver Down.
 - Air photographs indicate the presence of a substantial barrow cemetery on Middle West Down.
 - 20th century excavations of Bronze Age *round barrows* have taken place at Arreton Down (Alexander and Ozanne 1960) and Ashe Down (Drewett 1970).
- Archaeological and palaeoenvironmental evidence of Early Bronze age occupation found during a small excavation at Duxmore Combe (Tomalin 1991).
- Early Bronze Age hoard of weapons found on Arreton Down in 1737. Some of the artefacts are in the British Museum.
- Remains of prehistoric and Roman field systems on Mersley Down, Ashe Down and Brading Down, the last named possibly associated with Brading Roman Villa. (Details of Brading Villa can be found in the *Newchurch Environs and Sandown Bay HEAP Area* document).
- Significant archaeological finds of Iron Age and Roman date from a single field within this Area suggest the presence of a structure which has not yet been located.
- Anglo-Saxon secondary burials have been recorded from the Arreton Down Bronze Age *round barrow* excavated by Alexander and Ozanne, and Anglo-Saxon primary burials from a nearby burial mound (Arnold 1982, 75-76).
- Remains of medieval ridge and furrow and medieval stock enclosure on Ashe Down (Drewett 1970).
- *Pillow Mounds* (artificial rabbit warrens of medieval date) on Ashe Down .
- Ashe Down Seamark

- Yarborough Monument.
- Coastguard cottages on Culver Down.
- Bembridge Fort and Culver Battery
- Military earthworks and minor military structures on Bembridge Down and Culver Down include an anti tank ditch, anti aircraft gun position and boundary stones (Bannister 2003, 50-54).

Relationships with other HEAP Areas

- Manors which had their main agricultural holdings in other HEAP Areas (*Northern Lowlands, Arreton Valley, Newchurch Environs and Sandown Bay, Brading Haven and Bembridge Isle*) held manorial open grazing land on *East Wight Chalk Ridge*.
- *East Wight Chalk Ridge* shows many similarities with the *West Wight Chalk Downland* and *South Wight Downland* HEAP Areas.
- This Area is cut in half by a gap through which the Eastern Yar flows and in which the settlement of Brading is located. (This low-lying land has been included within the *Brading Haven and Bembridge Isle HEAP Area*).

Time-Depth

- Earliest visible historic features in the landscape are Bronze Age burial mounds.
- Route of modern road along the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* may be of ancient origin – a route likely to have been used in prehistoric times.
- Earthwork remains of Iron Age and Roman field systems.
- Where unenclosed and unimproved chalk grassland survives, this preserves an element of the Area's medieval and post-medieval character as manorial common land.
- Earthworks of medieval stock enclosure and *pillow mounds* on Ashe Down.
- Ancient woodland at Eaglehead Copse may have been wooded since the Middle Ages or from an earlier date but evidence of prehistoric flint-working has been recorded from within the wood, and also possible traces of cultivation *lynchets* (F Basford pers. Comm.).
- Some fields enclosed from open downland are of early post-medieval date whilst others date from the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Chalk pits record the importance of *marling* to medieval and post-medieval agriculture.
- The medieval parish boundary between Newchurch and Brading follows the west side of Eaglehead Copse within Eaglehead Combe and the medieval parish boundary between Arreton and Newchurch crosses Mersley Down to the south of the Downend-Brading road and then follows the west side of Duxmore Combe.
 - These two boundaries may predate the Norman Conquest and represent the boundaries of *mother parishes* in Arreton and Brading. The territory of these *mother parishes* may have correlated with that of large Anglo-Saxon estates.
 - The boundaries of the late Anglo-Saxon estate of Meolodune ran along the western and eastern sides of Ashe Down, the eastern side taking the same line as the parish boundary along the edge of Eaglehead Copse and the western side following the field boundary that marks the edge of the down.
- The correlation between the parish boundaries of Arreton/Newchurch and Newchurch/Brading and combes is interesting.
 - Tomalin (1991) has suggested that Early Bronze Age settlement on the Isle of Wight may have been concentrated in chalk combes but at a later date it would seem that the combes were at the margins of territorial units rather than at their centres.
- The course of the medieval parish boundary between Brading and Yaverland along Bembridge Down and Culver Down is followed for much of its length by the road
 - This road dates from the 19th and early 20th centuries and was constructed to provide access to Bembridge Fort and Culver Battery.
- The 18th century seamark on Ashe Down and early 20th century coastguard cottages on Culver Down commemorate the Island's close connection with the sea.

- Military structures and earthworks on Bembridge Down and Culver Down date from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Contribution of Historic Landscape to Present Landscape Character

- The present landscape of the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* exists as direct result of historic processes including the prehistoric clearance of woodland on the chalk, the use of downland as manorial common grazing in medieval and post-medieval times and some arable cultivation dating back to prehistoric times but becoming more widespread in the 19th and 20th centuries. There are archaeological earthworks of various periods and these contribute to the Area's present character, as do the military structures on Bembridge Down and Culver Down.

Values, Perceptions and Associations

- Chalk downs are the part of the Isle of Wight landscape most valued by many people and are perceived to be a tourist asset.
- Areas of unimproved chalk grassland surviving on the chalk downs are of ecological value.
- Unploughed land on the chalk is valued for its surviving archaeological earthworks. Within this HEAP Area there is a particularly good range of unploughed archaeological earthworks on Ashe Down.
- *East Wight Chalk Ridge* is particularly valued for its fine views.
- This HEAP Area does not have such a tranquil and rural feel as the *West Wight Chalk Downland* or the *South Wight Downland* due to the busy road between Arreton and Brading and the night time visibility of illuminated urban development to north and south.
- Two Bronze Age burial mounds in this Area have specific local names - the 'Devil's Punchbowl' (on Nunwell Down) and 'Michal Morey's Hump' on Arreton Down (Grinsell and Sherwin 1940, 188-189).
 - An 18th century murderer called Michal Morey was hung on a gibbet on top of Michal Morey's Hump
 - The skull exhibited in the nearby 'Hare and Hounds' pub at Downend is popularly supposed to be that of Michal Morey but in fact is that of a female who died in the Bronze Age (Phillips nd).
 - Grinsell and Sherwin (1940, 207) allege that the skull came from the Bronze Age burial mound close to Michal Morey's Hump. This burial mound was later excavated by Alexander and Ozanne (1960).

Research and Documentation

- Historic Environment Record is basic resource for archaeology, built environment and historic landscape character (includes HLC layer).
- 'The Vectis Report' (Basford 1980) discusses the ploughing of archaeological features on chalk downland but requires updating.
- Unpublished report on Isle of Wight Downlands prepared for Isle of Wight County Council (Cahill 1984).
- Excavation and fieldwork on Ashe Down (Drewett 1970).
- Archaeological and Historic Landscape Survey of National Trust land at Bembridge and Culver Downs (Bannister 2003)

Amenity and Education

- The *East Wight Chalk Ridge* offers superb views and an excellent vantage point from which to view the historic landscape to the north and south of the ridge.
 - However, traffic hazards on the Arreton–Brading road lessen the potential of this HEAP Area for educational visits exploring the historic landscape - except on Brading Down where safe parking is available.

- Interpretation panels on Brading Down (which is managed by the Isle of Wight Council Countryside Section) explain the historic character of the landscape to the south of the down.
- Bembridge Down and Culver Down offer better opportunities for field trips and for viewing adjacent HEAP Areas than the rest of the *East Wight Chalk Ridge*, owing to the smaller volume of traffic and safe parking, , Bembridge Fort can be visited by small groups by special arrangement with the National Trust.
- Car parks and picnic areas on Brading Down (Isle of Wight Council) and Culver Down (National Trust).
- *Access land* on the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* designated under the CROW Act of 2001 is more fragmented than that within the *West Wight Chalk Downland* but includes parts of Arreton Down, Mersley Down, Knighton Down, Brading Down, Bembridge Down and Culver Down.
- Western part of *East Wight Chalk Ridge*, between Arreton Down and Brading Down, offers fewer opportunities for off-road walkers and cyclists than the *West Wight Chalk Downland*.
 - ‘The Downland Way’ runs alongside the road but its proximity to this busy route may cause it to be underused.
 - Eastern part of Area has larger blocks of *Access Land* open to walkers on Brading Down, Bembridge Down and Culver Down.
 - The road running from the foot of Bembridge Down to Culver Down provides access to Bembridge Fort and to the National Trust car park on Culver Down. This road is open to motor traffic but also gives pedestrian access to these downs.
- Rights of Way include sections of the ‘Bembridge Trail’ and the ‘Nunwell Trail’ passing through this Area.
- Wight Wildlife has reserves within this Area at Arreton Down (old chalk grassland) and Eaglehead Copse (ancient woodland). These reserves are managed for nature conservation.
http://www.hwt.org.uk/wildlife_reserves/reserve1.htm#

Features of Particular significance within this HEAP Area

- Surviving areas of old chalk grassland containing archaeological earthworks and other archaeological structures.
- Ashley Down is unploughed at the present day and the multi-period archaeological earthworks on the down are of great historic landscape value.
 - There are some surviving areas of old chalk grassland on the northern and eastern edges of the down.
 - At present the down is in private ownership although there are public Rights of Way.
 - Ashley Down offers great potential for the conservation of the natural and historic environment and for the appreciation of the environment.
- The *East Wight Chalk Ridge* has a wealth of known buried archaeological remains and potential for location of additional sites.
- The Military Remains on Bembridge Down and Culver Down make a significant contribution to the Island’s military heritage.
- The viewpoints provided by the Public Rights of Way and Access Land on the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* from which the historic landscape of the various HEAP Areas to the north and south of the ridge can be viewed.

VULNERABILITY

Rarity and Typicality

- A large percentage of England’s unimproved chalk grassland was lost in the 20th century and the Isle of Wight now contains 10% of the total surviving extent of this habitat in south-east England, some being in this HEAP Area.

- However, chalk grassland has survived less well on the *East Wight Chalk Ridge* than within the *West Wight Chalk Downland Area*.
- *East Wight Chalk Ridge* has a range of archaeological earthworks typical of unploughed downland but the overall numbers and condition of these earthworks has declined in the 20th century as a result of downland ploughing.

Coherence

- On the road along the top of the ridge from Arreton to Brading and on Bembridge and Culver Downs, the sense of elevation and the panoramic views give this HEAP Area a clear identity as a downland ridge, and the steep southern scarp slope contributes to this identity. To the north of the road from Arreton to Brading the landscape is not so coherent, much of it having been ploughed.

Condition and Fragility

- Survival of chalk grassland is dependent on grazing and has been affected in some areas by cessation of grazing and subsequent growth of scrub.
- Archaeological earthworks on the downs have been affected by erosion caused by human feet, wheeled vehicles and animals.
 - The concentration of cattle around the Bronze Age burial mounds on Ashey Down has had an adverse effect on these earthworks.
- Development of Arreton Down Chalk Quarry has removed much of the original downland setting of Michal Morey's Hump.
 - This factor, and the large volume of traffic on the nearby road means that the monument is less likely to be valued and is more vulnerable to casual damage.
- Nunwell Down burial mound ('Devil's Punch bowl') is also close to the road and in the recent past was subject to close ploughing around the monument.
- Ploughing over or close to other archaeological earthworks has damaged or destroyed many sites.
- Buried archaeological sites are also being ploughed.

CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Forces for Change

- Climate change may not have significant adverse effects on the chalk grassland of the *East Wight Chalk Ridge*.
 - Hotter, drier summers are better for chalk grassland as an ecological habitat and some species have responded positively. In this respect, it is important that both south and north facing downland slopes are retained as chalk grassland to provide different habitats.
 - More information on the possible impacts of climate change on the protected landscapes of the South East can be found in a recent report funded by SEEDA (ADAS 2006).
 - The likely impacts of climate change on the historic environment in general are discussed in a report by English Heritage (2007).
- The changing global market in which agriculture operates may work for or against the conservation of archaeological sites (i.e. the potential to take buried sites out of cultivation).
- Management regimes of bodies such as the National Trust, Isle of Wight Council and Wight Wildlife will have an impact on the historic environment as well as on the natural environment and amenity of areas managed by these bodies.
- Ever-increasing amount of motor traffic on road between Arreton Down and Brading affects character of Area.

Management Issues.

- Need to ensure that the management of old chalk grassland benefits both the natural environment and the historic environment.
 - Some small pockets of surviving chalk grassland are still not being actively managed but the situation is improving.
 - Wight Wildlife now own Arreton Down so this is in active management.
 - The National Trust has purchased part of Bembridge Down with the intention of allowing this land to revert to grassland.
- Need to lessen the effect of ploughing on buried archaeological sites by taking certain fields out of cultivation where possible or using minimal cultivation techniques.
- Erosion and rabbit damage on archaeological earthworks, particularly erosion to Ashe Down Bronze Age burial mounds caused by cattle grazing.
- Need to ensure that traffic management measures in the informal car parking areas on Brading Down do not affect the earthworks of the Romano-British field system.
 - The potential for using ground rubber and grass for car parking surface on the top of the downs should be considered
- Heavy motor traffic on downs road affects sense of tranquillity and peace in this open landscape.
- 'Downland Way' may not be widely known or used.
 - Although close to the busy road it offers excellent views and a chance to experience the character of this HEAP Area.
- A rapid field survey is required to identify and record surviving archaeological earthworks on chalk grassland not covered by National Trust surveys.

Conservation Designations

- All of this HEAP Area is within the AONB.
- 17 *Scheduled Monuments* fall within this HEAP Area (some containing more than one feature). Scheduled monuments include Bronze Age burial mounds (most notably Michal Morey's Hump, the Devil's Punchbowl and the Ashe Down barrows), pillow mounds, the Brading Down field system and Bembridge Fort.
- There are no *Conservation Areas* on the *East Wight Chalk Ridge*.
- The only *Listed Building* within this HEAP Area is the Yarborough Monument.
- Whitecliff Ledge falls within the South Wight Maritime SAC.
- Arreton Down and Eaglehead & Bloodstone Copse are SSSIs.
- Nine *SINCs* are within this HEAP Area, including Brading Down; parts of Arreton Down, Mersley Down, Ashe Down and Bembridge Down; and part of Nunwell Park.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT

The Isle of Wight HEAP Objectives and Actions are set out in a separate document. These objectives and actions are generic and many of them are relevant to all HLC Areas. Those that are most relevant to this HLC Area are cited below.

- A12.** Complete Field Patterns HEAP.
- A13.** Identify field patterns of significance.
- A14.** Complete Rural Settlement HEAP.
- A17.** Investigate and record condition of all archaeological earthworks within the Open Land and other HEAP Types.
- A18.** Complete Open Land Type HEAP, building on earthwork condition survey and setting out best management practices.
- A19.** Investigate funding and potential for 'ground-truthing' of selected AP sites.
- A23.** Complete HEAP for Roads, Lanes, Tracks and Rail Lines.
- A24.** Complete field survey of historic Rights of Way.
- A26.** Complete HEAP for mineral extraction.

- A27.** Complete HEAP for Military HLC Type.
- A29.** Complete Climate Change HEAP.
- A30.** Investigate potential for projects to identify archaeological features within cultivated and non-cultivated land.
- A31.** Encourage detailed field survey of selected earthworks and features.
- A32.** Facilitate supply of HEAP and HLC information to land managers, farm advisers, farmers and funding bodies.
- A33.** Facilitate use of HLC information to assess importance of hedgerows affected by hedgerow removal notices.
- A34.** Advocate protection of buried archaeological features within cultivated land.
- A35.** Promote conservation of historic farm buildings and ensure that character is maintained if converted.
- A36.** Support maintenance of downland and heathland by appropriate grazing regimes.
- A37.** Support proposals for reversion of cultivated land, improved grassland or plantation woodland that will result in restoration of historic downland or heathland.
- A38.** Support proposals which minimise damage to archaeological earthworks from agriculture, recreational activity, forestry or rabbits, and improve settings of earthworks where necessary.
- A39.** Promote the retention of significant field patterns.
- A41.** Ensure that woodland and forestry planting and management conserves historic landscape character and does not damage archaeological features.
- A44.** Seek effective ways to lessen damage to road banks caused by motor traffic.
- A45.** Advocate the appropriate maintenance of historic character of rural roads.
- A57.** Facilitate pedestrian access to all HEAP Areas and HEAP Types.