



Parsonage Down

National Nature Reserve

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Parsonage Down National Nature Reserve includes 480 acres of some of the finest chalk grassland in England and 200 acres of improved farmland. Parsonage Down was established after the previous owner, Robert Wales, made the farm available to the Nature Conservancy Council in 1979.

Wildlife on the Down

What makes the old Down so special is the abundance and variety of its wildflowers. The majority of these plants can be seen on the old Iron Age camp next to the access gate on the western boundary (see map on page five). Over 150 species have been recorded including salad burnet, dropwort, devil's-bit scabious and knapweed. Wiltshire specialities include field fleawort, early gentian and dwarf sedge.

The Down is especially important for orchids, with burnt tip, green winged, frog, fragrant and pyramidal all abundant.



Burnt tip orchid. Stephen Davis/Natural England



Anthills cover the old Downland, each one its own little plant haven. They generate their own warmth and with a raised aspect also catch the warmth from the sun. This favours species such as thyme and rockrose. At the highest point of the reserve (500 feet above sea level) an expanse of scrub has developed on clay soil overlying the chalk. This scrub is mainly gorse, hawthorn and bramble. The scrub, grassland and other adjacent habitats such as arable farmland, woodland and hedgerows, add to the value of the Down for birds, insects and mammals. Grey partridge, lapwing, skylark,

yellowhammer and corn bunting breed on or near the Down, whilst green woodpeckers feed on the anthills. Wintering birds include golden plover, redwing and fieldfare. During the spring and autumn migration wheatears and whinchats stop over on the Down. The site is also home to mammals: badgers, deer and foxes.

Man's influence

Man-made features help enhance the botanical diversity of the Down by providing a variety of aspect and soil conditions. In early summer, bomb

craters left by military training become a riot of colour as herbs including thyme, lady's bedstraw and squinancywort flower in the shelter of the hollow. The ridges of Celtic fields are particularly pronounced in high summer, when the rust coloured flowerheads of salad burnet grow densely along the top of each ridge where the soil is thinnest.

Just outside the reserve lies Yarnbury Castle, a large Iron Age hill fort. The outer defences of Yarnbury include a shallow ditch and bank which traverse Castle Barn Down below the Iron Age Camp at the top of the Down.

Present day farming

The old part of the Down is managed using traditional farming methods and techniques. Cattle and sheep lightly graze the Down throughout the year. The cattle include the oldest registered herd of English Longhorns. Natural England manages adjacent grassland leys and arable fields to provide forage and back up grazing for livestock during the winter months whilst providing habitats for farmland birds. Hedgerows, rough grassland strips and ploughed plots of land left fallow are all helping to provide additional wildlife habitats.

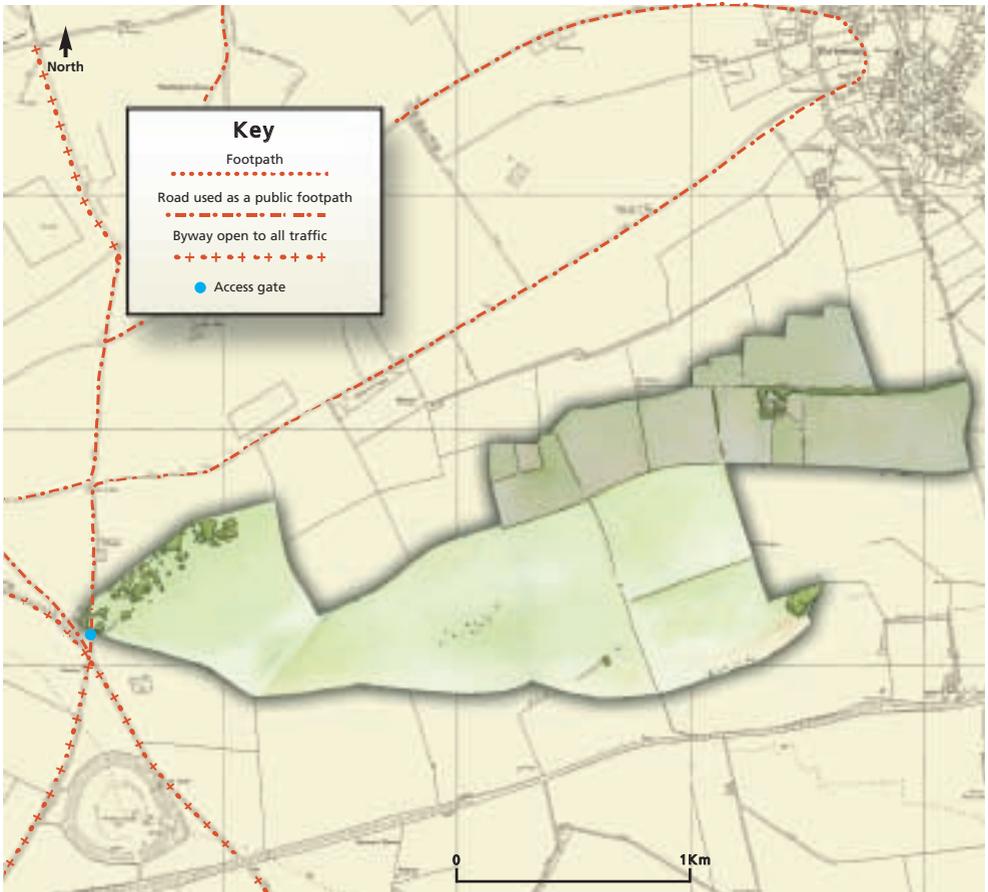
Longhorn cattle. Stephen Davis/Natural England



How to get to Parsonage Down

You are welcome to visit the reserve at any time. We ask all visitors to respect the farming enterprises on the Down and leave all gates as they are found. We recommend that dogs are not brought onto the Down as serious injury may result from cows protecting their calves.

Parsonage Down is one of a suite of National Nature Reserves across the whole country. They were established to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain. The reserve is a Special Area of Conservation under the European Habitats Directive; it is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest.



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