

Eroding cliffs back one of the Island's most popular holiday beaches at Blackgang Chine.  
Andy Gordon/English Nature



## Business as usual

It's business as usual for landowners and homeowners along the Island's rocky southern coastline.

Last May, English Nature notified its intention to extend the existing Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) to protect wildlife habitats between Compton Chine and the outskirts of Ventnor. The area has a long history of landslips, and the move will safeguard this internationally important coastline for the next fifty years.

Meanwhile, life will continue as normal for farmers and other residents, subject to restrictions in a narrow belt at the top of the cliffs. Our feature on this page explains the reasoning behind English Nature's proposals.

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## Life on the edge

"How would you feel if that landed on your breakfast table?" asks Andy Gordon, pushing a weighty package across his desk. "I'd find it quite daunting!"

Andy is the Conservation Officer looking after the Island's rocky southern coasts. After four months of public consultation, he's well aware that English Nature's proposals to extend the SSSI between Compton Chine and Steephill Cove have generated strong emotions. The formal documents required by the Wildlife and Countryside Act run to over 30 pages – and the supplement is longer still. Yet, behind the legal jargon and lists of Latin names, the principles are pretty straightforward.

These lush sea cliffs support important areas of chalk grassland, as well as rare plants, insects and geological features. As the Government's nature conservation advisor, English Nature has a legal duty to conserve the area for current and future generations.

Although the chines and woodland areas are important elements of the SSSI, much of the wildlife lives on the landslips that have moulded this coastline since prehistoric times. In different places, the cliffs are still eroding at between 0.3 and 2.0 metres a year, carrying the wildlife habitats inland as they go.

"That's a problem," says Andy, "because the law doesn't allow for 'rolling' boundaries". Faced with the prospect of redefining the SSSI every time there's a landslip, English Nature has opted for a longer-term approach. "We've drawn the legal boundary far enough inland to allow for fifty years of erosion," Andy explains. "But, in practice, our main focus is on the management of natural grassland in a narrow 20-metre strip at the top of the cliffs".

English Nature will work with farmers and landowners to help them avoid contamination from fertilisers along the cliff tops. "We want to protect the poorer soils that support the special plants and animals living on the eroding cliffs," says Andy, who can also advise on a range of financial incentives for this work.

Andy explains that homeowners can continue with normal maintenance and gardening. "What's more," he says, "development may be acceptable within the SSSI if it doesn't adversely affect the nature conservation interest. Proposals should avoid cliff stabilisation measures or deep drainage that would interfere with normal coastal erosion. I'd be happy to discuss any proposals informally with developers".

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undercliff matters is published by English Nature's Hants & Isle of Wight Team, 1 Southampton Road, Lyndhurst, SO43 7BU

Telephone: 023 8028 6410  
Fax: 023 8028 3834

**Team Manager: Wanda Fojt**

Edited for English Nature by David Foster  
[www.d-foster.co.uk](http://www.d-foster.co.uk)

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## Boundary disputes

Several landowners who have objected to the SSSI believe that it extends too far inland. The objectors suggest that a 20-metre buffer zone, measured from the eroding cliff edge, would give enough protection to wildlife living on the landslips.

Although English Nature is sympathetic to the idea of a 'rolling' SSSI boundary, the agency is legally required to establish fixed boundaries that follow clearly identifiable features. In addition, some valuable wildlife

areas extend further inland. These include the chines west of St Catherine's Point, the Ventnor Undercliff landslip with its steep rear scarp, and parts of fields between Binnel Point and Steephill Cove.

So, conservation officers have settled on a legal boundary that allows for projected erosion over the next 50 years – but, in practice, there will be few restrictions on land outside a rolling 20-metre management zone.

## Wildlife focus

People often ask about the wildlife in this part of the Island, and in our last issue we highlighted four of the rare insects living on the Undercliff. Here, we take a look at some of the area's more colourful species.

### Glanville fritillary *Melitaea cinxia*

This nationally rare butterfly was once common in mainland Britain, but is now only recorded on the Isle of Wight and Channel Islands. The adults fly in early summer on the undercliffs and chines, where they breed on chalk grassland scarp. The Glanville looks similar to other British fritillaries, but has a row of black dots in orange circles near the edge of its upper hind wing.



Glanville fritillary. R S Key/English Nature

### Hoary stock *Matthiola incana*

With its narrow leaves, woody stems and cylindrical seed pods, this nationally scarce hairy shrub is reminiscent of a wallflower. It lives on chalky sea cliffs in clumps up to 75cm high and bears sweet scented red, white or purple flowers, up to 25mm across, from May to July.



Hoary stock. Isle of Wight Council

### Ivy broomrape *Orobanche hederaceae*

Now classified as nationally scarce, this pretty, parasitic plant lives on the roots of ivy where it grows on cliffs and walls. The single 23-60cm stem has a cluster of pointed fleshy scales around its base and a spike of large, yellow or purple orchid-like flowers in the summer. The egg-shaped fruits form within the dead flowers.



Ivy broomrape. Peter Wakely/English Nature

### Triangular pygmy moss *Acaulon triquetrum*

Although widely seen in continental Europe, this tiny moss is provisionally classified as endangered in Britain, where it is confined to a few localities along the extreme south coast. It grows just a millimetre or two tall, usually on south-facing coastal cliffs and banks where the soil is constantly slipping. Although most mosses are green, this species is tinged with red.



Triangular pygmy moss. Jonathan Sleath

## Your views

The statutory four-month public consultation, which followed the publication of English Nature's plans for an extended south coast SSSI, is now drawing to a close. As well as issuing the formal notification and printed publicity, the agency has answered personal correspondence and organised local events to listen to residents' views.

Parish councillors were amongst 35 local residents who attended an animated meeting at Chale in May. A similar event was staged at Ventnor's Winter Gardens in July, when nine councillors were among the audience that kept Wanda Fojt and Andy Gordon on their toes. Despite the close questioning, there was also support for English Nature's work on the Island. Popular projects had included helping to establish the Isle of Wight meat brand, the grazing animals project, and assisting the RSPB's Brading Marshes Nature Reserve.

The questions raised at both these meetings – and at the Niton surgery (see below) – reflected understandable anxieties about the future. This selection answers some common concerns about how the extended SSSI would affect people's homes, businesses and lifestyles.

## Niton surgery

Over 30 Niton residents came to an evening 'surgery' at the Buddle Inn in April.

The event featured an information display, and local people welcomed the opportunity to discuss the SSSI proposals with English Nature. Several residents supported the plans to protect this nationally important wildlife habitat.

Others raised concerns about delays to the coast protection scheme, which was jeopardising homes in Castlehaven. English Nature acknowledged this, but explained that the assessment, design, and legal aspects of this complex project were inevitably time consuming.

Questions were also asked about the effect of the SSSI on agricultural land, private homes and the Undercliff Drive stabilisation.

**Q** English Nature's plans only talk about plants and animals. Don't you care about people?

**A** Of course we do. But the SSSI shouldn't affect most people's daily lives.

**Q** The Undercliff Drive is one of Ventnor's key road links. Won't the SSSI affect its chances of being stabilised?

**A** English Nature will cooperate with Isle of Wight Council's highways department to find a workable solution. Sensitive design, appropriate mitigation and careful planning will aim to enable the road and the SSSI to coexist.

**Q** Will homeowners be able to use their gardens if they are within 20 metres of the cliff edge?

**A** Yes! English Nature will give consent for gardening to continue as normal.

**Q** How will the extended SSSI affect future coastal defence work to protect properties and farmland in the Ventnor area?



**A** These decisions will be based on the Isle of Wight Council's *Shoreline Management Plan*, which assumes that natural erosion will be allowed to continue from Steephill Cove to beyond Compton Chine. An exception to the plan has been made to protect the small community at Castlehaven.

**Q** Will English Nature veto all new development in the SSSI?

**A** No! But new developments will have to be planned in harmony with the environment, and buildings must normally be removed if they become unstable or likely to collapse.



Shopping in Ventnor High Street – up to 20% of the town's trade depends on the Undercliff Drive. Isle of Wight Council/Stephen Lee

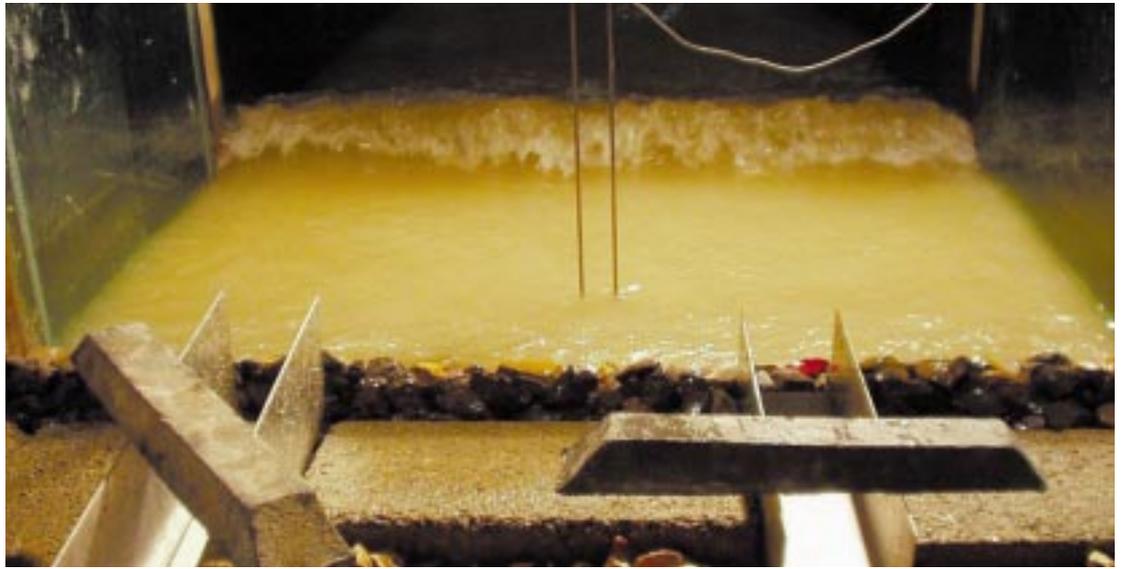
Isolated properties and agricultural land are unlikely to meet Defra's funding conditions for coastal protection work. English Nature

## Earth movers

English Nature is committed to working with the Isle of Wight Council to secure the future of the Undercliff Drive, without damaging the area's wildlife. The Council hopes that the essential stabilisation work will have only a localised impact on the land movement that supports so many unique plants and animals. Appropriate mitigation measures will offset any loss of habitat, as well as being sensitive to protected species such as dormice, bats and red squirrels.

English Nature supports the Isle of Wight Council's own *Shoreline Management Plan*, which rules out extensive engineering work to restrict natural erosion along this section of the south coast.

The reconstructed A3055 slips unobtrusively through the Undercliff landscape at Beauchamp House, Niton. Isle of Wight Council/Wightlight Gallery



A wave approaches the artificial 'beach' on the wave flume test rig at Wallingford. Hydraulics Research Ltd

## Autumn start for coast protection scheme?

Design work for the proposed £4.3 million coast protection and slope drainage scheme at Castlehaven has been completed. The project was put out to competitive tender during the summer, and the Isle of Wight Council is now considering the responses in partnership with its consulting engineers, High-Point Rendel.

Subject to the overall cost and successful consultations with Defra, the Council hopes that construction work will start in September. This timing will enable the project to benefit from the long dry summer period. The contractor will provide a detailed works programme, but it is likely that the coast protection works at the foot of the sea cliff will start at the same time as the slope drainage scheme. The Council will circulate more details to all residents after the tenders have been assessed.

High-Point Rendel also commissioned Hydraulics Research Ltd to undertake wave flume tests at their Wallingford base, to confirm the detailed design of the rock revetment along the base of the cliff. This work has been completed satisfactorily. A further ground investigation has also been undertaken, to verify ground water flows and provide other information that will ensure the effectiveness of the proposed deep drainage scheme. At the same time, the Council is updating its surface water and foul drainage records to help ensure that the scheme will capture the maximum amount of artificially introduced ground water.

The Council has now acquired twenty acres of land for environmental mitigation, and a draft Management Plan is being prepared. This will be considered at the first meeting of the Castlehaven Environmental Advisory Group, which is likely to be held in October.

## On the right road

The future of the A3055 Undercliff Drive between Niton and St Lawrence is under review.

Isle of Wight Council and its consultants, High-Point Rendel, are giving detailed consideration to the best way of securing a long-term life for the route, in harmony with the local environment. The road is affected by instability at various locations along a 3-kilometre frontage and, at a public exhibition in St Lawrence Village Hall last July, the Council presented its proposals for remedial work. A well-illustrated exhibition was visited by over seventy residents from the affected area over the two days. The Council's consultants were available to answer residents' questions.