

## Annex 2

### The Specialness of the Proposed South Downs National Park

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of

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#### **1. Biography**

1.1. I was formerly Head of the Department of Geography at the University of North London and I currently teach landscape studies part-time at the University of Sussex. I am a member of the Society of Sussex Downsmen, former Chairman of the Sussex Branch of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England and an ardent walker in the proposed National Park. I have written numerous academic papers on South-East England and the following books:

- The Making of the Sussex Landscape (1974)
- The South Saxons (ed.) (1978)
- The South-East from 1000 A.D. (with Brian Short) (1990)
- The South Downs (1998)
- The Weald of Kent and Sussex (2003)
- The South Downs (with Mike Read) (2003)

1.2. To be published in 2004 is a book entitled ‘Sussex’ and a book on the North Downs is in preparation.

#### **2. The South Downs National Park**

2.1. The proposed South Downs National Park would include some of the best-known and admired hill country in the world and also some of the most beautiful and least known parts of Sussex and Hampshire. Its most extensive component is the rolling chalkland of the South Downs which sweeps westwards from the spectacular white cliffs of Beachy Head for more than 90 miles across Sussex and Hampshire to Winchester. To the north-west, in a borderland abutting Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex, the scenery changes totally on rocks older than the chalk. This contrasting countryside has also been lavishly praised for the rare and distinguished beauty of its own but is comparatively unknown to the visitor. Together, the Park would offer incomparable opportunities for recreation within easily accessible distances from the town and cities of the Channel coast and the outskirts of London.

2.2. The salient and memorable characteristics of the chalk Downs can be readily identified<sup>1</sup>. For example, where the South Downs meet the sea in magnificent white cliffs is one of the most familiar images of England and perhaps more of a national icon than ‘the White Cliffs of Dover’. Even in the west where the Downs curve away

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix A – Brandon, ‘The South Downs’ (1998), pages 1 – 19 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

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from the sea it has a continuous presence. The salty tang of the pure air is a tonic and splendid marine views are obtained, e.g. from Catherington Down to Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight and Langstone Harbour or from Old Winchester Hill with its great sweeping view of the Solent. The most striking feature of the westward extending Downs is its crest which forms an undulating north-ward-facing steep wall rising abruptly from the Weald with magnificent panoramas across the Weald.

- 2.3. Few lines of hills have caught the public imagination as much as this imposing and virtually unbroken wall forming the horizon for hundreds of thousands of inhabitants in southern England, whether smooth-shaven and bare of trees as in the eastern part, ‘*so noble and so bare*’ in Hilaire Belloc’s felicitous phrase, or mantled with woods in the western parts which literally hang from the steep hillside. Those who know the Dorset or Berkshire Downs are unprepared for its formidableness and grandeur. For the people of the Weald it is the familiar backdrop to their lives and their re-assuring image of ‘home’. To the writer and artist this distinctive skyline has been a constant source of inspiration, and to the visitor its fascination is unbounded.
- 2.4. From the crest the Downs roll down to the sea or the coastal plain as an exquisitely smooth but deeply sculpted landscape repeatedly rising and dipping in a wave-like motion of ridge and deep valleys, known as ‘denes’ if long and winding, or ‘coombes’ when armchair in shape. Since the growth of London and great cities, and with the increasingly frenetic bustle of urban life, the gently swelling curves of the serene and spacious undulating landscape of the Downs has been regarded in the national psyche as tranquillising and therefore psychologically consoling, soothing and therapeutic. The effect is most impressive where the shape and form of the hills is unmasked by trees, when their peculiar smoothness, bareness and roundness lends them a particular sensuousness of outline which has long appealed as the shape of the human figure.
- 2.5. It becomes apparent, however, that in particular light, as at dusk, or when the Downs disappear mysteriously into mist or cloud, they may take on a more mountainous aspect than expected of the gentle country of southern England. Indeed, Gilbert White referred to them as ‘*A chain of majestic mountains*’. In reality, some of the downland slopes are steeper than those of some mountains. It is, for example, a stiffer climb up Kingston Hill near Lewes than over parts of the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland - and the air is as keen<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.6. Although the Downs are a single range of hills they change in character from east to west and they can be divided into eastern, central and western (Hampshire) sections. Each of these has its own particular beauty as part of the loveliest and most lovable landscape of England. At the eastern end, the Downs meet the sea and woodland exists only fragmentarily on slopes too steep to plough. Hardly a building breaks their smooth outline and the vaulted skies and sense of boundlessness can be overpowering. The bareness also makes the surviving archaeological remains impressive, a heritage of one of the earliest civilisations in Britain. Its glory was the springy turf, singled out as early as 1691 by the botanist John Ray as its most distinctive feature. This has been virtually ploughed up since 1940 but its selective

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix A – Brandon, ‘The South Downs’ (1998), page 6 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

regeneration is regarded as a not an impossible goal by the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and other local conservation bodies.

- 2.7. Beyond the River Adur, and still further west, one is acutely conscious of entering a different country with a special and distinct atmosphere, with a cryptic and compelling fascination of its own. It is the *'hills of the South Country'* which so profoundly moved Hilaire Belloc as to become his spiritual home. They are less dissected than the eastern Downs and much plastered over with a covering of sticky clay. There is a special 'language' to be learned in connection with the high beech forests, spectacular in their autumn tints. The eye is not set free along curves and hollows spread like an ocean without check and the woods mask the forms of the hills. Mostly their natural and man-made features are 'secret' and have to be sought out. The hanging woods on the escarpment, not found in the eastern Downs, are surely one of the most beautiful habitats jointly created by nature and man.
- 2.8. The Hangers inspired Gilbert White at Selborne; William Cobbett specifically went out of his way to see this feature that White had described and hangers are now universally admired. Much of the de luxe character of the western Downs is due to the milieu of great magnates, the Norfolks, Leconfields, Richmonds and Cowdrays. These and others represent a sporting and estate tradition which has evolved over centuries. The most remarkable of the woods are the yew groves of Kingley Vale which are famed as the finest yew forest in Europe. A view reinforced through the ecological research of Sir Arthur Tansley, who became the foremost authority on British vegetation.
- 2.9. The East Hampshire downland beyond Butser Hill also has its individuality. It is lower and much more cultivated but it has oases of unspoilt country and is so remote and empty that it is impossible to believe that it is the immediate hinterland of the large towns of Portsmouth, Eastleigh, Fareham and Southampton. Droxford is charmingly situated on the River Meon, a classic trout stream with crystal-clear water from the chalk. East Meon is one of the most beautiful downland villages. Hambledon is a fascinating form of development, a decayed market town, and it has revered associations with English cricket.
- 2.10. Another major element of the Downs are the river valleys which find their way through magnificent gaps in the range of hills. The Amberley Wild Brooks in the Arun valley are a classic example of what is now called 'wetland'. They consist of wide, peaceful, dyke-drained pasture with an endless variety of marsh plants and grasses, and an occasional stretch of reed bed or swampy pasture. They have a numinous quality for some people<sup>3</sup>.
- 2.11. The foot of the northern escarpment is a notable habitat in its own right. A district of deliciously clear springs and varied soils, some inherently fertile, it has for millennia attracted the affluent; witness the long line of Roman village sites, including Bignor, and the chain of country houses, mostly Elizabethan or earlier construction, which line the edge of the Downs from the Hampshire border to Eastbourne. This preference for the site of a house continues to this day. Here also the visitor finds a

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix A – Brandon, 'The South Downs' (1998), page 206 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

chain of archetypal English villages such as West Firle, Glynde, Ditchling, Steyning, Amberley, and South Harting.

- 2.12. The erosion which followed the updoming of the chalk, has exposed older rocks at the surface and these are encountered in the proposed National Park to the north and northwest of the chalk. The essence of this district is its extraordinary natural diversity. It is such a land of miniatures that one can drive in forty-five minutes across scenic variety which in Germany might take two hours, or in the case of the United States or Russia, days. Even on foot between Sufton and Petworth, for example, one crosses four different narrow bands of rock, each with its corresponding different plant, wildlife habitats and land use. Seemingly, all the world is in a few square miles.
- 2.13. A notable account of it is in the opening chapter of Gilbert White’s classic *The Natural History And Antiquities Of Selborne* (1798), which is still in print, where in that parish he identified nine different soils below the chalk. Crossing such belt of differing country up to the Surrey border one encounters almost every type and mood of scenery within lowland England: green, tumbledown hills, little fast-flowing brooks, deep loams and clays, oak and beech wood, chestnut coppice, orchards, water meadows and sandy heaths, the deepest recessed being so remote as to give the air of being 200 miles from Charing Cross. Strangers to this relatively unknown part of the proposed National Park have been known to be overcome by its surprising variety and intimacy. Disraeli, for example, was one of these and more recent explorers have included Cyril Joad to whom its beauty so surpassed any in southern England that it was beyond his powers of description<sup>4</sup>.
- 2.14. To return to the chalkland of the South Downs. It became so widely known and admired before the last war that it became the basis of a sort of myth concerning the character of the other chalklands of southern England<sup>5</sup>. Although the North and South Downs face one another, the springs of an arch from which the key-stone has been removed by erosion, they are quite different from one another. As a range of hills the North Downs are usually reckoned inferior to the South Downs in beauty and general interest. The North Downs lack the formidable wall of the South Downs with its prettily varied outline which was associated from the eighteenth century with the ‘*Hogarthian line of natural beauty*’. Its surface is normally a plateau bereft of Rudyard Kipling’s ‘*blunt, bow-headed, whale-backed hills*’ coursing along the horizon. Also missing generally are the great curving forms of great promontories jutting out from the escarpment, and the deep winding coombes etched deeply into the escarpment itself, which is such a delightful feature of the South Downs.
- 2.15. The reason for these differences is the gentler dip of the rocks in the North Downs and their less mature dissection by rivers. Moreover, because of this, a great deal of the North Downs is still plastered with heavy superficial deposits which have been under woodland during historical time, and earlier. This accounts for the relative paucity of prehistoric occupation compared with the South Downs. The North

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix B – Brandon (with Mike Read), ‘The South Downs’ (2003), page 38 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

<sup>5</sup> Appendix C – S.W. Wooldridge and DL Linton, ‘Structure, Surface and Drainage in South-East England’ (1955 edition), page 154 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

Downs share with the South Downs the vaulted skies, the immense views and, not least, the silences. They have the magnificent panorama from Newlands Corner and even the beauty of the Arun Gap cannot rival the strikingly beautiful corner bastion of Box Hill and the Mole Gap. However, *overall* the North Downs cannot match the superb scenery of their counterpart to the south which to many people is English chalkland *par excellence*, ‘*the fairest and most famous of all*’.

- 2.16. Similar remarks could be made of the Chilterns which, like the North Downs, are less maturely dissected than the South Downs, and thus less interesting and soothing than the latter. They also lack the maritime element which has always given the chalkland in Sussex and Hampshire the essence of the English summer scene by the sea. A case for a Cotswold National Park could be made out. However, unlike the South Downs, formed from the uncommon and quintessentially English chalk, they are a limestone landscape without the same iconoclastic overtones. They also lack the present-day threats to their integrity that face the South Downs.
- 2.17. It is also important to refer to the inter-relationships of the South Downs and the Weald region to the north on the Weald Clay. Throughout prehistory and history these have been complementary and conjoint. The Downs and the Coastal Plain were the earliest settled and became the most powerful and prosperous parts. The Weald was for millennia a ‘colonial’ territory exploited by the settled areas and divided up by them accordingly. Thus the ancient institutions of Sussex and Hampshire - the manor, the parish, the rape or similar division - all straddle the two parts. In many cases the ‘colonial’ (wood pasture) portion is up to ten miles or more north of the old settled area. A mosaic of landed possessions were thus inter-connected by the ancient droveways and other routes on a north-south basis. In past times, manors in, or at the edge of, the Downs held fragmented wood pastures in the Weald.
- 2.18. Until the ‘tidying-up’ of parish boundaries c. 100 years ago numerous parishes had detached ‘outliers’ in the Weald: thus the parish of Coombes in the Adur valley had people living in the Weald near Horsham who were accounted part of the parish and in north-west Sussex and the adjoining part of Hampshire, several parishes were similarly divided. The many instances of this pattern of linkage between Downs and Weald would be vividly brought to light by research on the ancient parish boundaries before Local Government reforms. Therefore from a cultural and landscape history perspective it is erroneous to regard the northern boundary of the Chalk as an appropriate boundary for the National Park.
- 2.19. The most striking legacy on the present landscape of the north-south linkages is the extensive network of routes now largely obsolete and surviving as footpaths and bridle-ways created by the movements of men and animals between the two respective parts of the Downs and Weald. It is plain that the principal need of self-sufficient communities in the more settled areas was not east-west routes which would have brought them into contact with resources they already had, but north-south ones which led to a quite different environment from their own. From the Weald, the downland communities obtained game, timber, fuel, clay for pottery, food for bees as well as using it for summer pasture of cattle and pigs.
- 2.20. These routeways, which are prime recreation, wildlife and plant corridors, were formerly assumed to be of Saxon origin but archaeologists are now in agreement that

they are much older and may well be prehistoric. The droveways to and from the Downs eventually attracted churches, especially at river crossings; traders gradually gravitated to the churches and in some cases villages and towns grew round this nucleus. Ditchling, Storrington and Kirdford are examples of such settlements; Shipley, Ashurst, Thakeham and Shermanbury are examples of Wealden churches sited on droveways from the Downs. Thus, to a very remarkable degree, the evolution of the Weald landscape, both urban and rural, has up to the present day been fundamentally influenced by settlement on the Downs<sup>6</sup>.

- 2.21. It is now perhaps useful to summarise why the area proposed for inclusion in the National Park is so special. The question has been repeatedly asked ‘*In what lies the chief charm and attraction of the South Downs?*’ They are no ordinary hills, but despite the enumeration of their salient characteristics earlier, the answer is difficult because their character defies analysis and so it is hard to define, terribly difficult to convey, yet so unmistakably there. I have hinted at, or explicitly mentioned, some aspects of their irresistible allure. Notable elements are the gentle swelling curves which are soothing and therapeutic in effect, and the saltish breeze, pure air which acts like a tonic and blows ‘*cobwebs from business worried brains*’. Wind, which has been increasing in strength during the last twenty years or so, makes rambling exciting, exhilarating and wonderfully bracing in autumn and winter. Also cherished has been the heritage of ancient earthworks which, although much depleted since the ploughing-up of the Downs after the last war, are still predominant enough to convey, in a widespread imprint of tumuli, field systems and sites of habitation; a sense of the oldest England, so beloved by the Victorians.
- 2.22. The Downs were the cradle of civilisation in Sussex and Hampshire and the main focus for forging the identity of the two counties. This was dramatically emphasised recently when one of Britain’s earliest habitations was discovered at Boxgrove in West Sussex. Moreover, the Downs have symbolised England for foreigners, exiles and the soldiers, who fought and died for them in two world wars; inspired by recruiting posters depicting famous beauty spots. They became a focus of popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century and thus entered English thought, literature, painting and music, an aspect discussed further below.
- 2.23. Throughout history, the largest, most efficient and prosperous farms have been based here and, from the eighteenth century until the last war, they were famed for their most renowned product, the celebrated breed of Southdown sheep - improved by John Ellman of Glynde near Lewes and others. The Southdown sheep became the progenitor of all the Downs’ breeds of sheep in England and had an influence on sheep farming worldwide. The complement of Saxon churches here is unique in England: they are especially moving in their smallness, utter simplicity and atmospheric siting amidst fields.
- 2.24. A persistent fascination has been Chanctonbury Ring, the most distinctive feature on the skyline of the Downs, which acquired a mystical and symbolical force without equal in southern England long before the beech clump was planted on its summit in 1760. It has been remembered by soldiers far from home, none in a more moving manner than the verses entitled ‘*From Steyning To The Ring*’. Many people seeking

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix D – Brandon, ‘The Kent and Sussex Weald’ (2003), page 47 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

retirement have moved consciously to be within sight of it.

- 2.25. By the 1930s the Downs were seen to offer the best of country walking, cycling, rambling, hiking, horse-riding, cricket, horse-racing, golf and hunting. From a leisure point of view the springy chalk turf was the greatest of their allurements. Stepping on it was like being on a soft carpet and the springiness underfoot seemed like walking on India rubber. Although most of this rare habitat has disappeared there is still enough to encourage the restitution of more. Few places in England are more suited for outdoor recreation than the Downs. It is not unsurprising, therefore, that Goodwood celebrated in 2002, the third centenary of its first cricket match and the second of its first race meeting.
- 2.26. The Downs can claim, with Kent and Surrey, to be the birthplace of cricket. They had the space and springy turf the game needed and the patronage (and active sportsmanship) of aristocrats, clergy and squires that the game needed to establish itself. Hambledon’s Cricket Club (nationally flourishing 1772-96) is world famous as the accepted authority and governing body of the game before the formation of the M.C.C.
- 2.27. Collectively the miniature flowers and herbs growing in short dense turf of old Chalk grass has always been responsible for much of the beauty and fascination of the Downs. Early in the year the sward has a predominantly yellow appearance if cowslips or horseshoe vetch are present: a mosaic of purples and mauves follows when the turf smells sweetly of thyme, marjoram and basil. The typical downland orchids appear from May, together with the wild flower most representative of all the blooms of the Downs, the round-headed rampion, which is more plentiful on the Downs than anywhere else in England and accordingly is known as the ‘pride of Sussex’. The chalk is also home to distinctive populations of birds, butterflies, and other invertebrates which can adapt to its special conditions.
- 2.28. The area beyond the Downs to the north-west is the home of another extremely rare European habitat - the lowland heath. This is an area where dramatic changes in vegetation have taken place over the past one hundred years or so. Blackdown itself is an example of these. Tennyson knew it as a heather-covered heathland dotted with pines and grazed by sheep and cattle. As grazing declined from the end of the nineteenth century and the traditional cutting of ‘brakes’ for litter in barns ceased, rhododendron and trees seeded and eventually grew into woods. The clock is now being turned back by the National Trust and other conservation organisations. The aim of landscape managers is a mosaic which will include lowland heath and create new viewpoints lost by the incursion of trees and a habitat for the species which colonised the former heathlands.
- 2.29. The area proposed for the National Park has been, for more than a century, inspiration for countless artists and writers and the smooth maternal lines of the Downs have become the most familiar and mimicked images of English countryside. Some of their creative works have a permanent place in English literature and art, such as Rudyard Kipling’s and Hilaire Belloc’s prose and verse, the poetry of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, and the novels of Virginia Woolf, and the songs of Bob Copper. Amongst landscape painters, Copley Fielding, Alfred Hine, Sir William Nicholson, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, Lyon Hitchens, John Piper and Eric Ravilious and, in our

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own time, Stanley Roy Badmin, Adrian Berg and Jeffery Camp, stand out. A number of composers have drawn inspiration from the landscape including Sir Hubert Parry, Sir Edward Elgar, John Ireland and Frank Bridge. Glyndebourne, founded in 1934 is now internationally acclaimed<sup>7</sup>. No other part of the English landscape, apart from the Lake District, has been the subject of such a volume of literary, artistic and musical inspiration which has gained a permanent place in English creative life.

- 2.30. These are my present thoughts on the specialness of the proposed National Park which originated as a desideratum in a germ of an idea of a writer in Ardingly more than one hundred years ago<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix A – Brandon, ‘The South Downs’ (1998), pages 195 – 204 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

<sup>8</sup> John Halsham (Forrester Scott), ‘Idlehurst: A journey into the country’ (1898), pages 22-24