



Pewsey Downs

National Nature Reserve

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The reserve lies on the southern edge of the Marlborough Downs and is situated on a steep, south-facing scarp slope overlooking the Vale of Pewsey and set within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The reserve encompasses the three hills: Milk, Walkers and Knap; the tallest of these is Milk Hill, which rises to a height of 294 metres.

The flower-rich grasslands which occur on Pewsey Downs have developed over the Upper Chalk, due mainly to the low levels of plant nutrients in the soil, which prevent vigorous species dominating the finer herbs.

While the lack of nutrients is important, the localised climate,

steepness of slope, aspect and the amount - or even lack - of soil give a variety of conditions ideal for a wide range of plants, so that on Pewsey Downs you are likely to find different plants on the different parts of the three hills.

Archaeology

Pewsey Downs is rich in features left by people over the millennia, although perhaps the most noticeable - the White Horse - dates from only 1812.

The oldest features, dating back to Neolithic times some 5,000 years ago, include the causeway camp on the crown of Knap Hill and the long barrow on Walkers Hill, both of which are visible from the car park. The long barrow now called Adam's Grave was once known as Woden's Barrow. Iron Age features include the round barrows which can be seen above the White Horse and near the car park.



Marbled white. Stephen Davis/Natural England



Pewsey Downs landscape. Stephen Davis/Natural England

A section of the Wansdyke crosses the reserve and forms the boundary at its western end. It is also accessible by crossing the road from the car park and following the path to the north.

This huge earthwork was built or enlarged in AD 584 by the Saxon King Ceawhin as protection against the adjacent Saxon kingdom.



Chalkhill blue.
Stephen Davis/
Natural England

The variation in topography provided by these earthworks increases the diversity of chalk downland habitats.

Wildlife and management

Some of the specialities which occur on Pewsey Downs include burnt tip, lesser butterfly, common spotted and fragrant orchids, which are found on the banks of the ancient trackways in May and June. At the same time, field fleawort and early gentian can be found, the latter a species which grows only in England.

During July ox-eye daisies and the nationally scarce round-headed

rampion are in flower, the latter being plentiful on parts of Knap Hill. Also on Knap Hill the very rare hybrid of tuberous and stemless thistle flowers in late July. During August, small and devil's-bit scabious give the down a blue haze, but if you look carefully, you may find the frog orchid or bastard toadflax. In September, autumn lady's-tresses can be found along the droveway on Walkers Hill.

All these plants are to be found in the herb rich-grassland, which is mainly dominated by one of two grasses, either red fescue or upright brome.

Natural England organises the grazing management carried out by local farmers' stock so that the bulk of the stronger growing grasses are removed, making space for the flowering plants. There are two broad grazing regimes on the reserve to reflect its two grassland communities. The red fescue grassland on Milk Hill is grazed by cattle and sheep throughout the year. On and around Walkers Hill and Knap Hill there is low level cattle grazing from May through to autumn, with winter grazing by sheep and a short rest in April to allow a taller grassland of brome to develop. This careful management ensures that the best conditions are provided for the wide range of plants and animals on the reserve,

including many insects - the most obvious ones being the butterflies. These range from skippers, green hairstreaks and wall browns during early spring, to the abundant chalkhill blue in late summer.

Alongside them one can see dark green fritillaries, small coppers and marbled whites, as well as the increasingly rare marsh fritillary. Summer migrants such as clouded yellows occur in some years.

Rabbits, moles and badgers use the down and are each important in their own way in creating variety in the sward by digging burrows, scrapes and holes, exposing the soil for colonising plants and solitary bees.

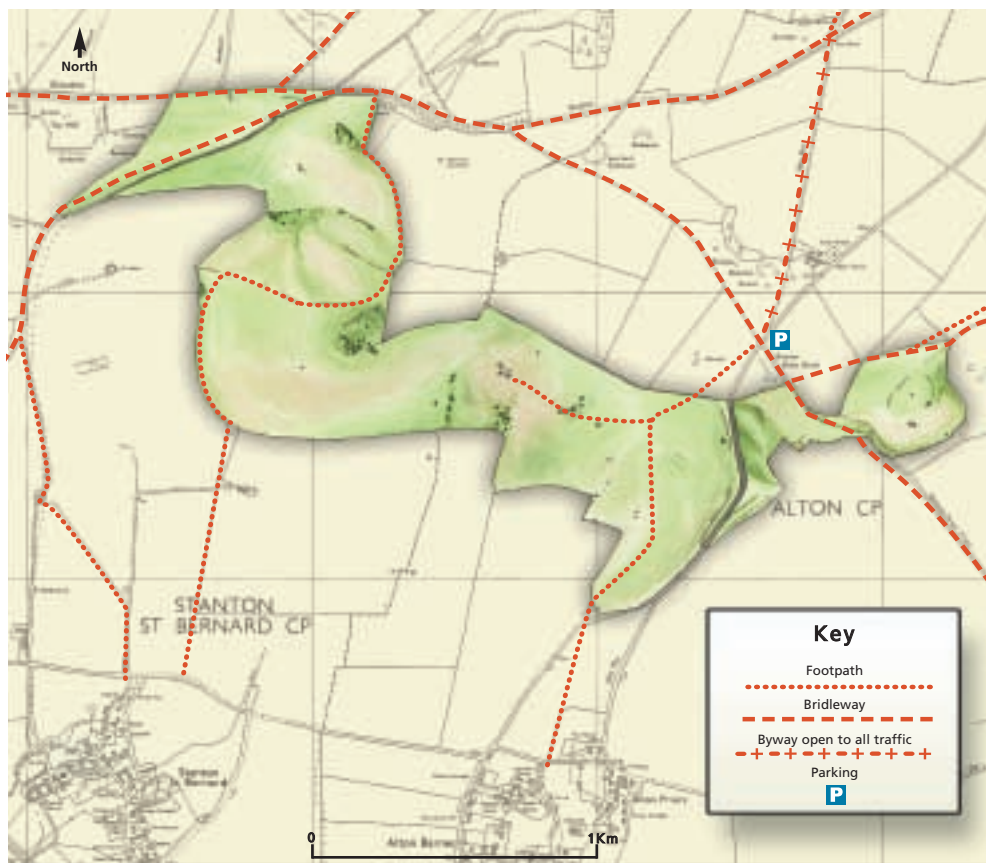


Illustration by Nigel Cowling

How to get to Pewsey Downs

You are welcome to visit the reserve at any time and public access on foot is unrestricted. However, we ask all visitors to respect the farming enterprise on the down and to leave all gates as they find them and keep dogs under close control.

Pewsey Downs 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.



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Natural England works for people, places and nature to conserve and enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas. We conserve and enhance the natural environment for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people, and the economic prosperity it brings.

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