

PART 2: EVALUATION AND OBJECTIVES

CHAPTER 2.1 CONSERVATION STATUS OF THE SITE

2.1.1 Historic

The site was largely unknown until comparatively recently. The earliest reference to it so far discovered was in 1942 as a site for Carex humilis (Grose 1957). It subsequently went un-noticed until it was 're-discovered' by NCC in 1967 and was included in the NCR, being graded 1A (Ratcliffe 1977).

The Nature Conservation Review Statement:

L34. PARSONAGE DOWN WILTSHIRE

SU0541. 130 ha

Grade 1

This large area of high quality downland contrasts with all of the previous sites listed in that it is situated on level to gently undulating land and is 'ranch'd' with a mixed herd of cattle. The only other areas of chalk downland with this type of topography are within the Salisbury Plain military training area (L41) and the Porton Down Ministry of Defence experimental area (L36), the remainder having all been ploughed. The grassland is predominantly of the Festuca ovina type but considerable areas of the Carex humilis association exist, which suggests that at least parts of this Down have not been ploughed for centuries. Adjacent to Parsonage Down is Yarnbury Castle, which is an Iron Age camp site with double earth embankments and a rich flora, including juniper. These two areas are best considered together as one key site. There is high archaeological interest.

Although the numbers of species of Auchenorrhyncha recorded in sample from Parsonage Down were slightly below average, the site is an outstanding one in other ways. The heteropterous fauna is very rich and the weevils recorded include the uncommon species Tychius lineatulus and Phytonomus venustus. The Adonis blue butterfly occurs here.

(NB: This last sentence is probably an error as the last known Adonis blue record was in 1947.)

In 1969 the site was considered a 'National Elite Site' in terms of the Reserves review and in 1970 the Advisory Committee for England recommended PNNR Status which was endorsed by the Conservancy. It was recognised at this time that there were "strong arguments for purchase as the best measure of achieving the conservation objective and to ensure its long-term protection and to allow full management control".

In 1971 the then owner Mr R Wales agreed to allow the NC, in his will, the first option to buy. He wished to continue farming himself until stopped by ill health or death. No provision had been made to hand the farm over to any relative (COLA/M/70/29). At this time it was first scheduled as an SSSI.

The PNNR/SSSI site was enlarged in 1973 to include pasture land of lower botanical value, recognising the importance of protecting land necessary for maintaining the long running grazing regime on the botanically rich area.

Following the death of Mr Wales on 27 October 1979, and prior to purchase a paper was produced by EHQ for Council (NCC 1979). It contained the following statement:-

"It (Parsonage Down) is one of the most important chalk grassland sites in Britain and Europe, and if acquired by NCC should be considered for designation by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve - part of an international network of the World's major ecosystem types devoted to the conservation of nature and scientific research in the service of man".

The Scotland Lodge Farm was purchased by NCC on 19 March 1980, and 303 acres of improved land were re-sold in November 1980. The remaining land was declared a National Nature Reserve on 11 July 1981.

The Reserve was named Parsonage Down NNR, The Robert Wales Memorial Reserve, recognising Mr Wales' role in protecting the site. A press notice of 21 Jan 1980 made a statement to this effect:-

"The NCC acknowledges that it is only through the endeavours of the late Mr Wales that the scientific interest of much of the land, and the very high diversity of plant species - as many as 35-40 per square metre - has been retained. Over the past 50 years he had carefully managed the land by traditional methods of grazing cattle and sheep to retain a wide range of grasses and flowering plants that were once widespread over large areas of South Wessex but which have all but disappeared due to ploughing and the application of agricultural chemicals."

2.1.2 SSSI Status, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

2.1.2.1 **Site Description**

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE

SITE NAME: PARSONAGE DOWN

DISTRICT: SALISBURY

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

Local Planning Authority: Wiltshire County Council
Salisbury District Council

National Grid Reference: SU 050412

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184

1:10,000: SU 04 SW, SU 04 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971

Date of Last Revision: 1973

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986

Date of Last Revision:

Area: 188.6 ha 466.1 ac

Other Information: Part of a National Nature Reserve owned by the Nature Conservancy Council. Site boundary amended.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Parsonage Down is one of the most outstanding chalk downland sites in Britain. Situated on the Upper Chalk of the southern edge of Salisbury Plain, the site is of particular interest as an extensive area of flat and gently sloping land, much of which has escaped ploughing and other agricultural improvement during the last 100 years.

For at least 60 years the site has been grazed extensively by hardy breeds of cattle and sheep at a carefully regulated stocking rate; this continuity has been important in maintaining plant and animal diversity. Further evidence, both archaeological and documentary, has contributed to a detailed knowledge of land use history which is an important facet of the interest of Parsonage Down.

The botanically-rich grassland which covers most of the site is broadly referable to the sheep's-fescue - meadow oat-grass (*Festuca ovina* - *Avenula pratensis*) type. However red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and downy oat-grass (*Avenula pubescens*) also occur in areas of herb-rich turf. This unusual feature may be related to local soils and topography.

A remarkable variety of vascular plants occur within the sward; it is common to record over 30 species in a square metre. Of the 28 grasses and sedges occurring

on the site, dwarf sedge (Carex humilis) and glaucous sedge (C. flacca), heath-grass (Danthonia decumbens), yellow oat-grass (Trisetum flavescens) and crested hair-grass (Koeleria macrantha) are widespread. Herbs which typify the south west Wiltshire chalk are common on the site and include saw-wort (Serratula tinctoria), devil's-bit scabious (Succisa pratensis), betony (Stachys officinalis), yellow rattle (Rhinanthus minor) and dropwort (Filipendula vulgaris). Many plants which exist at Parsonage Down have a restricted distribution in Britain. Amongst these are early gentian (Gentianella angelica), bastard-toadflax (Thesium humifusum), chalk milkwort (Polygala calcarea), dodder (Cuscuta epithymum) and field fleawort (Senecio integrifolius). Orchids are well represented and include burnt and green-winged orchids (Orchis ustulata and O. morio) and frog orchid (Coeloglossum viride).

Periodically, from prehistoric times to the last war, parts of the down have been used for crop production. An area ploughed and resown during the last war has since been left unimproved and now holds small quantities of typical downland plants such as salad burnet (Sanguisorba minor) and clustered bellflower (Campanula glomerata). Adjacent to high quality downland, this area is of value for the study of recolonisation of chalk grassland.

The regularity of grazing has restricted scrub development on the down. However gorse (Ulex europaeus) and hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna) occur locally as clumps with bramble (Rubus fruticosus agg) and dog rose (Rosa canina). To the west of the site are more extensive areas of scrub.

Limited invertebrate study has so far revealed several interesting species. The rare spiders Xysticus cristatus and Oxyptila simplex were noted in 1980, whilst several notable true flies (diptera) including Leptarthrus breviostris and Meonura minutissima were recorded in 1982. The well grazed sward supports typical downland butterflies such as marbled white (Melanargia galathea) and brown argus (Aricia agestis).

Birds which rely on the downland for breeding include lapwing, grey and red-legged partridge, whilst areas of scrub support yellowhammer and turtle dove.

Criteria for selection from the guidelines for the 'Selection of Biological Sites', PPG-83 (NCC 1983).

The site qualifies as Grassland Habitat Type A1, south and south west chalk under

selection ref A6, Criterion A6 is that which allows a county to notify 25% of a habitat type when 50% or more of the habitat type falls within the county.

South and south west chalk grassland is considered a less rare habitat (ie more than 10,000 hectares occurs), under threat (ie has declined by 50% since 1900 or 20% since 1945).

The reserve also qualifies on species criteria, Cib, scoring more than the required 200 points for the notable plant species occurring on the site. These are Carex humilis (50 points), Gentianella anglica (40), Orchis ustulata (40), Senecio integrifolius (40), Thesium humifusum (40) - total 210 points.

Red data book and notable invertebrates recorded are diptera; Meonura minutissima (100) RDB and hemiptera; Sehirus dubius (40). It is likely with more invertebrate information that the site would meet the criteria for these groups.

2.1.2.2 Potentially Damaging/Notifiable Operations

PARSONAGE DOWN SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST, WILTSHIRE

OPERATIONS LIKELY TO DAMAGE THE SPECIAL INTEREST

<u>Standard Ref No</u>	<u>Type of Operation</u>
1	Cultivation, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing and re-seeding.
2	Changes in the grazing regime (including type of stock or intensity or seasonal pattern of grazing and cessation of grazing).
3	Changes in stock feeding practice.
4	The introduction of and changes in the mowing or cutting regime.
5	Application of manure, fertilisers and lime.
6	Application of pesticides, including herbicides (weedkillers).
7	Dumping, spreading or discharge of any materials.
8	Burning.
9	The release into the site of any wild, feral or domestic animal*, plant or seed.
10	The killing or removal of any wild animal*, including pest control.
11	The destruction, removal or cutting of any plant or plant remains, including tree, shrub, herb moss and turf.
12	The introduction of tree or woodland management and changes in tree or woodland management (including planting and felling).
20	Extraction of minerals, including topsoil, subsoil and chalk.
21	Construction, removal or destruction of roads, tracks, walls, fences, hardstands, banks, ditches or other earthworks, or the laying,

maintenance or removal of pipelines and cables, above or below ground.

- 22 Storage of materials.
- 23 Erection of permanent or temporary structures, or the undertaking of engineering works, including drilling.
- 26 Use of vehicles likely to damage or disturb the flora and fauna.
- 27 Recreational or other activities likely to damage the flora and fauna.
- 28 The introduction of and changes in game management and hunting practice.

*"animal" includes any mammal, reptile, amphibian, bird, fish or invertebrate.

NB: The definition of 'pesticide' PDO6, may need to include parasitic stock treatments such as ivermectin, which may damage invertebrate populations. At the moment application of such medication is obligatory under agricultural legislation (See 2.3.4).

Due to NCC ownership it is highly unlikely that any operations will be carried out in a damaging way. If, however, the site had no conservation protection, economic forces would cause a change in agricultural practices and so cause damage. Most likely there would be a change from permanent pasture to arable (operations Nos 1, 5, 6), or to improved grassland (nos 1, 5 and 6). Changes to the stable grazing regime (no 2) on Castle Barn and Down (compts 1 and 2) are likely to be detrimental to the present interest. Changes may however be beneficial on Parsonage Bank which appeared to suffer a change in grazing from the time of land re-sale and also on the Hundred Acres and Parsonage Down (new downland areas) the recolonisation of which may be aided by a lighter grazing regime or a change to hay making (no 4). Should a change to hay making occur on parts of this area the limited application of farmyard manure is likely to be acceptable (no 5).

Stock feeding (no 3) occurs on botanically rich areas of the SSSI, although not the very best areas, and this is carried out in such a way that damage is not noticeable, although it may have a subtle influence on sward composition and its direction of development.

④ CONSENT LETTER

1.1.3

The Chief Warden
Nature Conservancy Council
South Region, England

Nature Conservancy Council
Foxhold House
Crookham Common
NEWBURY
Berks RG15 8EL

ALL DECLARED NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES AND FOREST NATURE RESERVES,
AND LAND ACQUIRED AS SUCH BUT NOT YET DECLARED, IN SOUTH REGION,
ENGLAND

NOTICE OF PROPOSAL TO CARRY OUT OPERATIONS UNDER SECTION 28(5) OF THE
WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981 AND CONSENT BY THE NATURE
... CONSERVANCY COUNCIL UNDER SECTION 28(6)

I hereby give you notice under Section 28(5) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
of my intention to carry out, cause or permit to be carried out the operations specified
below.

Signed:

DA Rogers

Name: D A ROGERS

Date: 10.10.86

The Nature Conservancy Council hereby agrees that, as manager for the above sites of which
it is owner or occupier, you may carry out, cause or permit to be carried out, the operations
specified below in the manner prescribed.

Signed for the
Nature Conservancy Council:

Peter Schofield
Regional Officer (South):

P Schofield

Date:

13.10.86.

Details of proposed operations

Operation

- A Any operation carried out in accordance with a current Management Plan
approved by the Nature Conservancy Council.
- B Any operation carried out in accordance with a draft Management Plan or Work
Programme approved by the Chief Warden.
- C Any other operation authorised by the Chief Warden.

2.1.3 Site Definition and Boundaries

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Virtually all the land within compartments 1 and 2, Castle Barn and Down are of SSSI standard, as is Parsonage Bank within Parsonage Down (compt 3). Most of the remaining grassland within Parsonage Down (compt 3) and nearly all of the 100 Acres is just below SSSI standard. It was notified for its value for research into the recolonisation of calcicolous grassland, particularly in the context of the research importance of the reserve and the current interest in re-establishing botanically rich grassland.

The remainder of the NNR is agriculturally improved back-up-land, essential a) to maintain the grazing regime on the unimproved downland and b) for the farm to remain a profit making enterprise. It also contains secondary wildlife habitats.

All the SSSI and NNR boundaries are fenced, except for compt 1a Cast Scrub which is the subject of an unresolved land ownership dispute with the MOD.

FIG. 2.1.3

PARSONAGE DOWN WILTSHIRE

