

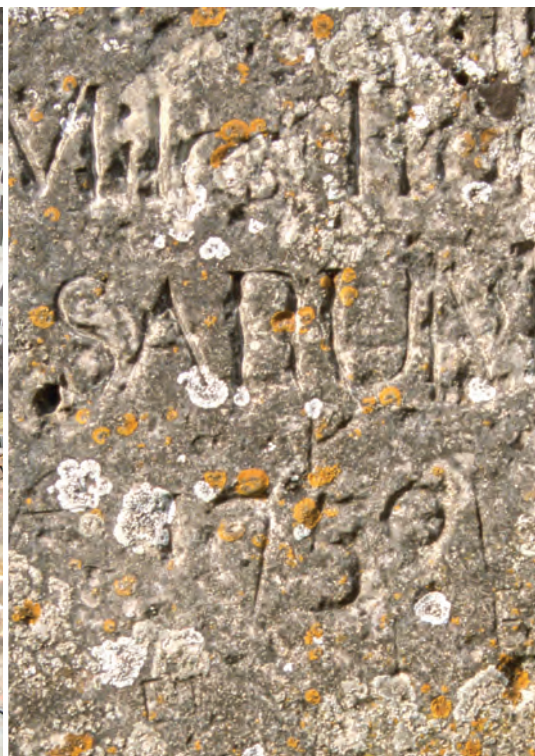


Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Background  
Area  
**T9**  
Theme  
Supplementary  
Method

# Historic Environment Action Plans

Theme 9: Open Land










This document forms part of a suite of documents which together comprise the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Environment Action Plans.

The HEAPs provide a summary of the key characteristics of the historic environment of the AONB at a landscape scale, they then set out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of this special landscape and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance these special characteristics. These summaries are divided into two groups:

1. Summaries of the historic environment of the AONB by area
2. Summaries of the historic environment of the AONB by theme

These core documents are accompanied by documents which provide background information, supplementary information and detail on the methodologies used to create these documents.

A series of icons help you navigate this suite of documents:

-  **Background** - Provides an introduction to the AONB Historic Environment Action Plans and provides background information on the history and archaeology of the landscape **(B1 to B10)**
-  **Area** - Summarises key characteristics of discrete geographical areas within the AONB, they then set out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of each area and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance its characteristics **(A1 to A12)**
-  **Theme** - Summarises key characteristics of historic environment themes, each document then sets out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of each theme and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance its characteristics **(T1 to T14)**
-  **Supplementary** - A series of documents which explore supplementary issues of relevance to the Historic Environment Action Plans **(S1 to S2)**
-  **Method** - Introduces the methodology behind the production of the Historic Environment Action Plans **(M1 to M3)**

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## Introducing the Theme Statements

Thirteen distinct Historic Landscape Themes have been identified in the AONB. These were chosen by the HEAP Steering group as representing the topics which best encapsulate the historic character of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.

The theme descriptions aim to provide an overview of each theme which encapsulates the main features of the Historic Environment present and include both the archaeological and historical, the very old and the more recent.



The process through which the Historic Landscape Character themes were identified, and mapped, and the sources of information used to create these descriptions is documented in the methodological statement 'Creating and Describing Historic Character Themes'.

## Introduction to Theme 9: Open Land

*“The vast flocks of sheep, which one everywhere see upon these downs, and the great number of thouse flocks, is a sight truly worth obervation”*

Defoe 1725

The aim of this document is to provide an overview of the impact that the exploitation of grazed and open land has had had on the AONB and to focus on the evidence of physical surviving remains of these activities in today's landscape.

The former exploitation of areas of open downland, furze, heath and rough grazing all contributed to the landscape seen today.



Surviving grassland  
on Martin Down

## Summary of Key Characteristics

- Large area of surviving open downland at Martin Down National Nature Reserve, marks an important survival of an historic landscape type which even 60 years ago covered much of the AONB.



- Areas of semi-enclosed formerly open, grass chalk downland are found on the tops, edges and sides of chalk escarpments. In some cases those cover extensive areas such as the National Trust holdings at Wyn Green and Melbury Down.
- Some areas of surviving open land in the AONB are densely covered in furze (gorse), in the past this resource was extensively exploited as fuel in the downland areas where wood was scarce.
- Surviving areas of rough grazing common land around Semley, either side of historic routeways, and wooded over common land on higher ground to the south marks historic survival of a once much more extensive historic landscape type.
- Surviving areas of rough grazing on the edge of settlements and fields marking areas of poor quality agricultural land which it is not worth converting to farmed land.
- There are some small areas of marsh in the base of the chalk river valleys often fenced off from surrounding meadows and remain as isolated islands surrounded by a sea of valley fields and relic water meadows.
- Areas of former downland are now large arable fields and retain elements of their former character due to the open vistas they provide, lack of mature hedged boundaries, number of fenced boundaries.
- Areas of former common land are still identifiable in the landscape through place name evidence and distinctive patterns of Rights of Way. Many have been transformed into areas of Parliamentary enclosure.
- Relationship between areas of open downland and rough grazing and archaeological earthworks, including fields systems, strip lynchets, cross dykes and Prehistoric settlements and monuments.



*Mosaic of chalk grassland surrounded by ancient woodland on the Cranborne Chase*



## Linkages to other Historic Landscape Character Statements

This statement forms one of 14 AONB wide Historic Landscape Character Theme descriptions. These are accompanied by a series of 12 Historic Landscape Character Area descriptions which cover the whole of the AONB. These documents together build up a picture of the key characteristics of the Historic Environment of the AONB at a landscape scale. These statements combined inform the Historic Environment Action Plans created for the AONB landscape.

Other Themes of particular relevance to this theme are:

 Theme 3: Fields in the Landscape

All the Historic Landscape Character Areas are of relevance to this theme.

 to 

## History and Context

Until AD 1800 large parts of the landscape of the AONB were open, in that they were not enclosed by field boundaries. The majority of this land was comprised of open grazed chalk grassland in downland areas and in river valleys and the Vale of Wardour by small areas of rough grazing on the edge of settlement, or areas of pasture on the edge of parishes. Fundamentally this is a Medieval pattern of land use.

The chalk downland, from the middle Bronze Age onwards, was subdivided into widespread field systems formed of earthen banks, although it is uncertain the extent to which these were arable or pasture throughout their history. However these field patterns were abandoned in the early Medieval period and the chalk downland reverted to open unenclosed grassland punctuated with some evidence for open fields around settlements e.g. Ashmore or Martin. Open land in other areas may be of greater antiquity.

Unenclosed chalk downland, and semi-enclosed chalk escarpments comprise the majority of the remaining open land in the AONB but still cover only a small percentage of the AONB landscape. Former reliance on the sheep-corn system of agriculture AD 1600 - 1900, in which open grassland played a major part, came to an end with the development of more modern methods of fertilising the soil than sheep folding at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This resulted in a massive increase in arable farming over the last 200 years in the area, with the ploughing up of former downland areas. In the last 100 years there have been large scale changes in landscape character as downland was converted to large scale ploughed fields. Pockets of grassland remain as relic examples of this former land use.

The other types of open land surviving in the AONB represent areas where common rights have preserved areas of open grazing around Semley. Historically in the Medieval period common land was the property of the lord of the manor, but their rights to exploit this land was constrained by long-established rights of the local tenants. This

included rights to summer grazing, rights to take turf, or furze for fuel and 'estovers' the rights to take materials for building dwellings. (Muir 2000: 60).

Other traces of former open land represent the survival of land which would have been on the edge of settlements and fields in the Medieval period and often was poor quality agricultural land, such as marsh or heath. This land did, however, represent an important resource in the past, and much of the scrubland and rough grazing, for example, was also subject to common rights. The escalating process of enclosure culminating in the intensification of farming in the 20th century meant that this land was increasingly encroached upon to the extent that only fragments are now left in the landscape.

B2

See *Background Paper 2* for an overview of the archaeology and history of the AONB by time period.

B6

See *Background Paper 6* for an overview of the key historical figures associated with the AONB.

B7

See *Background Paper 7* for an overview of Major historical events trends and fashions and their impact on the AONB.



*Martin Down*

### Key Secondary Sources

The pattern and history of open land in the present day landscape of the AONB is recorded and analysed in the *AONB Historic Landscape Characterisation* (Rouse 2008).



The history of the downland of the AONB is covered in a paper by Joseph Bettey in an edited volume entitled *Rural England: An illustrated History of the Landscape* (2000, 27-49) An introduction to common land in England is provided by Richard Muir in *The NEW Reading the Landscape* (2000).

The importance of the historic landscape character of Martin Down is considered in a paper by Emma Rouse in the *Proceeding of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* (130, 2009, 189-193).

B10

A full list of References is provided in Background Paper 10.

## Landscape Scale Characteristics and Components

### 1. Open Land in today's landscape

#### *Background*

Today the open downland of the AONB is limited to small areas on the edge of escarpments, in steeped sided coombes or to nature reserves such as at Martin Down in Hampshire. However, historic ordnance maps show that as recently as 50 years ago the AONB was dominated by open downland. In AD 1800 open chalk downland covered an area in excess of 20,000 hectares and 10,000 hectares of this survived into the early 20th century.

#### *Landscape scale impact*

Open land in the AONB has a very restricted distribution. There are distinct concentrations of surviving open land firstly in the area surrounding Martin Down, to the north of Mere and to the north of Shaftesbury around Semley Common. This primarily represents grazed chalk grassland but is punctuated by dense areas or furze (or gorse) which were once a crucial source of fuel and fodder in this area that is often marked on historic ordnance survey maps. In addition semi-enclosed chalk escarpments are located on the chalk escarpments including the Fovant escarpment, Melbury to Blandford escarpment, the Melbury to Winkelbury Hill Escarpment and the western edge of the West Wiltshire Downs. This form of enclosure can be characterised as representing the final stage of the enclosure of the open chalk grassland and downland which was once a dominating component of this landscape.

Other open land includes area of marsh, and scrubland and rough grazing. Open marsh land has a very restricted distribution in the chalk valley systems of the AONB and remain as isolated islands surrounded by a sea of valley fields and relic water meadows. Surviving scrub and rough grazing represent traces of what would have been larger areas of marginal open land on the edges of settlements and fields. Notable concentrations of the land occur to the north of Ashmore and to the southwest of Donhead St Mary.

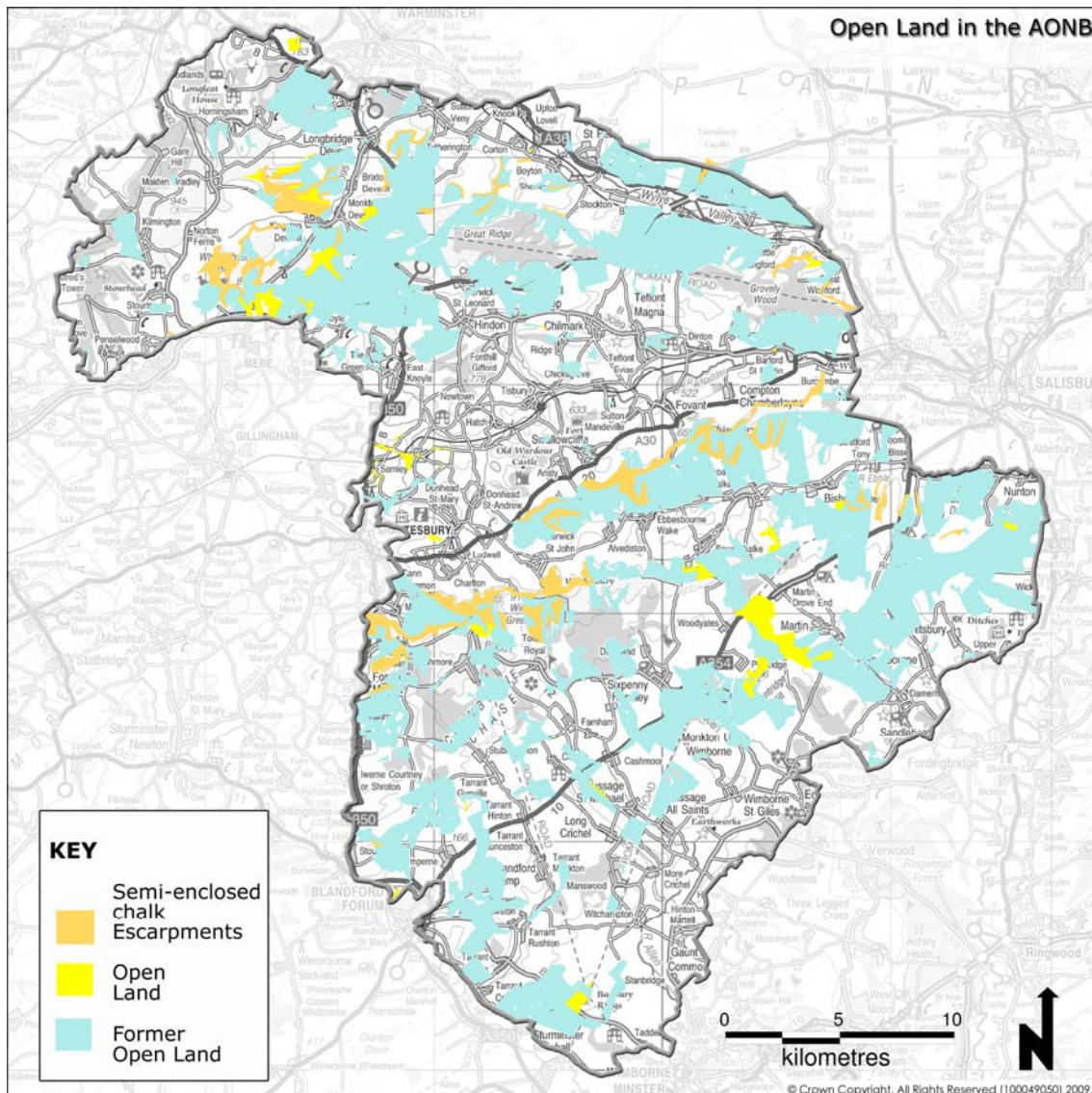


Figure One: Open Land in the AONB

## 2. Common Land in the AONB

### *Background*

The extent and nature of common land in the Medieval period varied from manor to manor and was also affected by other rights such as those relating to the Medieval hunting areas.

### *Landscape scale impact*

The area around Semley Common forms the only surviving common land in the AONB formed of widened areas of grazing alongside roadsides in the parish; common land is an unusual feature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century landscapes of England. In some areas evidence for relic common land also survives, this includes place name evidence, but also the late survival of rights in some areas which affected the later historic landscape character of the area. This includes former open grazed common land now subsumed



within fields or areas of common land which have been allowed to become woodland, such as to the south of Semley.

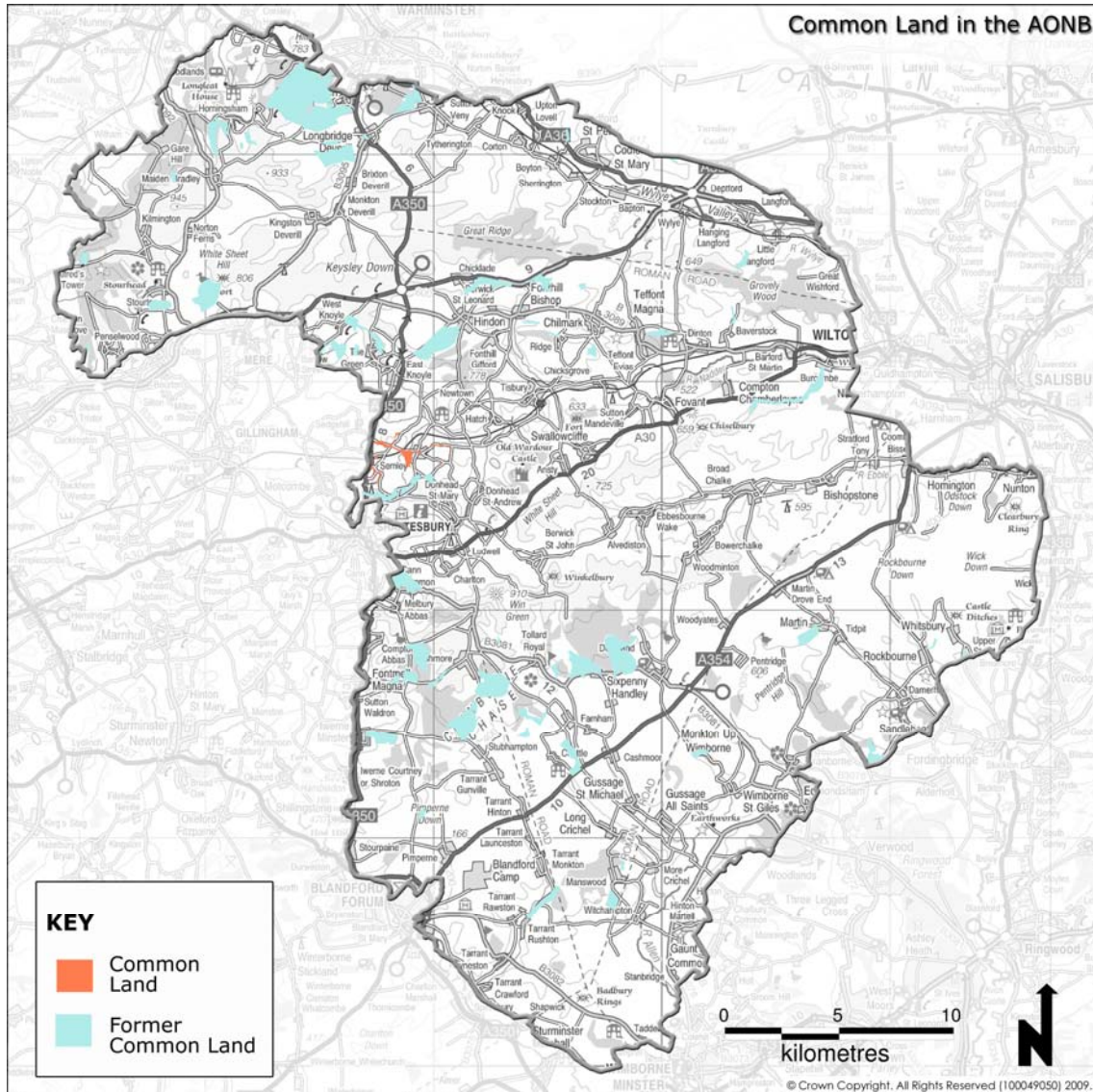


Figure Two: Common Land in the AONB

### 3. Chalk Grassland in the AONB

#### Background

Historically chalk grassland played a major role in the sheep-corn system of agriculture AD 1600-1900 and supported large flocks of sheep which is now mainly limited to marginal areas on the edge of chalk escarpments or within nature reserves. These areas are associated with important natural habitats while their historic importance is often overlooked.

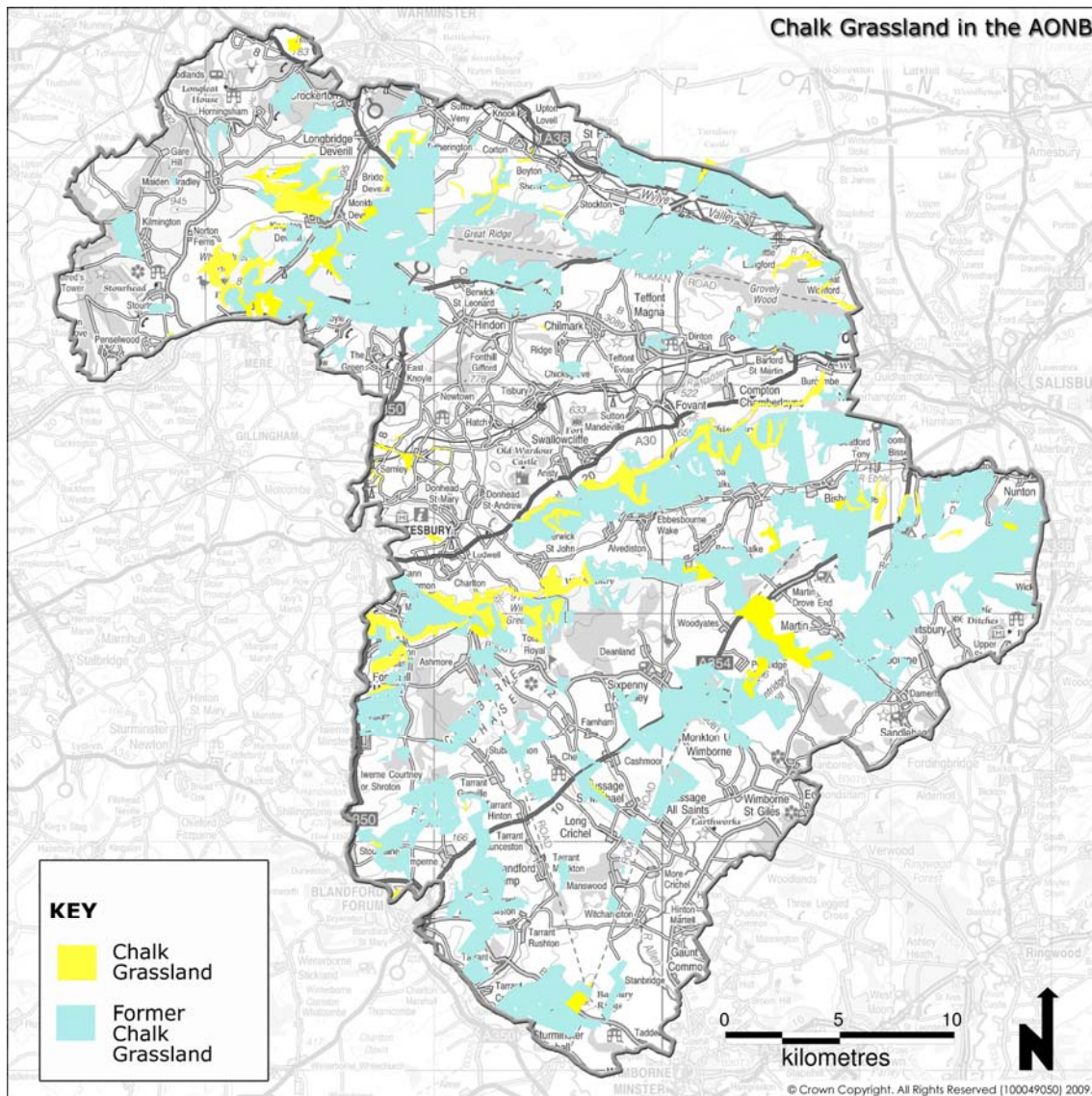


Figure Three: Chalk Grassland in the AONB

### *Landscape Scale Impact*

The surviving open chalk downland represents traces of what would have once been large tracts of downland. In the 18th and 19th century this land formed a major part of the sheep-corn husbandry system of farming.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the open downland supported vast flocks of sheep, marvelled at by Daniel Defoe in his travels as 'a sight truly worth observation' (Furbank et.al. 2006: 91). However, much of this land was transformed into fields in the 19th and 20th century, leaving only small areas surviving, notably at Martin Down.

An interesting reflection about the area of Martin Down in particular is that the protection and continuing survival of this area is due firstly to its use as a military area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and latterly to its status as a National Nature Reserve, which is based on the quality of its grassland habitat and the wide range of downland flowers,



insects and birds it supports. In the context of historic landscape character, however, it also represents an often unappreciated historical survival of land use and grazing regimes, which was once more ubiquitous and widespread and in this sense is as nationally important as the Scheduled Ancient Monuments which are found scattered across it. (Rouse 2009).

The contribution of the former once open downland to today's landscape character, receives less attention, but its contribution to present day historic landscape character can still be sensed in the size of the 'prairie' scale fields which have subsequently been created, maintaining wide open vistas and sense of space redolent of the grass downland; in remnant place names; and in the survival of a large number of prehistoric and later earthworks.



*Open common land at Semley*

## Historic Environment Actions



See Background paper 9 for a full list of Historic Environment Actions and the stages identified in their implementation.

### **ACTION 6: Gain AONB wide coverage of mapping and interpretation of archaeological features from aerial photographs**

**The Threat and the Opportunity:** The buried or surviving archaeology of the AONB has never been systematically recorded from crop marks or earthworks displayed in aerial photographs. This means that there is potential for important archaeological sites



to be damaged or inappropriately managed because they have not yet been recognised.

**The Potential Mechanism** - A mapping project for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB could fill gaps in knowledge of plough damage sites, uncover new sites (through crop marks, earthwork patterns etc.), and spatially link known buried archaeology. The aim of English Heritage's National Mapping Programme (NMP) is to enhance the understanding of past human settlement, by providing primary information and synthesis for all archaeological sites and landscapes visible on aerial photographs, or other airborne remote sensed data.

**ACTION 17: Improve management of historic field boundaries and ensure they are retained**

**The Threat** - The historic fieldscapes of the AONB are key characteristics of the AONB landscape which are not at present subjected to integrated and holistic management. There has consequently been loss and gradual removal of the historic patterns of pre 1800 boundaries, including the distinctive pattern of small curving irregular fields around the Donheads. Elsewhere older field boundaries have not been maintained and are either degrading or, if originally hedgerows are becoming overgrown.

**The Potential Mechanism** - This action would aim to halt the decline in the condition of particular field boundaries and the legibility of historic field patterns by providing training for agri-environment and other land management advisors. There is already much advice available on historic field boundary conservation (including implementation of the 1997 Hedgerow Regulations) and management, often generated via the HECAS officers mentioned under Action 5, but most of this is specific to the region's where it was generated. However, this material can be reviewed and tailored to suit the needs of the AONB once a clearer understanding has been gained of the character and needs of the field boundaries within the Area.

This material should then form the basis of training sessions for farmers and land managers working within the AONB. Involvement in such an initiative might be attractive to partners such as FWAG, the National Trust, Natural England and the local Wildlife Trusts.

Version 1 December 2010. Written by Emma Rouse, HEAP Officer  
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Background	B1	Introducing the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Environment Action Plans
	B2	Description of the Archaeology of the AONB by Time Period
	B3	History of Archaeological Discovery
	B4	Land Use
	B5	Local Distinctiveness
	B6	People in the Landscape
	B7	Major Historical Events, Trends and Fashions
	B8	Designated Heritage Assets
	B9	Full List of Historic Environment Actions
	B10	References and Glossary
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	A2	Sutton Veny, Cold Kitchen Hill and Zeals Knoll
	A3	Chalk River Valleys
	A4	Northern Wylde and Ebbel Valley Sides
	A5	West Wiltshire Downs
	A6	Great Ridge and Grovelly Woods
	A7	Fovant Terrace and the Area Between Chalbury and Woodlands
	A8	Chalk Escarpments
	A9	Vale of Wardour
	A10	Wooded Chalk Downland of the Cranborne Chase and Chetterwood
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Theme	T1	Ancient Boundaries and Land Ownership
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	T8	Landscapes of Prehistory
	T9	<b>Open Land</b>
	T10	Routeways in the Landscape
	T11	Settlement in the Landscape
	T12	Water in the Landscape
	T13	Woodland and Trees in the Landscape
	T14	Historic Features of Local Value
Supplementary	S1	Planning and Historic Landscape Character: A Guide for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB
	S2	Forces for Change Operating on the Historic Environment of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB at a Landscape Scale and their Past, Current and Future Impacts
Method	M1	Creating Historic Environment Action Plans for Protected Landscapes
	M2	Creating and Describing Historic Environment Areas
	M3	Creating and Describing Historic Environment Theme

Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



## Historic Environment Action Plans

[www.historiclandscape.co.uk](http://www.historiclandscape.co.uk)

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