Welcome to Portsdown Hill

Portsdown Hill is a 120 metre high chalk ridge that overlooks the harbours, islands and urban areas of the Portsmouth region. It also provides spectacular views over the Forest of Bere to the South Downs. It is home to an abundance of colourful and attractive wildlife and it has a long and fascinating history.

Eighty hectares of the hill are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest because of its rare chalk grassland. This, along with other wildlife-rich sites on the hill, makes Portsdown an important site for biodiversity.

The hill we see today is the product of the chalky geology and many centuries of farming, quarrying and military activity. Portsdown Hill is now a place of wildlife conservation where the natural world can be enjoyed… and the story continues.

Feel free to explore its open spaces

Portside’s Prehistoric Past

The chalk of Portsdown Hill was formed over 65 million years ago at the bottom of a tropical sea. It is made from the microscopic remains of marine algae. The chalk formed folded layers that are continuous with the chalk of Southern England and the near continent. As a result of movements in the earth’s crust, the layers were pushed up to from the down we see today. As Britain warmed after the last Ice Age, woodland developed. From around 6,000 years ago early farmers cleared the trees. Over thousands of years since then, grazing livestock produced a distinctive open grassland, rich in specialised plant species that can cope with the free draining and nutrient-poor soil. Portsdown’s ridge would have formed a valuable strategic vantage point and a dry east-west route through a generally marshy landscape.

Wildlife

There are many paths that lead you through the mosaic of flowery grassland and bushes. Colourful wildflowers are everywhere. Among them are rarities such as orchids, early gentian and bastard toadflax. Significant numbers of pollinating insects share the vegetation with many other invertebrates in a diverse ecosystem. Butterflies, moths, spiders, beetles, grasshoppers and crickets abound. Greenfinches and whitethroats sing from perches within the scrub, whilst kestrels and buzzards hang on the wind above the slopes as they look for mice and voles. Lizards are to be seen basking, but are likely to scurry away as you approach.

Victorian hill forts, and the fall and rise of grazing

In the 1850s it was thought that the French would invade to gain the heights of Portsdown Hill. From the top of the Hill it would be possible to bombard the British fleet at anchor in Portsmouth’s Naval Dockyard. To prevent this, defensive hill forts were built along the Hill’s crest to counter an inland attack. Soon after completion the forts were obsolete. Since then they have been used for many other purposes, most notably for planning during the D-Day landings of the Second World War. From the 1950s onwards the open chalk downland of Portsdown developed into coarse grassland and scrub as grazing declined.

Insect life

Red-tailed Bumblebee and Marmalade Hoverfly

Portsmouth the great waterfront city

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