

Ditchling Beacon

Panoramic views of the Weald from this Iron Age hillfort site of chalk grassland and scrub

Photographs taken 50 years ago show the steep, north-facing scarp slope of this reserve completely free of tree cover, as the short downland turf was maintained by sheep grazing. Since the road opened and the grazing ceased much of the site has become covered in hawthorn, wayfaring tree and ash.



Highlights

Fragrant, common spotted and twayblade orchids, and other chalk grassland flowers. Brown argus, common and chalkhill blue butterflies.

However, thanks to scrub clearance and the re-introduction of grazing by the Trust, there are still some beautiful open areas that display chalk specialities such as round-headed rampion, hairy violet, common twayblade and the delicately scented fragrant orchid. There is a plateau at the top of the reserve that was ploughed until 1976; here a mixture of coarser grasses and flowers grow, including wild marjoram and the semi-parasitic yellow rattle, whose dry inflated seed-pods rattle with the seeds inside.

yellowhammer

Hugh Clark



Clockwise meadow grasshopper, fragrant orchid, common blue

Butterflies, such as chalkhill blue and brown argus, enjoy the sunny sheltered banks and hollows, created by chalk quarrying carried out centuries ago. Bees, flies and beetles thrive in the scrub, as do birds such as whitethroat and yellowhammer: it makes ideal perching places from which to sing out their scratchy songs. The reserve is a registered common and leased to the Trust from the Ditchling Common and Tenantry Down Ltd.

Ditchling Beacon has had a long association with man. As an obvious vantage point it was used as a prehistoric hillfort and later for lighting beacons to send warning signals along the coast.