

What is the character of Brading Down?

As far as we can tell, virtually all the areas of grassland existing in Britain now were once a forest. Some of these were cleared of dead trees long ago, perhaps by 2500 BC. Others are of more recent origin.

Today, most of our grassland is used for agricultural purposes of one sort or another and is ploughed from time to time, treated with fertilisers and sprayed with chemicals which destroy unwanted plants. As a result, the numbers and kinds of plants and animals are largely controlled by man.

Brading Down and others like it are the only remaining areas which have any claim to being 'natural' because they are mostly free from human interference.



So how do we define 'downland'?

The photographs give a good idea of what a Down looks like. If you have worked through the Brading Down Trail, you will have discovered lots of information about Brading Down in particular. Apart from the visual picture you have of downland, we can also state a few more facts:

- The Down is made up of chalk (the remains of millions of small animal shells which lived in the sea) – so the area was once covered by sea. See the *Geology* leaflet in this series.
- The top soil is very shallow.
- The Down dries out very quickly, especially where the slopes are steep.
- The Down is largely free of trees.
- Plants and grasses are close-cropped.
- The Down catches the sun all day and so is a warm place.

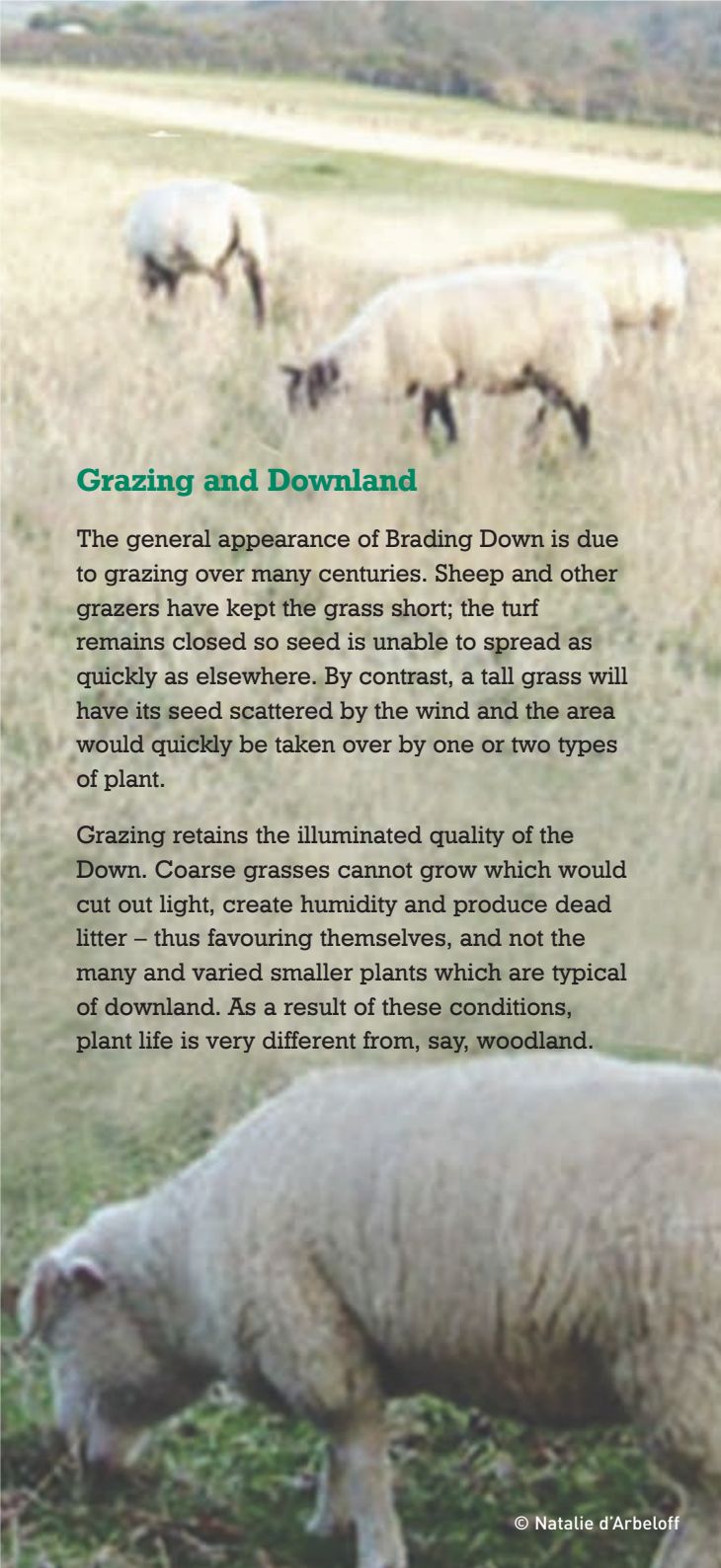
As a result of these conditions, plant life is very different from that in, say, woodland. These conditions give rise to plants and animals which we can call 'Downland Specialists'. Specialist plants have reacted to the conditions in the following ways:

- There are more species (different types) of plants per square metre than in other types of habitat, up to 40 in some places. The reason is that there are no dominant local factors such as shading, so no particular plant is favoured. In contrast, a large tree in a wood would have only a few species of plants growing around it.

- Plenty of light can reach the smaller plants, so different types grow in abundance.
- Downs are dry, warm places so some plants have developed shapes which retain water.
- Perennials (plants which come up year after year) are dominant, rather than annuals – they can exist without reproduction by seed.
- Up to 35% of plants belong to the 'pea' family.



Common Rock-rose, a 'Downland Specialist'



Grazing and Downland

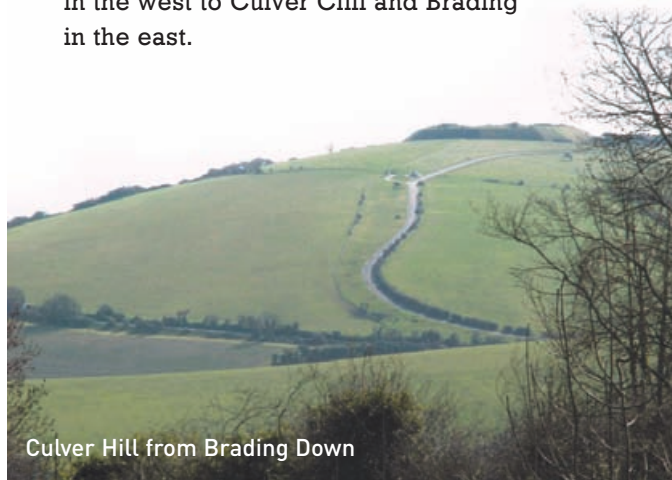
The general appearance of Brading Down is due to grazing over many centuries. Sheep and other grazers have kept the grass short; the turf remains closed so seed is unable to spread as quickly as elsewhere. By contrast, a tall grass will have its seed scattered by the wind and the area would quickly be taken over by one or two types of plant.

Grazing retains the illuminated quality of the Down. Coarse grasses cannot grow which would cut out light, create humidity and produce dead litter – thus favouring themselves, and not the many and varied smaller plants which are typical of downland. As a result of these conditions, plant life is very different from, say, woodland.

Why is Brading Down precious?

The chalk downland of England is precious landscape. It was created by the same earth movements which produced the Alps, and covered by the sea for long periods during the early history of the earth. Downlands have been altered in more recent times by the activities of man. Underlying geological structures have influenced their natural history and ecology, so that today they represent a unique, special habitat.

Chalk downland can be found right across southern Britain. The Isle of Wight's central chalk backbone is a good example of some of the most typical downland to be found anywhere. High ground passes through the Island from Tennyson Down and the Needles in the west to Culver Cliff and Brading in the east.



Culver Hill from Brading Down



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BRADING TOWN COUNCIL

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Isle of Wight area of outstanding natural beauty

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Brading Down Character

