

## **Wildlife, Heritage and Farming in the Marlborough Downs Landscape**

Notes of partners meeting convened by the Habitats & Heritage Group of the Marlborough Downs 'Space for Nature' Nature Enhancement Partnership (MDNEP)

Held on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2020 at Maizey Manor Farm, Ogbourne St Andrew

### **Present:**

Alex Howson, Wiltshire Council

Ali Rasey, Wiltshire Council and Habitats & Heritage Group

Catherine Burrell, Habitats & Heritage Group and MDNEP member

Catherine Hosie, National Trust

Gill Swanton, MDNEP member

Hilary Makins, MDNEP and National Trust

Jacky Akam, North Wessex Downs AONB

Laura Corbett, Habitats & Heritage Group and MDNEP member

Martin Cook, Wiltshire Council

Milly Carmichael, Transition Marlborough and Habitats & Heritage Group

Nick Croxson, Historic England

Nick Snashall, National Trust

Rachel Foster, Wiltshire Council

Rebecca Smalley, Black Sheep

Richard Broadhead, Wiltshire Council

Robert Cooper, Chair, MDNEP

Sarah Askham, Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site

Sarah Simmons, Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site

Stephanie Payne, Natural England

Stephen Stacey, Avebury Parish Council

Stephen Thomas, Habitats & Heritage Group and Avebury Society

Suzie Swanton, Habitats & Heritage Group and MDNEP member

## Notes

1) **Richard Broadhead** (Head of Service – Rights of Way & Countryside, Wiltshire Council) chaired the meeting and welcomed all. He outlined the purpose of the meeting – to discuss the potential for future collaboration on heritage and landscape projects, and to understand how we can better and more efficiently work together to achieve the results we all want. All were asked to think about how their organisation’s activities fit into the overall aims of enhancing the historic environment, natural heritage and landscape features of the Marlborough Downs.

2) **Laura Cooper** (Marlborough Downs Farmer and MDNEP Habitats & Heritage Group) – we want to enhance the Marlborough Downs whilst doing our job. Laura’s family has undertaken conservation work for decades. Sometimes contacting the farmer or landowner is difficult; farmers/land managers have been the subject of bad press due in part to climate change, pesticides, and other environmental issues, but also farmers are generally not good at promoting their successes and so there is an imbalance.

A Government pilot gave rise to the ‘Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area’ which ran for three years, ending in 2015. Yet the initiative is still going and has expanded thanks to Project Manager Jemma Batten and the commitment of farmers and landowners involved in the original project. Its new name is the Marlborough Downs Nature Enhancement Partnership (Space for Nature). Over 50 farmers/landowners are now members, and it’s no longer about boundaries – we are talking about serious landscape scale conservation now. Farmers know what each other are doing, and farmers have got to know each other too.

Many Marlborough Downs farmers are now in Higher Level stewardship schemes. All MDNEP members have a holding number, with farms ranging from 5 ha to many hundreds of hectares. Every member is invited to subscribe £1/ha to be a member, but this is not compulsory. ‘One off’ funding has come from the Solar Park at Wroughton, the Community Fund, the Kilcreggan Trust, and from volunteers. The Project Manager is part funded by the Facilitator Fund, and the project succeeds very much on the goodwill of stakeholders.

Many different interests are involved with the MDNEP; volunteers, specialists, NGOs, local govt, farmers, environmental organisations. And a huge amount has been achieved:

- Recording and monitoring
- Grassland and dew pond restoration
- Flower rich verges and arable flora enhancement
- Education – workshops mostly open to all. (Come to our seasonal suppers!)
- Butterfly habitat enhancement
- Farmland bird benefits – especially the tree sparrow successes which have received national interest and are so important and successful because of the landscape scale. Supplementary feeding takes place throughout the ‘hungry gap’, as well as feeding through the summer. Farmers have become competitive on ‘their’ bird species especially.

To achieve all the above, actions HAVE to be undertaken and they have to be forward-planned. The dew pond restorations have been an amazing success – water is great for all wildlife, important for birds, especially in the relatively arid landscape of the Marlborough Downs.

To get the public out into the Downs, walks and talks are run by the project and individual members to give people a true farm/countryside experience.

Sometimes the NEP has paid for school transport to enable this to happen.

Quality access to the Downs is important.

So, the benefits are showing now, the group can play on other member’s strengths to get things done, and we know who to go to for specialist help. Farmers donate their time, and are motivated by being appreciated for what they have done. A taste for results gives motivation. The MDNEP Open Farm Sundays have been incredibly successful, and all here today are invited to have a stand at Open Farm Sunday; can anyone volunteer beforehand to help organise this for 2020?

This project has influenced agricultural policy on ‘farmer clusters’ – and now similar projects are springing up elsewhere.

There is the ambition to achieve more, there is no shortage of ideas, but the net needs to be cast further to achieve more – hence today’s meeting. We need to:

- Talk
- Share issues
- Understand each other's objectives and restrictions
- Understand the best way of getting in touch with each other.

Richard emphasised how successful the NEP project has been. We now want to make it more inclusive. How can all our organisations work together to maintain focus and achievements?

## **BREAK**

### **3 Perspective of partner organisations: round-table thoughts/discussions**

(see pages 9-10 for flipchart notes)

**Gill Swanton** (Marlborough Downs Farmer and archaeology expert) – preserved archaeological sites can act as refuges for wildlife if managed properly; the need for nature and heritage to work closely together is very important.

**Martin Cook** (Wiltshire Council County Highways) – there are landowner responsibilities for ditching and hedging. Over the last three months there has been a lot of surface water on the highway network; it would be beneficial to bring together ditch clearance across the network to deal with this. Also timely cutting of hedges across the highway network (in line with agri-environment scheme requirements). There are over 40 million ha of grassland available as verges across England! A great resource; discussion of verge cutting took place – uncut verges tend lead to the perception of narrower roads, slowing traffic and discouraging people from driving on the verge and causing damage. This must be balanced though against the need for sightlines/highway safety.

**Alex Howson** (Wiltshire Council Rights of Way) – has part of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site in his area. In keeping the rights of network open, timing of clearance work is important. He is getting involved with the farmer cluster in the south of Wiltshire, thinking of smarter ways of working, eg when restoring dew ponds can the spoil can be used to repair nearby trackways appropriately? Volunteer input is vital to maintain the rights of way network.

**Ali Rasey** (Wiltshire Council Rights of Way) – raised the timing of verge cuts; currently cutting of rural verges starts in May and lasts for around eight weeks; can timing be tweaked to 'nurture' floristically diverse verges? One contractor

covers the whole county. Adrian Hampton at Wiltshire Council is now looking to 'wild' more verges. So Wiltshire Council will investigate whether requests could be sent through to Highways for a later cut of some verges, and these then added later to cut. For local verges, we need to TALK to the contractor. Any amendments need to make it into the contract specification.

**Nick Croxson** (Historic England) – deals mainly with heritage at risk (there are 150 scheduled monuments within the MDNEP project boundary). Around 20% are at risk from arable cultivation, and burrowing rabbits. Keen to work towards synergies and shared objectives so that National Trust, Natural England, public health & wellbeing all benefit. Keen to do some arable reversion if possible, condition monitoring of sites if possible. There may be a small budget for public walks/talks/interpretation.

**Nick Snashall** (National Trust Archaeology) – the archaeology and World Heritage Site are very important. National Trust is looking to protect that and make it more accessible to the public together with a win for nature conservation too. So heritage, wildlife and accessibility is the desired three-pronged approach, all to be mutually compatible.

**Rachel Foster** (Wiltshire Council Archaeology)– we hold the Historic Environment Record, and could provide maps and data for designated and non-designated sites. It's good to know what's on the land before making plans. We advise on many schemes, farmers are advised to get in touch at [archaeology@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:archaeology@wiltshire.gov.uk) if they are planning anything major on land within the World Heritage Site. Should we think about providing data to landowners in the WHS/MDNEP area with generic advice? In future meetings can we talk about how best to do that, it may need to be individual walks across land. Laura suggested leading a farm walk, interpreting the landscape.

**Sarah Simmonds** (Stonehenge/Avebury World Heritage Site Partnership) – feels both partnerships are trying to do the same thing, and there is overlap. The next Stonehenge/Avebury World Heritage Site newsletter needs to report on MDNEP achievements. How can we mesh together better? Farmer representatives exist for Avebury and Stonehenge; perhaps the farmer representative should sit on MDNEP Habitats & Heritage group also. Sarah would like everyone to embrace the historic aspect of the landscape. Sarah attends Open Farm Sunday with an

info stand, and works closely with Gill Swanton. At Stonehenge there isn't a good network yet but they are looking to set one up. Resources are very stretched.

**Richard Broadhead** discussed the stretched resources issue – both money AND people. Lack of funds can sometimes be overcome, but a lack of people can't! Sarah said that hopefully we can help farmers become a powerful lobbying tool, to encourage the government that farmers are custodians of the historic environment. Laura thinks it would be worth ALL the World Heritage Site farmers meeting together to cross-pollinate. At Stonehenge the farmers' representative is the vice chair of the Stonehenge Committee, so there should be some efficiencies there. We need to work on getting this together.

**Stephanie Payne** (Natural England) – access/interpretation work on Fyfield Downs SSSI is in progress. Looking also at virtual interpretation to reduce physical pressures. Also looking to use volunteers to map the Wansdyke – considering how can we use these volunteers in the aftercare. (Aftercare consists of carrying out the various agreements with farmers.) NE has/would like the opportunity to do more, advise and monitor reversions etc.

**Stephen Stacey** (Avebury Parish Council) – farmers need to be better at positive PR and putting over the positive message, especially in relation to volunteering. Stephen feels there are untapped volunteers that could be interested in working with the MDNEP; he is looking at volunteering opportunities with Stephen Leonard on rights of way. How do we find a solution to getting volunteers organised and giving them opportunities to volunteer? There's a desire to create a volunteer scheme similar to the Cotswold Wardens in the North Wessex Downs AONB area, bringing together CPRE, Ramblers, parish councils and county rights of way team.

**Richard Broadhead** discussed that volunteers need to be managed, and that takes staff resources. There's a capacity issue for how many volunteers we can handle – and how do we attract self-sustaining volunteers? Nick Snashall finds this also.

**Hilary Makins** (National Trust Rangers) – we want to continue what we're doing so far. Where else can we work together? Recording and monitoring the National Trust estate is taking place, so perhaps we can work together more on that. And what about sharing what we're doing, eg sward enhancement and badger

management on Windmill Hill? As Nick says, maybe there is some volunteer capacity to get involved.

**Jacky Akam** (North Wessex Downs AONB) – if we had the MDNEP/SfN across the whole of the AONB that would be great. We are working on two other farmer clusters that have recently received facilitation funding. The AONB is also involved with the Dark Skies initiative, in collaboration with Marlborough Town Council. An event will take place based in Marlborough, on 2-4 October (full moon weekend!) with a programme of talks and workshops – arts and science. There may be working in collaboration with Avebury Parish Council too. If this is a success it would be good to follow up for wider in the AONB area.

***Richard Broadhead** discussed the importance of getting proper darkness back for all of us and our wildlife. Martin Cook said the old sodium lamps will be replaced by LEDs across the highway network in the next two years; some of the LEDs seems to be very bright, can they be reduced to the minimum of 2,700k in sensitive areas? Peter Binley in Wilts Council is a contact for lighting, (Atkins are the contractor). The World Heritage Site is also linking in with dark skies.*

**Milly Carmichael** (Transition Marlborough) – Transition is an international network of response to the climate and environmental crisis. Marlborough has joined the Transition Network. The Bee Roadz project started two years ago, and has now spread across the Downs. The aim is to expand that as Buglife has finished mapping biodiversity corridors across the country. Marlborough now sits on the crossroads of north/south, east/west for this! The Transition movement does a lot around permaculture, ie what would nature do, how does nature do it? How do we garden, look after the soil? Would love to share this with others. Transition can possibly offer a bridge to the divide between farmers and vegans.

**Stephen Thomas** (Avebury Society) – Avebury is probably unaware largely of what the MDNEP is achieving, and Stephen is considering setting up a website to improve knowledge. Very keen on the Dark Skies initiative. Also interested in 5G and would like to encourage Wiltshire Council to take a precautionary approach to 5G because we don't know how it can affect wildlife and people. This is in addition to the damage caused just getting the infrastructure in.

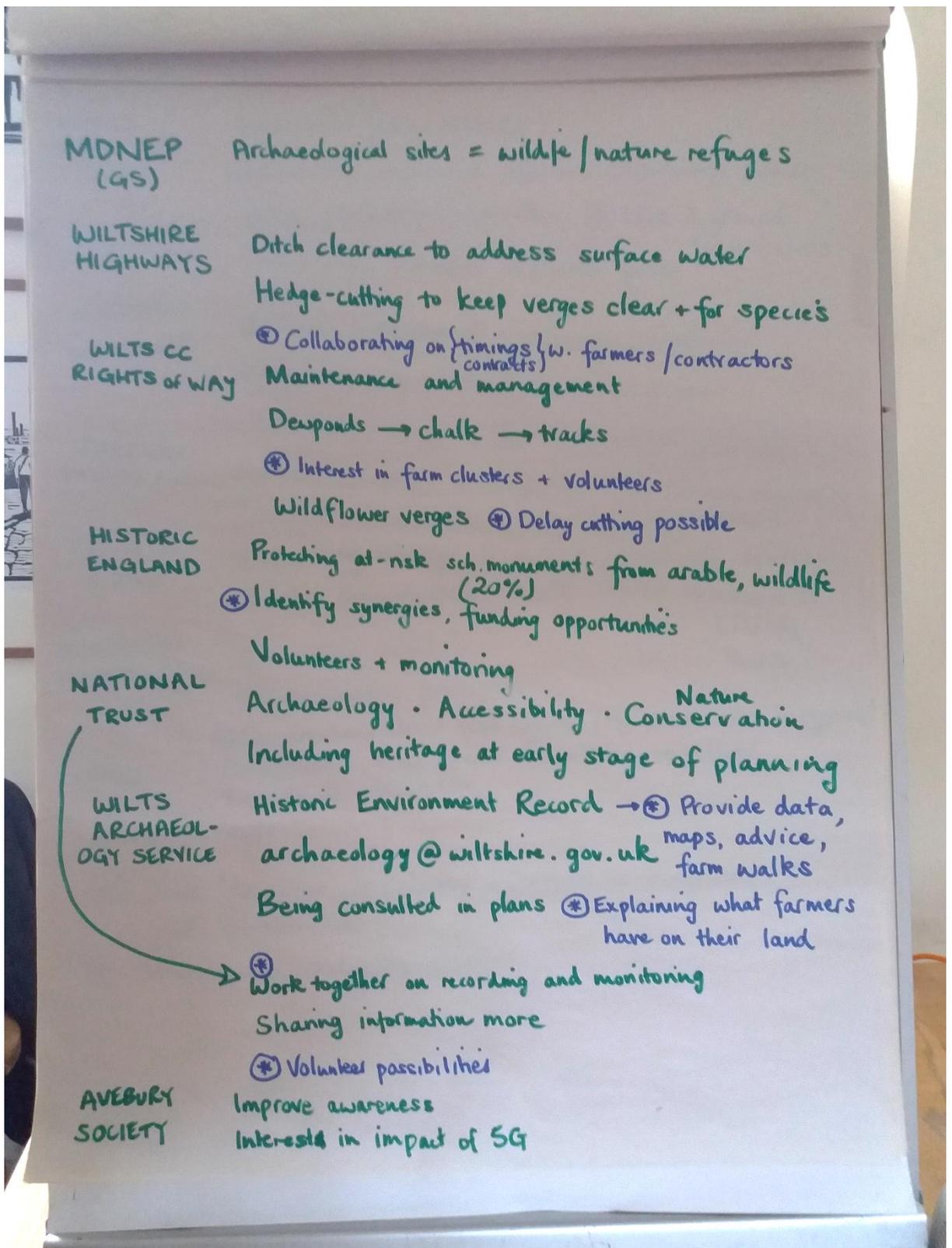
**Robert Cooper** (Marlborough Downs Farmer and Chair of the Partnership) – no one can achieve anything without the people who own the land. The key word of

today has been connections, we must maintain that; so many people are involved in the same thing but doing their own thing. We have 12,000 ha of land involved here! People need to input into Defra under the ELMS scheme, and to promote landscape scale initiatives, because initiatives as a sole landowner will achieve minimal benefit.

**Laura Cooper** – asked if attendees thought it would be valuable to meet again? All said yes. May was suggested for the next meeting, so attendees will be informed of the date.

**Richard Broadhead** thanked all who attended, and special thanks went to **Catherine Burrell** for kindly hosting the meeting.

Flipchart notes from round-table discussion



WORLD  
HERITAGE  
SITE

Partnership (like MDNEP)

- \* Newsletter collaboration
- \* Meet Stonehenge farmers
- Farmer representative committee
- \* Link 2 groups; focal points
- Landscape protection = shared goals

NATURAL  
ENGLAND

Scheme management + aftercare / recording

Landscape interpretation (virtual?) + visits

Volunteers - mapping \* → Collaboration possibility

AVEBURY  
PARISH C.C.

Increase promotion in community

\* Volunteer warden scheme?

Tap reservoir of volunteers; link initiatives

N.W.D.  
AONB

Biodiversity, heritage, planning, community tourism

2 other farm clusters. Dark Skies → relevant to wildlife, WHS

TRANSITION  
MARLBOROUGH

Biodiversity corridors

Permaculture principles

- \* Conversations about food issues (eg provenance, vegan)
- Connections; scale effects of working together
- Key role of landowners

MNEP

GENERAL POINT:

- \* Limited resources → efficiency + creativity in networks and collaboration
- \* Managing and coordinating volunteers