

**THE WEST WYCOMBE ESTATE
DOWNLEY COMMON PRESERVATION SOCIETY**

**A
MANAGEMENT PLAN
FOR
DOWNLEY COMMON**



1998 - 2008

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March 1997

RATIONALE AND SYNOPSIS

Downley Common represents a hugely important resource in its provision of attractive countryside and wildlife habitats on the northern fringes of High Wycombe's urban sprawl. Downley residents have long known this, but more importantly have also recognised the vulnerability of the Common to both natural succession and misuse by people. It was because of this concern that the Downley Common Preservation Society (DCPS) was formed, to protect and conserve the Common through positive management, in collaboration with the West Wycombe Estate who own the land.

Management is currently based on a plan devised and put into practice by DCPS some years ago, and which has worked very well. However, there comes a time when any such plan needs reviewing and updating, and following the drawing up in 1995 of a comprehensive management plan for Naphill Common (which in fact included part of Downley Common), DCPS decided that it would make sense to extend this more recent initiative to include the rest of Downley Common. The result was the commissioning of the survey and plan being submitted herewith.

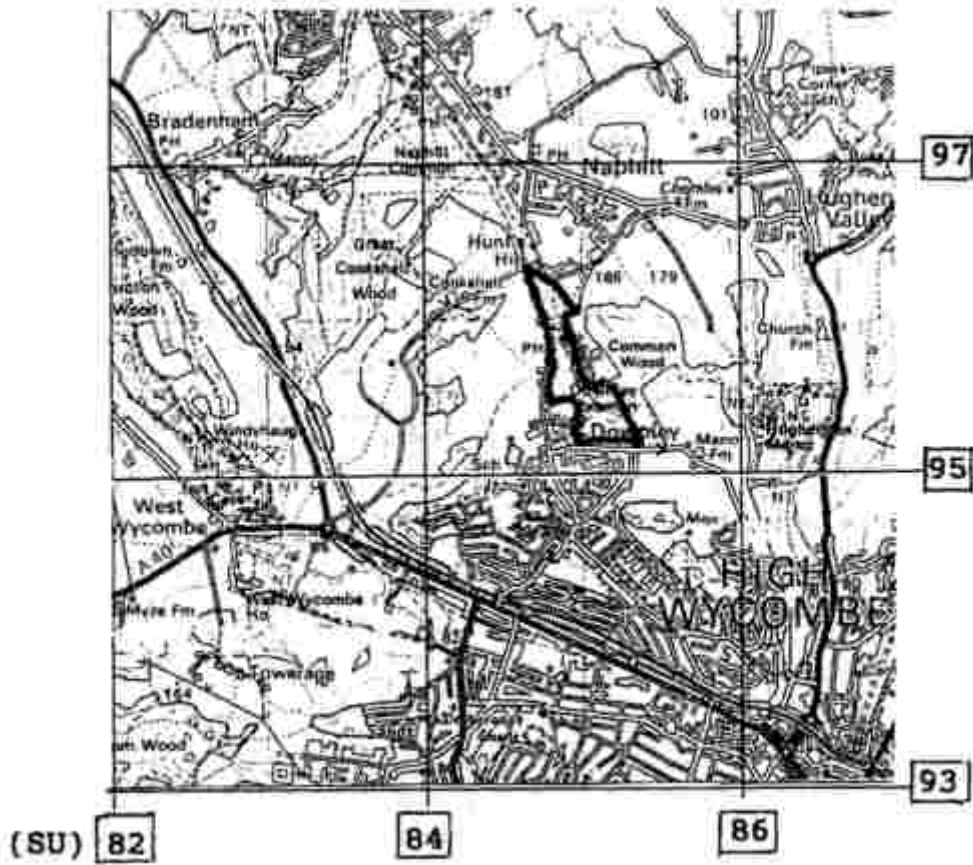
For completeness and continuity, that part of Downley Common covered by the 1995 Naphill plan is included here, and the same format adopted for the remainder of the property. Thus, Downley Common is first described in terms of its location, topography, landscape, history and wildlife interest; next, existing provisions for managing the Common are described, and new measures formulated for its continuing protection and conservation; recommendations are then made for the implementation of these proposals, presented in the form of a series of management projects designed to be spread over the ensuing ten-year period; and finally, guidelines are offered on how best to service these proposals in practical terms, as well as on possible sources of grant-aid.

Supplementary information is provided in the form of annotated maps and plans, as well as lists of the Common's flora and fauna and an indication of the relative abundance or rarity of key species. A selection of photographs is also included.

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PLAN A: DOWNLEY COMMON. LOCATION MAP



Scale 1:50 000

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1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1.1 Methodology

Basic information on the landscape and wildlife interest of Downley Common was gathered mainly during the course of field visits and survey work directly connected with this assignment, or with relevant parts of my Naphill Common Plan (Smith, 1995b¹), which included part of Downley Common.

Ecological observations are reported descriptively, and common names used throughout the text for ease of reading. Scientific names of plants are provided in Appendix II, which also lists all species noted, with an indication of their habitat preferences and relative abundance. The major plant communities present have been assigned provisionally to their respective National Vegetation Classification categories, according to Rodwell (1991, etc.).

Additional data on these and other aspects were obtained through personal contact with DCPS Committee members and other local people who know the area well, as well as from the County Council's Museum and Environmental Records Centre.

The County Council also kindly made available their aerial photographic coverage of the Common, flown for them on August 21st 1995 by Aerofilms Ltd., and this made it possible to update the extent of the woodland cover, as well as to pick out the courses of the main footpaths.

A number of photographs were taken during the course of the field work, and a selection of these is included in Appendix IV.

1.2 Location and Extent of the Study Area

Downley Common, which forms part of the West Wycombe Estate, is centred on National Grid Reference SU 850955 (Plan A). It consists essentially of an elongated triangle of land, with its base formed by Common Side, Downley, and its tip, angled northwestwards, coinciding with the point where Cookshall Lane meets the boundary of Naphill and Downley Commons at Hunts Hill - a distance of about 1340m or 0.8 miles. Maximum width east to west is about 360m or a 4 of a mile. There is a large bite out of the south-west corner (encompassing Moor Lane, the Methodist Church and the Old Bakehouse), and another out of its long north-east boundary (the other main area of housing, including the Le De Spencers Arms and California Holdings) which otherwise is wooded (Plan B).

Plomer Green Lane skirts the remaining part of the Common's south-western edge as far up as Blacksmith's Cottage, before cutting across to the opposite side. I have referred to these two stretches as Plomer Green Lane (W) and (N) accordingly. Well and Vale Cottages and their associated parcels of land form an enclave towards the southern end of the Common which is excluded from this study. Note, however, that some grass verges on the opposite sides of both Common Side and Plomer Green Lane (W) are included within the Common's bounds.

The main Ordnance Survey parcels making up Downley Common, as recognised in the latest pre-digital metric edition of the 1:2500 cover, are, to the south of Plomer Green Lane (N), 9343 and 230 (the open and wooded areas, respectively), and, to the north, 8579 and 8500/8200, though there is an anomaly in the latter sector and various additional parcels, not all coinciding exactly with the study area, further complicate the picture.

In all, Downley Common amounts in extent to around 22.7ha (56ac) .

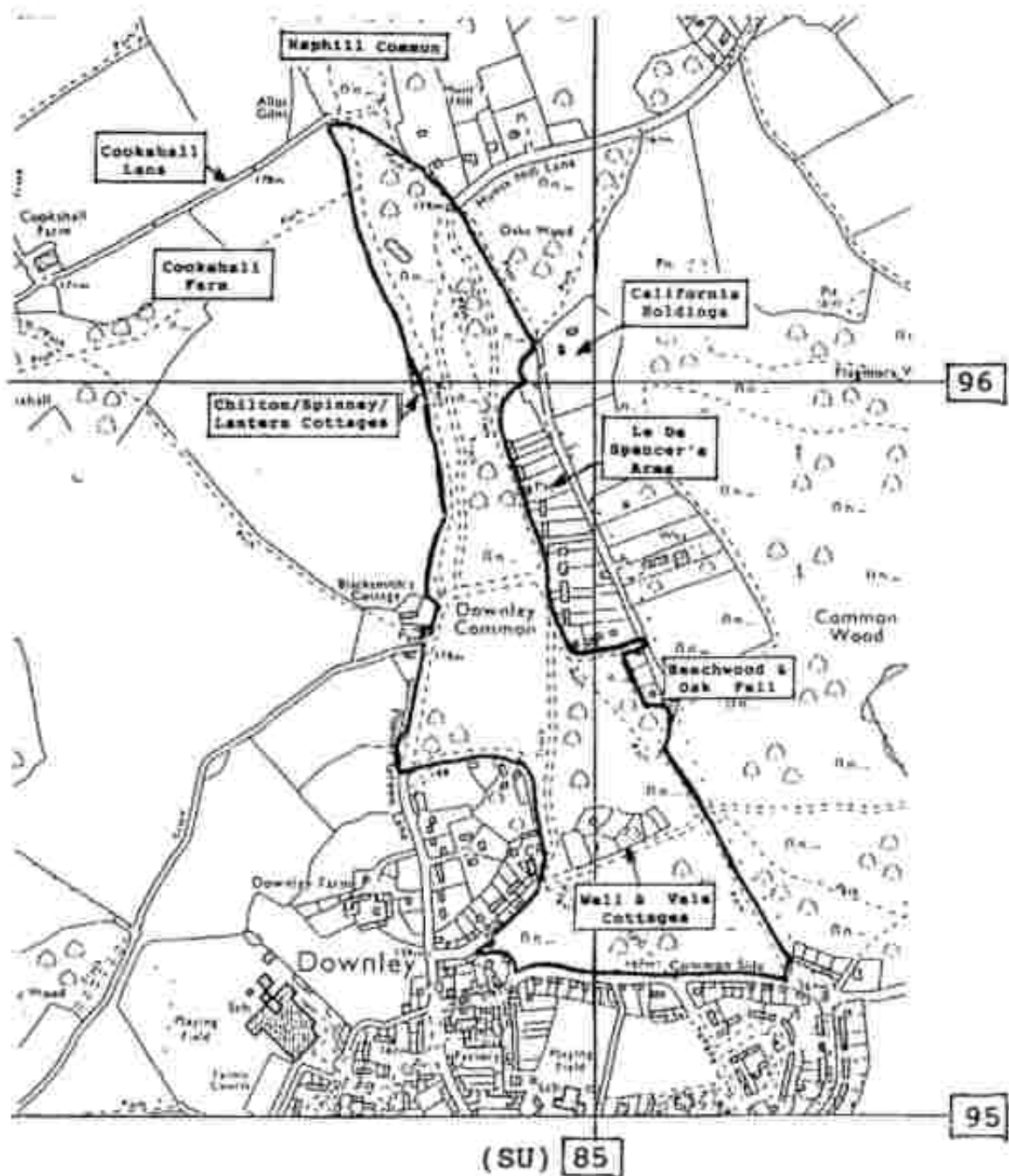
¹ For References, see Appendix V.

PLAN B

DOWNLEY COMMON: BOUNDARIES AND ADJOINING PROPERTIES ~

Scale 1:10000

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Physical characteristics

Downley Common occupies a classic position on the Chiltern dip slope which itself falls steadily south-eastwards from about 179m (587ft) at the northern end to 167m (548ft) at Common Side, though this pattern is cut into by a spur of the Hughenden Valley which runs up westwards via Manor Farm, and accounts for the sharp dip in relief in the vicinity of Moor Lane and the Well Cottage plot and orchard, where altitude bottoms out at around 140m (460ft).

Geologically, superficial deposits of Clay-with-Flints, and Plateau Drift (this including gravels and loessal silt) mask the underlying solid Chalk, though this can be seen in at least one of the pits which abound on the Common, for example opposite the Le De Spencers Arms pub. Brown earth soils are characteristic throughout, however, and probably encompass the Winchester, Berkhamsted and Batcombe series described from similar situations by Avery (1964), and showing varying degrees of acidity in their reaction. All are free-draining, and compared with the Chalk retain relatively small reserves of available water - a fact which enhances their summer drought susceptibility, even in "normal" years (Smith, 1976).

Certain variants of these soils puddle well enough, however. The almost legendary power of Mannings Pond to retain water testifies to this fact, as does the rapidity with which parts of the footpaths and bridleways turn into guagmires² - and even running streams² - in wet weather.

1.3 Archaeology and history

Downley Common, like the Chiltern Plateau in general, experienced no early prehistoric settlement, although a Roman coin (Bucks County Museum Ref. CAS 0619) was found "in a field near Downley Common" in 1904.

The old parish boundaries represent important historic features, of course, which are linked with the very foundation of the West Wycombe Estate. Downley Common now lies within its own parish, but this was formerly a detached northern part of West Wycombe Parish. The ditch-and-bank feature marking the line where Downley and Hughenden parishes meet forms the boundary of Downley Common from California Holdings to Cookshall Lane. The very creation of the commonland status of this part of the Estate was a further crucial factor in the history of Downley Common, as of course was the digging of clay and chalk which created its many dips and de~ls. Another fascinating episode was its laying out as a golf course.

In course of time, World War II was to make its mark on Downley Common, for when the old High Wycombe firm of Broom and Wade was commissioned to turn their air-compressor factory into a production line for tanks, Downley (as well as Naphill) Common provided a convenient testing-ground, and the reinforced tankcrossing opposite Blacksmith's Cottage stands to this day.

1.4 Ecology

Like its neighbour Naphill Common, Downley Common demonstrates a classic example of ecological succession which in turn mirrors an earlier phase in its development when it was managed as woodpasture by a combination of grazing and pollarding (see Hepple & Doggett, 1994; Rackham, 1994). Pockets of the original turf still persist, as do some of the old veteran trees - not to mention Manning's Pond - but scrub and secondary woodland are encroaching throughout, and in course of time - as has happened more extensively at Naphill - all remaining open areas would close over. It is this familiar mix of habitats that represents both the attraction of the Common and the challenge of maintaining its diversity.

These ecological aspects are considered in more detail in Section 2 (and management in later Sections), but an indication of the disposition of the main wildlife habitats about Downley Common is shown in Plan C.

² As graphically described to me by Norman Belson during one of our early tours of the Common!

PLAN C: DOWNLEY COMMON MAIN WILDLIFE HABITATS

A FIRST APPROXIMATION

Smaller scale features shown either semi-notionally or omitted from map

Scale 1: 3570 approx

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1.5 Amenity and access

There is free access throughout Downley Common, though this is confined largely to the network of footpaths (including the statutory rights-of-way) which criss-cross the area, and which an attempt has been made to map on Plans G and H (see Appendix I).

An additional amenity is the village sports field.

1.6 Designations and wayleaves

Downley Common lies within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and in the associated Management Plan (Chilterns Conference, 1994), forms part of Valley Landscape VI (the Saunderton Valley).

Downley Common constitutes the larger part of the Downley Conservation Area (see Plan D), as designated by Wycombe District Council. The Common is catalogued as Site 0326 by the County Environmental Records Centre.

Downley Common Preservation Society (DCPS) has an ongoing agreement with the West Wycombe Estate to undertake work - for example pond and grassland maintenance and scrub clearance - in order to protect and enhance its amenity and conservation interests (see Appendix III). This agreement forms the basis for continuing management as discussed in Section 3.

Management agreements between the Estate and both English Nature and the Forestry Authority, aimed primarily at Naphill Common, but including also the northernmost part of Downley Common, have been concluded in recent years. Indeed it was these initiatives which originally triggered the commissioning of my own earlier report to which reference has already been made.

Downley Common is registered commonland, with the Commoners enjoying rights of pasture, estovers, grazing and turbary (see Hoskins & Stamp, 1963, for definitions). There is vehicular access to commonside properties, but otherwise motorised traffic, other than authorised maintenance vehicles, is excluded.

Statutory rights-of-way have already been referred to in the previous section.

Overhead powerlines cross parts of Downley Common and obviously have direct relevance to hedge, scrub and woodland management and to tree-planting. Other services include underground power, piped water and sewerage facilities. The Estate will have details of these services and wayleaves.

1.7 Neighbouring Land

As already noted, parts of the land adjoining Downley Common are built-up, but of course the mosaic of grassland, scrub and woodland habitats continues northwards as the much more extensive Naphill Common, which is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Open farmland (part of the Estate's Cookshall Farm holding) skirts parts of the western boundary and includes important hedgerow habitats as well as a pond.

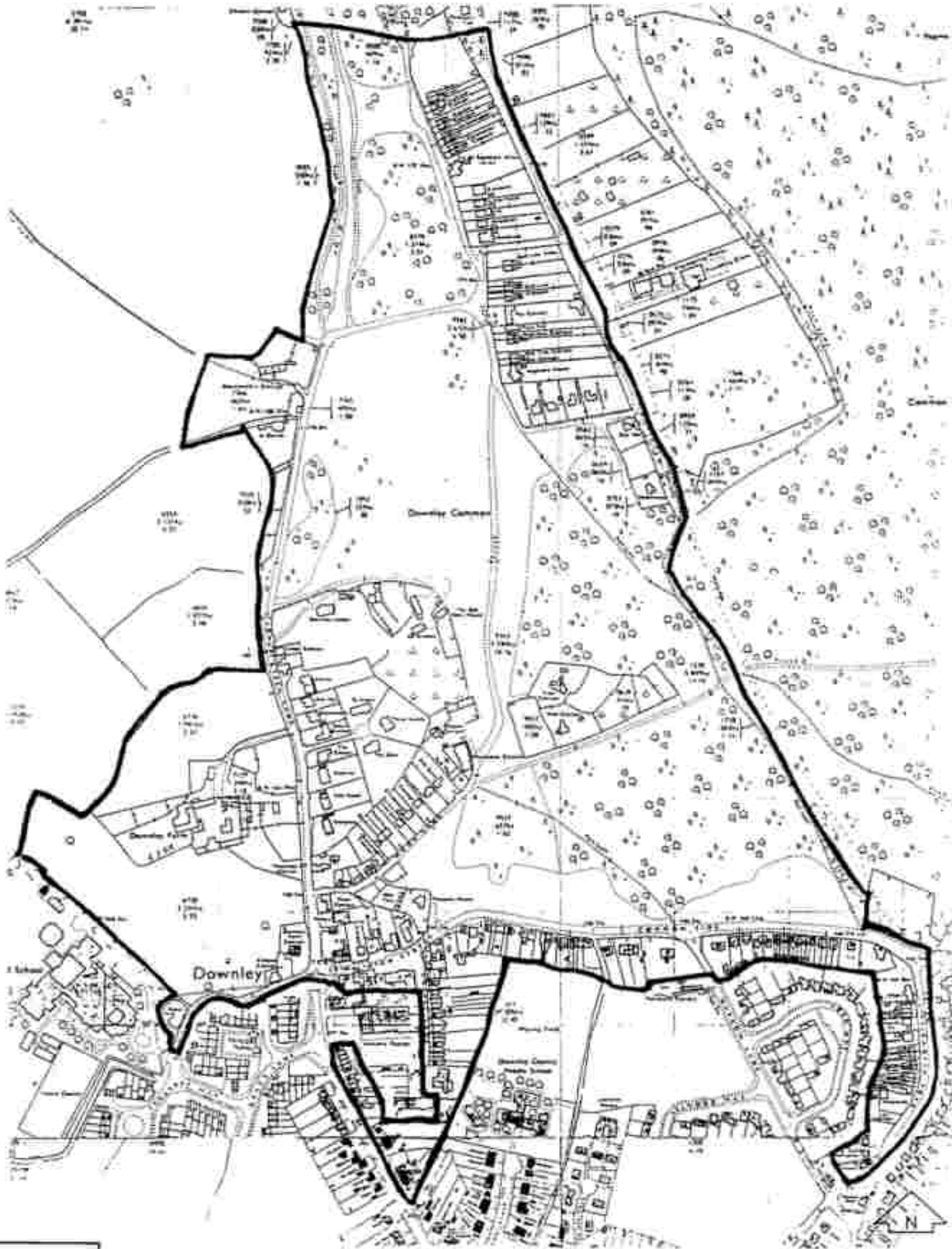
The upper and lower parts of the long north-east boundary are entirely wooded, Oaks Wood at Hunts Hill is in private ownership, while Common Wood adjoining the southernmost end is now part of the National Trust's Hughenden Estate (see Smith, 1995a).

Plan D

DOWNLEY CONSERVATION AREA

Scale 1:5000

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1:5000