

Fyfield Down

National Nature Reserve

English Nature is the Government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and geology throughout England.

This is one of a range of publications published by English Nature's Wiltshire Team, based at:

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Printed on Evolution Satin,
75% recycled post-consumer waste paper,
Elemental Chlorine Free.

ISBN 1 85716 666 3

Catalogue code ST9.5

Designed and Printed by
Status Design and
Advertising, 3M.

Fyfield Down NNR is situated in the Marlborough Downs, approximately five kilometres north west of the town of Marlborough.

We ask all visitors to respect the farming enterprises on the Down and leave all gates as they are found.

Fyfield Down is one of a suite of National Nature Reserves across the whole country. They were established to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain.



Front cover photograph: Sarsen stones.
Peter Wakely/English Nature



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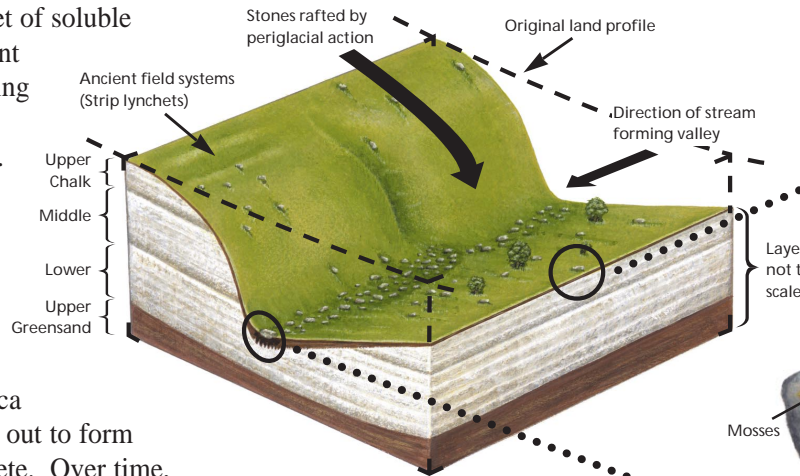
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At the centre of Fyfield Down NNR is the remains of a prehistoric landscape formed by the forces of nature. The 25,000 sarsen stones on the reserve are resting in their natural setting, in contrast to the orderly rings and lines of sarsens placed by ancient people around nearby Avebury.

Tropical stones and icy sludge

The sarsen stones are thought to be the remains of a sheet of soluble silica (a hard, resistant mineral) formed during the early Tertiary, 50 million years ago. A tropical climate existed in southern England at this time. Weathering in these warm, wet conditions dissolved large amounts of silica that was precipitated out to form a hard sheet of silicrete. Over time, this silicrete crust broke into pieces, creating the sarsens. The sarsen boulders reached their present positions when they were rafted in a mixture of icy chalk sludge. The boulders were finally brought to the surface when the soft chalky material was washed away by stream water 20 million years ago.

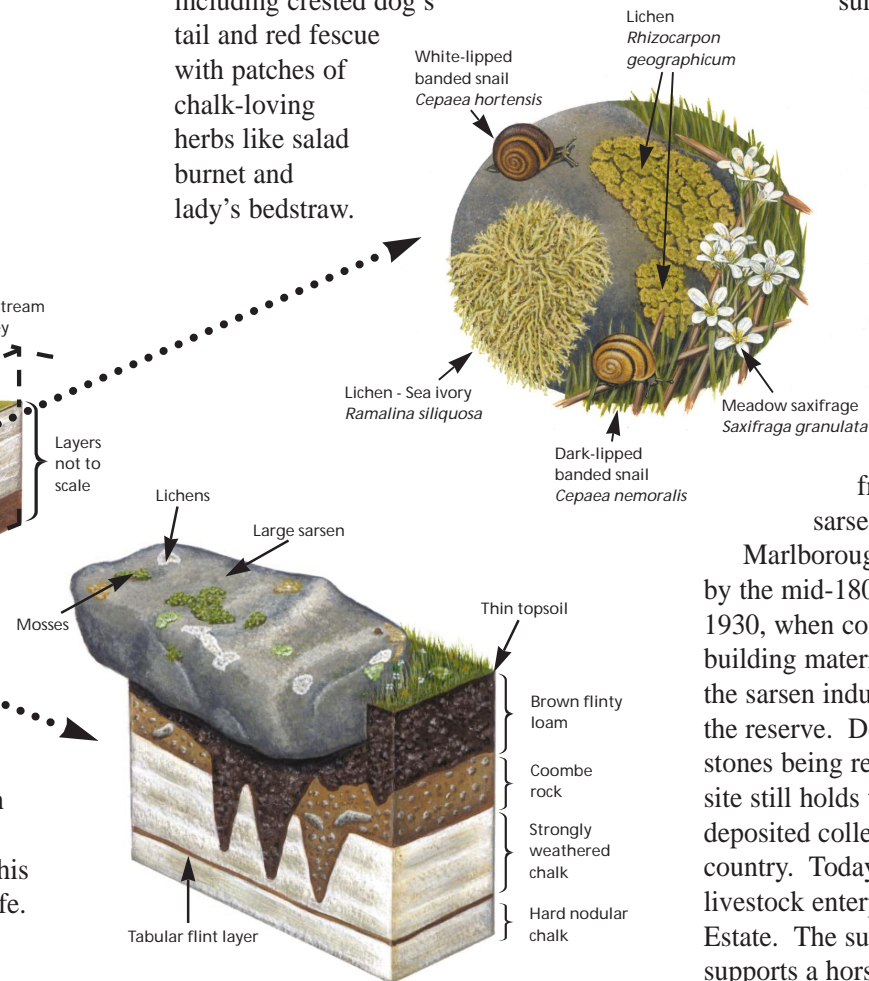


Lichen and other life

Today, the hard sarsen boulders lie in a fossilised landscape on soils left untouched by modern agriculture. This special place supports unusual wildlife. Of particular interest are the communities of lichen and mosses

growing on the sarsens. Species of lichen usually found on the highlands or by the coast flourish here. For one of the lichen species found on the reserve, its distribution in Britain is restricted to sarsen stones. Similarly, species of moss that are usually found in the uplands or on man-made structures abound at Fyfield.

The infertile soils of the reserve are clothed in wild grasses, including crested dog's tail and red fescue with patches of chalk-loving herbs like salad burnet and lady's bedstraw.



Animals thriving on the Down include the brown argus and marbled white butterflies, green woodpecker and roe deer.

Ancient fields and settlements

Historic evidence abounds to suggest that the forests were cleared in this area by early farmers of the Neolithic period. By the Bronze Age, people would have settled across the surrounding area. The great Bronze Age settlement of Avebury is only two kilometres west of the reserve. There is evidence of the soils of Fyfield being cultivated up to the Saxon period and again through medieval times.

Many sarsen stones were used for housing from Roman times. The sarsen industry in the Marlborough area reached a peak by the mid-1800s and lasted until about 1930, when concrete became the building material of choice. Signs of the sarsen industry can be seen across the reserve. Despite many of the stones being removed from Fyfield, the site still holds the largest naturally deposited collection of sarsens in the country. Today, Fyfield forms part of a livestock enterprise run by the Manton Estate. The surrounding land also supports a horse stud.