**Draft Whitchurch Down Management Plan**

**2016-2021**

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9. **Introduction**

Whitchurch Down is located to the west of the town of Tavistock and covers an area of 188.34 hectares (460 acres). Tavistock Town Council is the holder of 'Manorial Rights' (essentially freehold and mineral rights, subject to old leases and commoners’ rights) over Whitchurch Down both within and without the Dartmoor National Park boundary.

Tavistock Town Council plays a lead role in protecting and shaping the future of Whitchurch Down and recognises the importance of the area for the local community, the many varied recreational uses, the rights of the commoners and the intrinsic value of the natural habitat that it provides. In partnership with the following groups the Council seeks to manage the area for the enjoyment of all by restricting the use of the land to purposes compatible with conservation and grazing rights whilst maximising the recreational, leisure and tourist potential:

* Tavistock Golf Club – has occupied the current location since 1890. In May 1957 225 acres of land was formally leased to Tavistock Golf Club for 99 years at a peppercorn rental of £10 a year.
* Tavistock Cricket Club – has had use of the cricket pitch on the down known as ‘the Ring’ since 1849. Tavistock Town Council leases 8 acres of land to Tavistock Cricket Club; this was last confirmed in writing in 1920, for 25p a year.
* Whitchurch Down Commoners – Livestock grazing on Whitchurch Down is overseen by the Whitchurch Commoners Association, which is, in turn, regulated by The Dartmoor Commoners Council[[1]](#footnote-1).
* Plasterdown Grouped Parish Councils represents the joint civil parishes of Whitchurch and Sampford Spiney.
* Dartmoor National Park Authority - 335 acres of Whitchurch Down are within the boundary of Dartmoor National Park and are subject to the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 and to local byelaws set down by the National Park Authority.

Whitchurch Down is popular with both local and visiting public and a number of public rights of way, tracks and car parks are maintained by the Town Council. The whole of Whitchurch Down is designated access land under the CRoW Act 2000. On the north side of Whitchurch Down is an area designated a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest).

1. **Background & special qualities**
	1. **The town of Tavistock**

Tavistock is an historic market and stannary town, frequently referred to as the “Western Gateway to Dartmoor”. Its history dates from around 800 AD when an Iron Age Fort was recorded as “Tavy-stoc”. In the 10th Century a Benedictine Abbey was founded there, and on its dissolution by Henry VIII the lands went to the Russell family, who as the Dukes of Bedford have maintained a close interest in the town ever since. The town area, including surrounding villages, has a population of some 29,366 (2016 figures) with Tavistock having 41% of the population.

135 hectares (335 acres) are within the boundary of Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) and the remaining 44.5 hectares (110 acres) fall within the boundary of West Devon Borough Council (WDBC).

**2.2 Ownership & Manorial rights**

In 1964 the Trustees of the Bedford Estate sold Whitchurch Down and its manorial rights to the then Tavistock Urban District Council for the sum of £750. The sale agreement included permissions to the Air Ministry to erect a building near the reservoir as a ‘lookout’ and to Mr F Kerswell for use of the quarry. Permission was also included for use of part of the down for an 18-hole golf course, and for the football ground at Middlemoor.

**2.3 Tavistock Golf Course**

The Tavistock golf course enjoys the distinction of being one of the oldest golf courses in Devon, and the first in the country to move away from natural sand-dunes to heath and heather. The club was formed in 1890. In 1894 a new clubhouse was built (to replace the old ‘iron house’) and in 1895 an 18-hole course was completed. The eleventh Duke of Bedford became a patron in 1900. At the beginning of the 20th century, the wish to expand the course brought the club into conflict with the Whitchurch Down Commoners. After a lengthy dispute the Duke granted permission for the golf club but it was not until 1927 that a lease was drawn up whereby by the golf club was allowed to set up an 18-hole golf course and 4 shelters, with rights over the whole of the eastern half of the Down, in return for rent payable to the Duke. With the break-up of the Bedford Estates the rental lapsed and the course treated as common land, with free access. The arrival of the motor car and the changed attitudes of the 1920s brought an influx of weekend golfers. The golf club celebrated its centenary in 1990. Today 91 hectares (225 acres) of land is leased to the Trustees of Tavistock Golf Club from Tavistock Town Council and is maintained by the golf club under the terms of its lease.

**2.4 Tavistock Cricket Club**

The cricket pitch was transferred to Whitchurch Down in 1849 and the Tavistock Cricket Club was formed under the patronage of the seventh Duke of Bedford, who gave permission for the granite posts to be set up around the circular playing area. A pavilion was built in 1873 and enlarged in 1894 by the eleventh Duke. In 1953 the ground was enlarged and further facilities added in the early 1960’s. Today, just over 3 hectares (8 acres) of the Down is leased to Tavistock Cricket Club by Tavistock Town Council, and is maintained by them under the terms of their lease.

**2.5 Middlemoor**

Middlemoor is the small hamlet located to the south of Whitchurch Down and marks the southern most limit of the land owned by the Town Council. Tavistock Town Council owns and manages a small area of land adjacent to the hamlet of Middlemoor at SX 497727.

**2.6 The Pimple**

The small tower on Whitchurch Down (SX 491735), affectionately known as ‘The Pimple’, was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and built in 1914. The tower is three-sided, constructed in Hurdwick stone, with fine rafters and a slate roof flaring up to a capped point. The tower covers access to the service reservoir below – inside the tower is a metal stairway that leads down to a buried concrete tank – although this has been sealed off for safety reasons. The reservoir was part of a commission from Major Gallie for the design of Littlecourt (house at the top of Down Road, also designed by Lutyens). The reservoir was to supply water to this house and future houses on Down Road. The local water supply, including the reservoir was taken over by Tavistock Urban District Council and then transferred to North Devon Water Board and subsequently incorporated into South West Water Authority before passing to the privatised South West Water. Following a campaign lead by Mrs Margaret Wedd (who lived at Littlecourt) the Pimple was listed in December 1983. In the early 1990’s a new source of water was piped across Whitchurch Down, which effectively by-passed The Pimple thus making its reservoir redundant. South West Water sold the Pimple in 2000 to a private buyer.

**2.7 Historic features**

There are two medieval crosses on Whitchurch Down that served to mark the so-called ‘Abbots Way’. Both crosses are scheduled ancient monuments.

Historically important boundary stones mark the old parish boundary of Whitchurch. The boundary stones run from the cricket ground to a garden wall at the top of Down Road and then in the direction of Taviton[[2]](#footnote-2).

The hedge banks and walls date back centuries and were constructed to protect the in-bye (cultivated land) from grazing livestock or deer. Although a historical feature of the Down the hedge banks and walls belong to the in-bye landowners and are therefore beyond the scope of this Management Plan.

**2.9 Biodiversity**

Whitchurch Down is characterised by lowland heath, which is defined as open uncultivated land below 300m in altitude dominated by dwarf shrubs such as ling, cross-leaved heath and European gorse, intermixed with acid grassland, bog bracken, scrub and scattered trees[[3]](#footnote-3). The area of bog on the northern boundary is designated as an SSSI and is recorded as being in ‘favourable’ condition[[4]](#footnote-4). It contains a good variety of invertebrates including ten species of Dragonfly, such as Southern Hawker, beautiful Demoiselle, Golden-ringed Dragonfly and the local White-legged Damselfly and the nationally scare High Brown Fritillary butterfly also occurs here[[5]](#footnote-5)

* 1. **Hydrology/Rivers**

Information on ponds & water courses to follow.

**3.0 Purpose of the Management Plan**

Tavistock Town Council plays a lead role in protecting and shaping the future of Whitchurch Down and recognises the importance of the area for the local community, the many varied recreational uses, the rights of the commoners and the intrinsic value of the natural habitat that it provides. To that end a 10 year management plan was drafted in 2010 that set out a regular maintenance schedule of tasks that needed to be carried out to meet this aim.

* 1. **Review of the 2010-2015 draft management plan[[6]](#footnote-6)**
1. **Lowland Heath**

**Objective - Restore, and where feasible recreate areas of heathland.**

This was to be achieved by bracken control, grazing, scrub and gorse clearance (including removal of brash to create bare areas for heathland species to colonise. The work would be monitored by fixed point photography and funding from HLS used to cover at least some of the costs. This objective was partly achieved – areas of scrub and gorse were cleared by hand in winter 2012/13 and in 2014/15 by machinery. The fixed point photography did not happen and the application for HLS did not proceed.

1. **Access, Interpretation and Recreation**

**Objective** - **Inspect and maintain Public Rights of Way (PRoW) and car parks; produce and/or update site interpretation as necessary; maintain regular contact with local community groups and stakeholders to gather feedback.**

This was to be achieved by monitoring and maintaining PRoW on Whitchurch Down in line with Tavistock Town Council’s grounds maintenance schedule which also includes maintenance of the car park areas (particularly repairing the surfaces), removal of rubbish (fly-tipping) and management of trees. This objective was achieved.

1. **Funding**

**Objective – Pursue outside funding sources to achieve stated objectives.**

This objective was not achieved.

1. **Legal & other obligations**

**Objective – To meet all legal and other obligations**

This was to be achieved through liaison with the relevant authorities; the preparation of fire safety plans, site risk assessments, and tree safety assessments.

This objective was achieved.

**3.2 Challenges and opportunities for the next 5 years, 2016-2020**

The main land management challenge continues to be gorse encroachment – a major problem for both conservation and access. The aim for the next 5 years should therefore to be to clear gorse and scrub from paths, tracks, viewing areas, roadside verges and archaeological features on a rotational basis to form a mosaic of different ages of gorse and scrub. Over-grown vegetation is also threatening Pixies Cross. The cross is a scheduled monument and is deemed to be ‘at high risk’ as a result of scrub encroachment. Work to clear this site in particular should be made a priority. The boundary stones on the north side of the down should be kept clear of vegetation.

Bracken is regularly cut by commoners under their rights ‘in-venville’. Only very occasionally is parking an issue on the down – usually this coincides with occasional sporting events when cars on the grass verges and the Down itself. This can result in some localised damage if ground conditions are wet. The use of suitable equipment, such as tractors or caterpillar tracks, should be considered by contractors when hedge-cutting, extracting timber etc. Public usage, particularly by dog walkers and horse riders remains very popular. There are numerous access points from residential areas up on to Whitchurch Down.

**4.0 Whitchurch Down Consultative Group**

The Whitchurch Down Consultative Group meets twice a year, in April and November. The Consultative Group currently is made up of representatives from: Tavistock Town Council; Whitchurch Down Commoners Association; Plasterdown Grouped Parish Councils; Dartmoor National Park Authority; Tavistock Golf Club; and Tavistock Cricket Club. Regular meetings provide stakeholders with the opportunity to discuss areas of concern and share information. There is a good working relationship between all parties and this management plan seeks to strengthen this wherever possible.

The following people have been consulted as part of the management plan review:

Paul Glanville, Area Ranger, DNPA

Naomi Barker, Ecologist, DNPA

Andy Crabb, Archaeologist, DNPA

Charles Mudge, Chair Whitchurch Commoners

Jennie Hope, Secretary, Whitchurch Down Commoners

Jonathan Coe, Tavistock Golf Club

Andy Jarman, Tavistock Cricket Club

Plasterdown Parish Council

Ken Sedgmen, Works Manager, Tavistock Town Council

Wayne Southall, General Manager, Tavistock Town Council

1. **Biodiversity & Geodiversity**

Whitchurch Down is characterised by lowland heath. Lowland heath is defined as open uncultivated land below about 300m in altitude, dominated by dwarf shrubs – heather, cross-leaved heath and gorse – intermixed with acid grassland, bog, bracken, scrub and scattered trees. In Devon, lowland heath represents part of a continuum of overlapping, related habitats between the upland heaths of Dartmoor and Exmoor, and the lowland wet grassland of the Culm Measures and Blackdowns (Rhos pasture).

The UK’s lowland heathlands are of international importance, and represent some 20% of the total area of the habitat in Europe. Devon’s lowland heath represents one fifth of the total in the South West, and has a unique character. Devon’s lowland heathland, like many of its special wildlife habitats, is subject to great pressures and has declined markedly in the course of the last century. Losses to agricultural improvement, with former heathland being converted to more productive pasture and forestry, which now covers substantial areas of former heath, have reduced the county’s lowland heaths to some 4,000 hectares[[7]](#footnote-7).

There are several ponds, small flushes and scrapes on Whitchurch Down. The largest of the ponds is located at xxx. Occasional (ephemeral) ponds, puddles, and water-filled ruts are an important habitat for the fairy shrimp.

The ‘Living Dartmoor’ document describes the whole of Whitchurch Down as outside any of the designated Key Wildlife Areas of KWA’s. However, there is a neutral grassland KWA to the south and Whitchurch Common (to the east) is a moorland KWA. Further to this on Whitchurch Common there have been recent recordings of cuckoo, small pearl-bordered fritillary and purple hairstreak butterflies and It is likely that the usual moorland bird species can be found on Whitchurch Down together with lizards and adders[[8]](#footnote-8).

**5.1 Plants**

The character of Devon’s lowland heathland is provided not just by heather which is less predominant in Devon’s heathlands than it is in the other heathland areas further to the east, but by a varying mosaic of heather, western gorse, bristle bent, cross-leaved heath and bell heather. Other frequent plants are bilberry, bracken, tormentil and lichens of the genus *Cladonia*, with bracken sometimes predominating. Heath lobelia, pale dog violet and marsh clubmoss are listed as Species of Principal Importance in England (NERC Act, 2006)[[9]](#footnote-9)

* 1. **Birds**

A number of specialist bird species breed on the county’s lowland heathland including nightjar, Dartford warbler, stonechat, whinchat, tree pipit and a dwindling number of curlew in wetter areas, of these species the nightjar and woodlark are listed as Species of Principal Importance in England (NERC Act, 2006)

* 1. **Mammals**

Deer, hare are known to be present on Whitchurch Down.

**5.4 Invertebrates**

More than 35 species of butterfly and 21 species of dragonfly and damselfly breed on Devon’s heathland, making heathland one of the most important invertebrate habitats in the county. The following butterfly species are listed as Species of Principal Importance in England (NERC Act, 2006) – the silver-studded blue, pearl-bordered fritillary and grayling. Dragonflies and damselflies of conservation concern on Devon’s lowland heaths include the keeled skimmer, southern damselfly and the small red damselfly, of these species the southern damselfly is listed as Species of Principal Importance in England (NERC Act, 2006). Other insects include the narrow-headed ant, raft spider, bog bush cricket, wood cricket, and small grass emerald moth. The narrow-headed ant is a Species of Principal Importance (NERC, 2006).

**5.5 Reptiles & amphibians**

It is thought that lizards and adders are both present on Whitchurch Down.

**5.6 Whitchurch Down SSSI**

The SSSI comprises herb rich valley mire together with a good variety of invertebrates, including some rarities. This is a good place to see typical Dartmoor bog plants. The wettest areas are characterised by hummocks of Sphagnum mosses together with Devil’s Bit Scabious, Common Yellow Sedge, Carnation Sedge, Mat-grass and Purple Moor-grass. Unusual plants include Round-leaved Sundew, Pale Butterwort, Bog Asphodel and Bog Pimpernel. In the pools there is Bog Pondweed, Lesser Spearwort and Round-leave Crowfoot. Other flowering plants include Lesser Skullcap, Ivy-leaved Bellflower, Marsh St John’s Wort, Marsh Violet, Lousewort and the Cornish Moneywort grows along the banks of the stream. Invertebrates include 10 species of Dragonfly, such as Southern Hawker, beautiful Demoiselle, Golden-ringed Dragonfly and the local White-legged Damselfly. The nationally scare High Brown Fritillary also occurs here[[10]](#footnote-10)

**5.7 Challenges**

Much of the loss of lowland heathland over the course of the 20th century in Devon has been due to agricultural improvement of land by drainage, ploughing, re-seeding and fertiliser application. Losses to this cause have largely come to a halt now, though some of the smaller heathland sites remain vulnerable.

Overgrazing by overstocking heathland vegetation with sheep, cattle or ponies causes a gradual transition to poor acid grassland and the loss of heather and other dwarf shrubs. Overgrazing has been a problem in the recent past on Whitchurch Down but today grazing rights are carefully monitored by the Whitchurch Down Commoners (the grazing and stocking rates on Whitchurch Down are monitored and set by DEFRA and Natural England)[[11]](#footnote-11).

Conversely many of the smaller heaths across Devon have suffered from too little rather than too much grazing, often because they do not offer a viable source of grazing, and are not in keeping with the rest of larger farm units, yet have not been economic to convert to grass. Such sites become degraded, or have been lost altogether due to scrubbing up and succession to woodland. This serves to underline the importance of the Commoners on Whitchurch Down without whom long-term sustainable grazing management would not be possible.

The main land management challenge is gorse encroachment – a major problem for both conservation and access. The aim for the next 10 years should therefore to be to clear gorse and scrub from paths, tracks, viewing areas, roadside verges and archaeological features on a rotational basis to form a mosaic of different ages of gorse and scrub. This has the additional benefit of improving access and the locating and/or moving of livestock. It also helps to create gaps in the vegetation that can act as a fire breaks. The preferred method of management is to establish a 10-year management rotation of target areas (compartments) identified using aerial photographs and survey information. Hand-cutting is preferred over the use of machinery, especially in sensitive areas along the northern boundary, and to tackle over-mature stands of gorse. The use of machinery by specialist contractors in certain areas is still very much an option where the scrub is of a suitable age/structure (i.e. well-managed). Where hand-cutting is used there are several suggested options for the disposal of the brash. Firstly, it can be burnt on site as its being cut down; secondly, larger pieces can be stacked to create habitats; and thirdly, the brash can be chipped or shredded. The chippings can be disposed of in-line with the Council’s green waste recycling or (and potentially very interesting) local commoners maybe persuaded to take the chippings for use as animal bedding.

Bracken is regularly cut by commoners under their rights ‘in-venville’. The bracken is currently cut and round-baled. In recent times the bales have been left in-situ. In the future the Council would like to see the bales removed within a month of harvest. It is also the recommendation of this management plan that bracken cutting is avoided when the ground is very wet, to avoid vehicle damage to the down.

No ecological survey work has been undertaken on Whitchurch Down and little active nature conservation work has taken place to date. As a result extensive scrub encroachment is degrading habitats and limiting public access.

**5.8 Management aim, objectives, targets & priority actions**

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| **Biodiversity** **Aim:** To conserve the natural features that characterise Whitchurch Down |
| **Objective** | **Target** | **Priority Action** | **When** | **Who** | **Monitoring** |
| 1. Undertaking a habitat survey to establish baseline data for comparison
 | Survey complete | TTC to carry out an ‘in-house’ habitat baseline survey using aerial photographs, Magic Map and on-site visits. Use this information to identify and map suitable areas for scrub management over the next 5 years. | 2016/17 | TTC  | Continue to survey and monitor  |
| 1. Maintain and improve the condition of existing habitat on Whitchurch Down
 | Overall reduce area of scrub/gorse by 10% in selected areas over a 10-year period. Prioritise tracks, paths, viewpoints, road verges and archaeological features i.e. 100% of scrub/gorse cut within selected areas within 10 years. | Clear areas of gorse and scrub, preferably using hand cutting in the first instance and subsequently by hand-cutting and flail. | Each year in rotation over a 10-year period | TTC & contractors | Continue to survey and monitor. In 2016/17 TTC to cut area to west of Cricket ground (widen tracks and pathways), Pixies Cross and path alongside Taviton Brook. Contractor to cut area north of cricket ground. |
| 1. Maintain a ‘watching brief’ over the SSSI
 | SSSI remains in ‘favourable’ condition |  |  |  | Continue to survey and monitor |

1. **Public enjoyment, access & recreation**

The principal public interest in the site is for recreation – visitors appreciate and value the area because of its beauty, scenery, wildlife.

**6.1 People & events**

Whitchurch Down has long been used as a place for commemorating important events. The first recorded event was in 1885 when local people organised a public celebration of Guy Fawkes Day – after a carnival procession through the town the crowds moved to Whitchurch Down to a huge bonfire, followed by a firework display. In 1887 a 50 foot bonfire is said to have been lit to commemorate Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee. More recently a beacon was lit, close to the Pimple to mark the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II’s 90th birthday.

The down is used for a wide range of both formal and informal community events. All events taking place on Whitchurch Down must have the permission of Tavistock Town Council. Anyone offering fee-charging services on Whitchurch Down will be asked to apply to the Council for a licence and a fee maybe payable.

**6.2** **Tracks,** p**aths, and car parks**

Numerous tracks and paths criss-cross Whitchurch Down. The whole of the Down is designated access land under the CRoW Act 2000. Dartmoor Commons Act.

**6.3 Benches**

A total of 21 benches are located on the Down, mostly concentrated around the cricket ground. All the benches are maintained by Tavistock Town Council and are mostly of timber slats on painted metal frames. There are no intentions to increase the number of benches in and around Whitchurch Down in exceptional circumstances the opinions of the WDCG will be sought. A condition survey was carried out in summer 2016 and all benches tagged with a URN.

**6.5 Challenges**

Fly-tipping happens occasionally and the Town Council aims to remove any fly-tipped rubbish as soon as possible and notify West Devon Borough Council if appropriate.

Only very occasionally is parking an issue on the down – usually this coincides with sporting occasions such as cross-country events or when there is a special golf tournament. It is thought the best way of dissuading people from ‘informal’ parking is by keeping the car parks in good repair. Where vehicles have to cross the Down, and particularly in wet conditions, the use of suitable equipment, such as tracked vehicles should be encouraged. Indeed encouragement should be given, particularly to contractors, who are sensitive to the site.

Public usage, particularly by dog walkers remains very popular. There are numerous access points from residential areas up on to the down and a number of houses on Down Road and Chollacott Lane have created their own access points from their individual properties. The Council is carefully monitoring the trend for establishing ‘informal’ parking areas, adjacent to individual properties, which infringe on Council owned land. The Town Council installed six dog poo bins in 2015/16 at the main access points and these are responsibly used by local dog walkers.

**6.7 Management aim, objectives, targets & priority actions**

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| **Public enjoyment, access & recreation****Aim:** To manage access and recreation for the benefit of all |
| **Objective** | **Target** | **Priority Action** | **When** | **Who** | **Monitoring** |
| 1. Continue to monitor PRoWs, tracks, and car parks. Maintain to a satisfactory standard all gates, fences, litter bins, etc.
 |  | Inspect annually.Maintain PRoWs and tracks by scrub clearance at appropriate times of year (i.e. not bird nesting season). | On-going | TTC | Continue to survey and monitor.  |
| 1. Continue to keep car park surfaces in good repair
 |  | Undertake pothole repairs as required. | On-going | TTC |  |
| 1. Fly-tipping & rubbish
 |  | Remove fly-tipped waste as soon as practicable and/or notify WDBC | On-going | TTC |  |
| 1. Foster greater public understanding, involvement and enjoyment of Whitchurch Down
 |  | Support local eventsEncourage community involvement in practical conservation. Use every opportunity to speak with users of the Down when on-site to explain the management goals. Make more information on Whitchurch Down available on the Town Council’s website.  | On-going | TTC |  |

**7.0 Farming & land use**

**7.1 The Commons**

The commons are areas of open unenclosed land, that are privately owned but which other locals have rights to put their livestock on - these are referred to as common rights. The public also has a right of access on foot and horseback through the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985. This right of access is governed by the Dartmoor National Park Byelaws.

The beginning of the use of Whitchurch Down as common grazing land for livestock, as with other uplands in Devon, may date back to prehistoric times and is certainly not recorded. The area of Whitchurch Down itself contains no farmsteads, but farmers on its borders have always exercised their grazing rights locally (and many exercised their rights to use Dartmoor as well, referred to as ‘in venville’). Rights of Common were written into farm leases, certainly from the 14th century, and those which enjoy commoners’ rights today on the Down include more than fifty owners of agricultural land in the Tavistock area. In addition to grazing the Down, commoners were entitled to the rights of turbary (i.e. the cutting of turves), the taking of stones and the cutting of bracken and rushes.

As far as grazing was concerned, until the First World War the traditional breed of cattle was the South Devon which was crossed with a Galloway or Highland bull. In the early part of the last century there were no ponies on Whitchurch Common and very few sheep, the latter traditionally of one of the Dartmoor breeds crossed with a Scottish Blackface ram, but there were large numbers of geese, mainly owned by smallholders and cottagers.

The Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 provides for the setting up of a Commoners' Council. This is a Statutory Body that has responsibility for the good husbandry of the commons. Membership to the Council is made up of representatives from the local Commoners' Associations, the Duchy of Cornwall, a vet, and two common land owners. The Dartmoor Commoners' Council Regulations were prepared under Section 5 of the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985.

The Dartmoor Commoners Association was established in 1952, and the Whitchurch Commoners were invited to nominate two representatives. More recently, the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 aims to control the use of the moors to ensure that they are grazed efficiently and to prevent abuse by farmers, visitors and others and at the same time retain the natural beauty and traditional uses of the moorland areas.

The most important right of common is grazing. This right of common pasture is extremely important, particularly to hill farms that hold such rights. Rights are attached to specific properties for keeping certain numbers of sheep, cattle and ponies. These rights are registered and depend on the size of the farm.

The origins of common land and rights stretch back to time immemorial. In medieval times rights were strictly regulated; landowners appointed officials known as Reeves to check abuses. Such control lapsed during the 20th century and problems such as over-grazing and under-grazing, poor animal health and husbandry and the abuse of rights were widespread. At the same time pressures of public access and increased recreation were rising so the Dartmoor Commons Act was passed in 1985 (the full act can be viewed at [www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk)). Public access on foot and horseback to common land was secured for the first time under the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 and, more recently, new access rights were granted as part of the CRoW Act 2005.

In addition to statutory legislation there are a number of byelaws that apply to Commons within Dartmoor National Park. These can be viewed at [www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk)

Finally, Dartmoor Commoners’ Council Regulations were drawn up to govern the activities on commoners’ and were passed in 1990. These can be viewed at [www.dartmoorcommonerscouncil.org.uk](http://www.dartmoorcommonerscouncil.org.uk)

Whitchurch Down is not subject to any entry level or higher level stewardship payments.

**7.2 Mining**

Evidence of mining exists at points along the Down’s northern boundary, on the southern slopes of Taviton Brook. They are relics of small-scale working for copper in the 18th and 19th centuries, known generally as Wheal Surprise, and latterly as Whitchurch Down Consuls. The workings are based on copper lodes which run roughly east-west and crop out along the valley. The earliest known mine (shown on a 19th century map as Surprise Old Mine) lies downstream from Furzy Lane Bridge at SX 503740 (see below).

**7.3 Quarrying**

In the past stone has been quarried at various points on Whitchurch Down. The Down lies on the metamorphic Devonian and Carboniferous beds which surround the Dartmoor granite, and the shales and slately rocks when extracted have provided useful building material. There are the remains of a quarry at the Down’s western-most point, just behind the cricket pavilion. The remains of another are seen south of Torlands, latterly this was used as a tip and back-filled. There are the remains of another quarry close to Pixies’ Cross. Pennycomequick Quarry is the largest on Whitchurch Down (SX 511739); it was worked primarily for building stone up until the 1920’s.

**7.4** **Challenges**

**7.5 Management aim, objectives, targets & priority actions**

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| **7.6 Farming & Land Management****Aim:**  |
| **Objective** | **Target** | **Priority Action** | **When** | **Who** | **Monitoring** |
| 1. Maintain & improve the existing habitat by grazing
 |  | Maintain appropriate levels of livestock grazing on Whitchurch Down for the purposes of maintaining and improving the existing habitat. Encourage cutting of bracken annually in line with ‘venville’ rights. |  | Whitchurch Down Commoners |  |
| 1. Tree survey
 | Incorporate Whitchurch Down into the biennial TTC Tree Survey. | Undertake any tree management work in line with findings of the biennial tree survey. | Next survey due Winter/spring 2017. | TTC and arboricultural consultant 2016/17. |  |

**8.0 Historical features**

**8.1 Medieval crosses**

Two crosses on Whitchurch Down date from around 10th century AD and undoubtedly served to mark the way between the Benedictine abbey which was established in Tavistock in 974 and at Buckfast in 1018 – the so-called ‘Abbots Way’. The route also became known as the ‘Jobber Cawse’ because of its use by traders in wool. This, the smaller of the Whitchurch Down crosses stands near the junction of the road coming up from Green Lane with the one coming from Down Road (SX 493738). Evidently having suffered damage at some stage, the cross is lower than its likely original height and has been restored; the shaft is of a different stone from that of the head and arms. A short distance east (SX 501736) is the larger one, known locally as Pixies’ Cross. It is of thicker and more regular shape and over six feet in height. Both crosses are scheduled ancient monuments.

**8.2 Boundary stones**

The old parish boundary of Whitchurch is still marked by a line of stones running from a point near the cricket ground to a garden wall at the top of Down Road and then in the direction of Taviton. Helpfully the stones have a runnel along the top pointing in the direction of the next ones[[12]](#footnote-12).

The Lions Club of Tavistock buried a time capsule on 28th May 2000 to mark the millennium. The time capsule is located at SX 497733 on the boundary between the parishes of Tavistock and Whitchurch.

**8.3 Hedge banks and walls**

It is not possible to date the construction of the boundary walls, but their origin must have been some centuries ago. Since common rights are ancient, adequate boundary works were necessary to protect the in-country of cultivated land from encroachment by grazing stock or deer, and it is possible that some of the walls of the Down were built on the corn-ditch principle – a bank with a deep, wide trench on the moorland side (resembling a ha-ha) to deter jumping. The existence of mature trees, including oak, in many lengths of the bank also indicates long establishment. Interestingly, almost all the boundary hedge banks have been built of small stones in a very regular fashion, unlike those of the nearby lanes which are of irregular pieces of granite. The boundary hedges also contain a large quantity of very heavy white quartz[[13]](#footnote-13). The hedge banks and walls belong to the in-bye landowners.

**8.4 Challenges**

Over-grown vegetation is also threatening Pixies Cross. The cross is a scheduled monument and is deemed to be ‘at high risk’ as a result of scrub encroachment. Work to clear this site in particular should be made a priority. The boundary stones on the north side of the down should be kept clear of vegetation.

**8.5 Management aim, objectives, targets & priority actions**

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| **8.5 Historical Features****Aim:**  |
| **Objective** | **Target** | **Priority Action** | **When** | **Who** | **Monitoring** |
| 1. Clear archaeological features of scrub/gorse
 | Gorse and scrub removed. | Remove over-mature gorse and scrub from around Pixies Cross to open up access and reduce risk of damage. | 2016/17 | TTC, volunteers |  |
| 1. Keep boundary stones clear of vegetation
 | Boundary stones located and vegetation removed | Remove vegetation from the parish boundary stones, record locations and take photos. | 2016/17 | TTC, volunteers |  |

**Maps to follow:**

Magic map 1 – SSSI, woodlands & grasslands

Magic map 2 – Common land

Map 3 – CROW, footpaths etc.

Map 4 – listed buildings & SAMs

Map 5 – SW Nature map

**Appendices to follow:**

Whitchurch Down Management Plan 2016-2020 Work programme

**References:**

Dartmoor Commons Factsheet, DNPA, June 2006

Dartmoor Delivery Plan for Pearl-bordered and High Brown Fritillaries

Whitchurch Parish, Ken Cook, Tavistock & District Local History Society, 2002

Whitchurch Down, edited by Helen Harris, Tavistock & District Local History Society, 2000

[www.dartmoorcommonerscouncil.org.uk](http://www.dartmoorcommonerscouncil.org.uk)

Devon Biodiversity & Geodiversity Action Plan, 2009

**High Brown and pearl-bordered Fritillaries**

The High Brown Fritillary has pale green hind wings with mottled white, black and orange markings. The adults start to emerge in mid-June and can be seen until early August. They lay their eggs on violet leaves, the larval food plant, or on bracken or leaf litter close to violet plants. HBF caterpillars are brown with dark pink spiky hairs, and re very well camouflaged in dead bracken litter. They overwinter in the egg stage and hatch in March when warm conditions are needed for the larvae to develop rapidly. The average count of HBF over the last 5 years has remained stable at an average of 13 sites, which is a decline of about 50% since the 1990s on Dartmoor. Suitable habitat is extensively grazed, south-facing bracken slopes with an under-storey of violets. It is important that there is a good layer of broken-down bracken litter, which creates the warm conditions in the spring. The issues affecting HBF are a lack of grazing leading to scrub encroachment; over-grazing & poaching by livestock; destruction of overwintering eggs and larvae by burning (not on Whitchurch Down); and increasingly mild, wet winters that favour grass and bluebells leading to cooler ground conditions. Both the high brown and the pearl-bordered fritillaries are monitored as part of the Two Moors Threatened Butterfly Project. Through the project sites that have populations of high brown and pearl-bordered fritillaries are brought into suitable management via agri-environment schemes[[14]](#footnote-14).

1. <http://www.dartmoorcommonerscouncil.org.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Whitchurch Parish, Tavistock & District Local History Society, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. www.devon.gov.uk/dbap-land-lowland.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. NE SSSI info [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Natural England citation [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Draft Whitchurch Down Management Plan 2010-2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Devon Biodiversity & Geodiversity Action Plan, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Naomi Barker, Ecologist, DNPA [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Species of Principal Importance in England as identified in the Natural Environment & Rural Communities (NERC) Act, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Natural England citation [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tavistock Town Council Draft Whitchurch Down Management Plan 2010-2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Whitchurch Parish, Tavistock & District Local History Society, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Whitchurch Down, edited by Helen Harris, Tavistock & District Local History Society, 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dartmoor Delivery Plan for Pearl-bordered and High Brown Fritillaries [↑](#footnote-ref-14)