

8.0 White Cliffs Coast

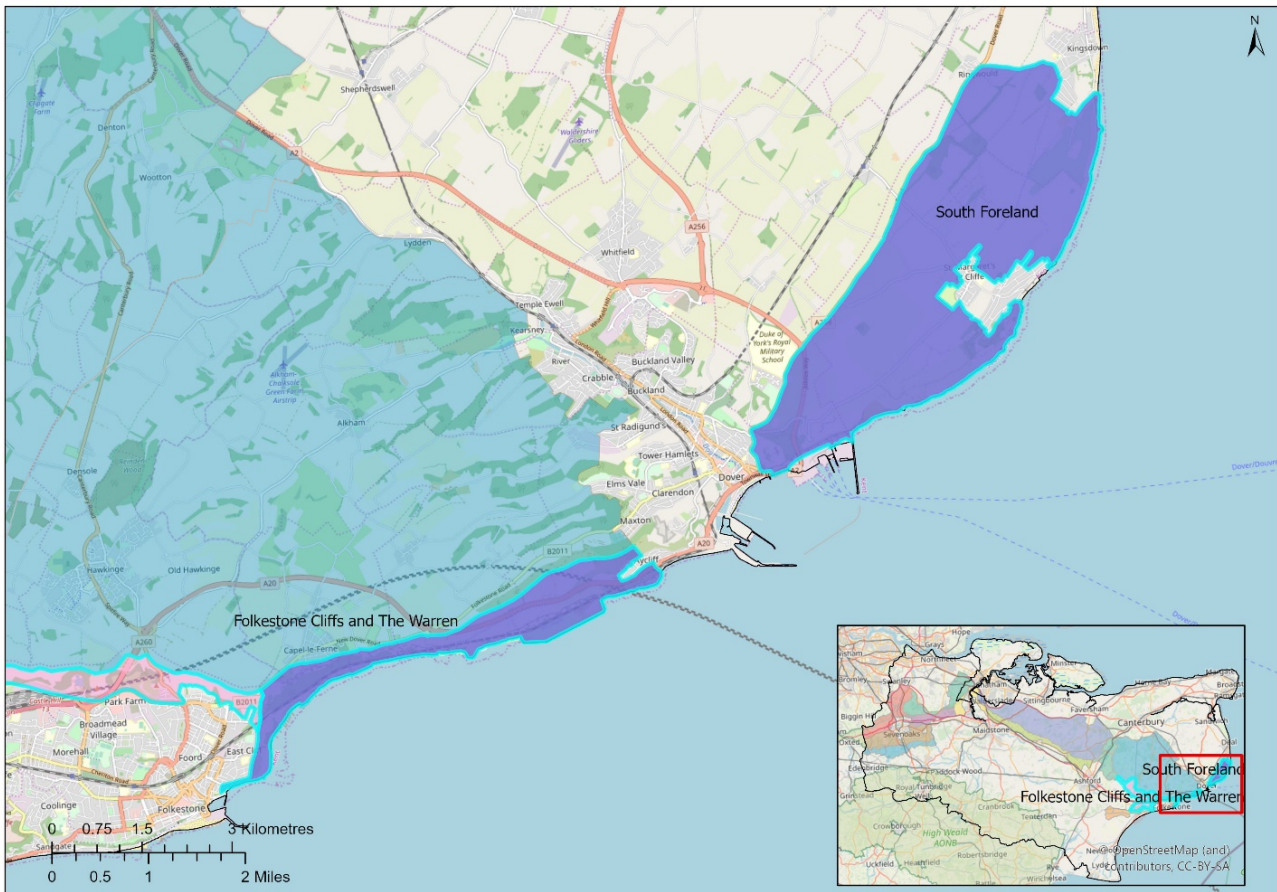
Landscape Character Area 3A

Landscape Character Type: Chalk Cliffs and Coast

Districts/ Boroughs: Dover

Landscape/Countryside Partnerships: White Cliffs Countryside Partnership

Location and Context: This LCA is located in the far east of the Kent Downs AONB, to the south and east of the East Kent Downs LCA. It encompasses the coastal area between Folkestone and Kingsdown. It includes the settlement of St Margaret's at Cliffe, and forms the setting to Dover and to Folkestone.



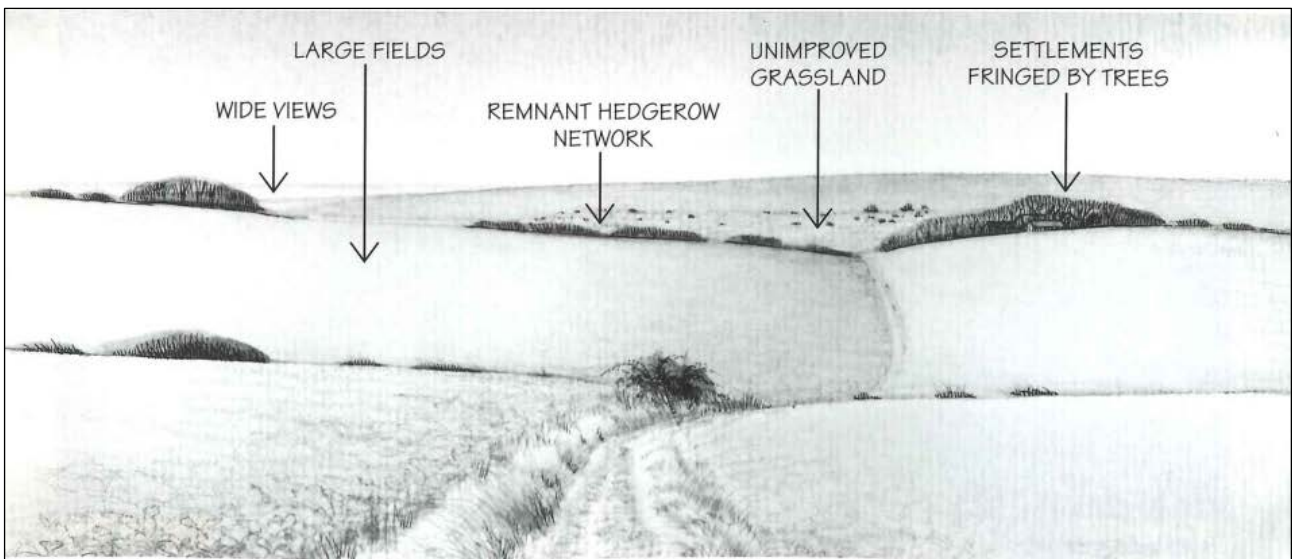
Location map for White Cliffs Coast LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Folkestone Cliffs and The Warren, and South Foreland



White Cliffs of Dover viewpoint, chalk grassland, cliffs, foreshore and open horizons

Summary Characteristics

- Underlying chalk geology, spectacularly revealed in high white cliffs at the coast.
- Dramatic coastal landforms include cliffs, landslips and pebble beaches. Above the cliffs, the land forms a gently undulating coastal plateau punctuated by dry valleys.
- Relatively few trees, creating an open landscape, although there is secondary woodland in sheltered valleys and on landslips.
- Dominant land use is arable agriculture within large, open fields. Also extensive areas managed for recreation and/or nature conservation.
- Important semi-natural habitats include coastal chalk grassland, secondary woodland and scrub, cliffs, landslip and shoreline habitats.
- Extensive archaeological and heritage sites, particularly relating to defence and communication over two millennia.
- Limited settlement within the LCA, although Folkestone, Dover and smaller 20th Century coastal settlements are adjacent. Scattered farms in the east of the LCA.
- Relatively few roads, but A20 has an impact where it runs close to the coast.
- An exceptionally open and exposed landscape, with a strong awareness of the presence of the sea in sights, sounds and smells.
- Popular for recreation, with coastal path, Country Parks, visitor centre and golf courses.
- Prominent landmarks include White Cliffs, Dover Castle, Port of Dover and South Foreland lighthouse.



Sketch of the White Cliffs Coast (looking inland) from 'The Kent Downs Landscape' (1995)

8.1 Description

- 8.1.1 Rearing straight up out of the English Channel, the 'White Cliffs of Dover' form one of the country's most famous landmarks, lodged in the hearts and minds of millions of people. As such, this coastal LCA, stretching between Folkestone and Kingsdown, is possibly one of the best-known parts of the Kent Downs AONB. It contains a series of distinctive coastal landforms, including Shakespeare Cliff, Abbot's Cliff, the Warren coastal landslip, and the Dover Cliffs. It is extremely popular for recreation, with a well-used coastal path, National Trust visitor centre at the White Cliffs, and Country Parks at The Warren and Samphire Hoe.
- 8.1.2 This stretch of coastline is also well known for its long association with the defence of the realm. It has a long and rich military and maritime history spanning many centuries, including the Roman Lighthouse, Dover Castle, numerous Napoleonic sites, sound mirrors, WW2 sites and the Battle of Britain Memorial. Some of these sites (such as the coastal gun emplacements) are undesignated or underground and not immediately apparent in the landscape. Others, such as Dover Castle are highly prominent and symbolise constancy in the landscape.
- 8.1.3 The area has long played an important role in communications, and continues to do so. The pilot Bleriot landed here following his first cross-channel flight, and in 1899 Marconi made the first cross-Channel broadcast from near Boulogne to South Foreland Lighthouse. Communications masts remain prominent features. The Port of Dover continues to dominate seaward views in the western part of the area, and cross-channel ferries and other shipping are part of the seascape.
- 8.1.4 Although the area is in close proximity to the towns of Folkestone and Dover, its exposed coast and military uses mean that it contains little settlement. The coastal village of Kingsdown in the north-east was a Cinque Port in medieval times, and expanded as a fishing village. On the coast between Kingsdown and Dover is the village of St Margaret's at Cliffe, a planned settlement dating from the early 20th Century with large houses in grounds planted with numerous trees. This gives the settlement (a Conservation Area) a distinctive character, and examples of high-quality architecture continue today. Further inland, straight streets of houses are the result of speculative development in the mid-20th Century.

- 8.1.5 Weather, light and sea conditions have a profound effect on this coastline. In sunshine the cliffs are dazzling white, but when shrouded in mist they become much less distinct. Sea mist hovering over the landscape can create an ethereal quality.
- 8.1.6 The presence of the sea and the sheerness of the cliffs create a sense of vulnerability and danger in the view, but the sense of powerful nature is both uplifting and a reminder of our own insignificance. Set against this is an awareness of impermanence from the eroding coast and lost valleys. Views along the coast, over the harbour and across the channel to France are panoramic. The coastal paths and visitor hubs are very popular, and at times there is a strong awareness of the presence of people and cars. However, a short walk can enable a greater sense of remoteness and tranquillity. Sounds, including seagulls, skylarks and ferry sirens contribute to the sense of place.
- 8.1.7 Edward Hasted, writing in the 1790s, described the area around West Cliffe thus:
“The height and continuance of the hills and the depth and spacious width of the valleys, added to a wildness of nature, which is a leading feature throughout this part of the country, contribute altogether to its pleasantness; and the variety of prospects, as well as over the adjoining country, as the sea, and the coast of France beyond it, are very beautiful”.

Shakespeare Cliff is named after a reference King Lear (Act 4 Scene. 6).

Scene VI: The Country Near Dover

Edgar: Come on sir; here's the place: stand still – how fearful

And dizzy 't is to cast one's eyes so low!

The crows, and choughs, that wing the midway air.

Show scare so gross as beetles: Halfway down

Hangs one that gathers samphire; dreadful trade!

Methinks, he seems no bigger than his head.

The fishermen, that walk upon the beach,

Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark,

Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy

Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge,

That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes,

Cannot be heard so high. - I'll look no more;

Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight

Topple down headlong



The Warren Country Park and the White Cliffs as seen from Folkestone



Beach vegetation on shingle at the base of the chalk cliffs, Kingsdown



Flowers in cliff-top chalk grassland



Battle of Britain Memorial on the cliff top near Capel-Le-Ferne



Telecommunications masts above Broadlees Bottom



Houses in treed grounds in St Margaret's at Cliffe Conservation Area



Dover Castle from Fox Hill Down

8.2 Local Character Areas

8.2.1 There are two Local Character Areas within the White Cliffs Coast LCA. **Folkestone Cliffs and The Warren** comprises the coastal strip between Folkestone and Dover, and lies to the south of the East Kent Downs LCA. **South Foreland** is a detached area of the AONB between Dover and Kingsdown.

Folkestone Cliffs and The Warren

8.2.2 The coastal downs of the Dover-Folkestone Heritage Coast form a dramatic landscape of open, cliff-top fields, exposed chalk cliffs and tumbled, scrub-covered rock-falls along the undercliff at The Warren. The austerity of the cliff-top landscape is emphasised by the scarcity of trees and hedges. Only small pockets of scrub or tattered strips of remnant hedge fleck the smooth sweep of the landform. The beauty of this landscape lies in its scale and drama, and the sense of ‘wilderness’ which it offers. There are vivid contrasts in colours between the bright white chalk cliffs and the surrounding sea and vegetation. As well as chalk cliffs, this area contains dramatic coastal landslips at The Warren, and fine examples of clay and greensand cliffs at Copt Point. Samphire Hoe is an interesting artificial construction, forming an apron at the base of Shakespeare Cliff. It was created in the 1990s using spoil from creation of the Channel Tunnel, and was designed to emulate the undercliff of the Folkestone Warren. It contains a lagoon and coastal grassland. All of the cliffs, The Warren, Samphire Hoe and Copt Point are designated SSSI for their geological importance. The Warren is an international geological reference site for Cretaceous period stratigraphy and fossils. Its landslips, which include both chalk and clay, have been very extensively studied. Dinosaur footprints have recently been found in Lower Greensand rocks on the foreshore at Wear Bay.

8.2.3 This is also a rich cultural landscape, particularly with regard to defence heritage. Scattered along the coast are relics of WW2 observation posts, an early acoustic mirror at Abbot’s Cliff, Lydden Spout rifle range, occasional Napoleonic remains (including a Martello Tower in Folkestone) and the Battle of Britain Memorial.

8.2.4 The Warren Coast is a popular landscape for recreation. In addition to the clifftop path, there are Country Parks at The Warren and Samphire Hoe, and a campsite at the foot of the cliffs. Views of the White Cliffs are enjoyed from Folkestone and Capel-Le-Ferne. There are also spectacular views from the railway between Folkestone and Dover, which runs along the foot of the cliffs. The railway line is vulnerable to damage during storms, and exposed sections are therefore protected by artificial sea defences. These structures influence the character of the shoreline.



Abbots Cliff and The Warren as seen from Capel-Le-Ferne

South Foreland Chalk Coast

- 8.2.5 The gentle valleys which furrow the landscape between Dover and Kingsdown still show the pattern of enclosure, much of which was imposed upon the landscape in the 19th Century. Before then, the landscape was largely one of unenclosed downland or arable fields. Modern farming, with its lack of need for hedges and trees, is beginning to return this character to the landscape, leaving only occasional overgrown hedges to contain and emphasise the openness. Scattered clumps of scrub often mark the locations of military positions.
- 8.2.6 Behind and beyond the chalk cliffs, the landscape and seascape of this coastal section of the AONB epitomises the windswept Channel coastline of the imagination – tufts of windblown thorn and scrub cling to the edges of the huge, rolling fields and the landscape is dominated by the vast horizons of sea and sky. This unique area is one of the most open and wild landscapes in Kent, and is literally and metaphorically ‘on the edge’. The sparse tree cover and the rolling, open countryside allow coastal landmarks such as Dover Castle, South Foreland Lighthouse and the Dover Patrol Memorial to stand out. It also results in an open landscape of uncluttered skylines which is very vulnerable to any form of development. The radio masts, which tower above Broadlees Bottom, dominate the locality. However, they are also relatively rare surviving communications structures from the Battle of Britain, and as such are important elements in the cultural landscape which are now Listed Buildings.
- 8.2.7 The South Foreland Heritage Coast lies between Kingsdown and Dover, and despite the intensive agriculture, still contains some strips of ecologically rich chalk grassland and scrub along the cliff tops, which have in places been expanded inland in recent years. These areas are not only important for their scientific interest but also form a major contribution to the sense of naturalness of this small undeveloped stretch of coastline. The Landscape Character Area contains and abuts important coastal and marine habitats associated with the chalk coast, including intertidal rock and shingle habitats at the cliff base.



South Foreland Lighthouse seen across open arable fields. The patches of scrub mark the locations of WW2 gun emplacements

8.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 8.3.1 The 2004 Assessment identified this landscape as being in poor condition, as well as being of high sensitivity. In the intervening years a number of projects have taken place to enhance the landscape and improve its accessibility and management of visitors, including The Warren and Samphire Hoe Country Parks, and the White Cliffs of Dover National Trust visitor centre.
- 8.3.2 Projects to manage and restore habitats and heritage features include the reclamation of cliff top grassland from arable land, extension of land in National Trust ownership, and the opening of Fan Bay WW2 shelter to the public. Today, the condition of this landscape is improving, but it still faces a number of different challenges.



The White Cliffs of Dover Visitor Centre (with green roof) and associated car park above Dover Harbour and ferry terminal



Cliff-top grassland (shown here above Abbot's Cliff) is vulnerable to coastal squeeze

Issue	Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts
Coastal processes, climate change and natural forces	<p>This is a dynamic coastal environment which is strongly influenced by a range of coastal processes including erosion by the sea, frost shattering of rock, longshore drift and beach deposition. The white colour of the cliffs is because constant erosion allows previously-unexposed white chalk to be revealed on the surface.</p> <p>As the cliffs gradually become eroded and retreat inland, cliff top grassland habitats become vulnerable to coastal squeeze.</p> <p>Natural coastal processes can cause problems where they impact on man-made structures. At Kingsdown, coastal defences have been toppled and breached. At The Warren, coastal erosion and landslips have required the shoring-up of the railway line at the foot of the cliffs, and additional sea defences.</p> <p>Climate change is likely to exacerbate the risk and rate of loss due to higher sea levels and an increase in the frequency and intensity of storms.</p>
Air and water	<p>Lack of groundwater in the chalk is a major concern, particularly given that demands for abstraction are likely to increase with population growth. There is also concern about air quality, and haze caused by air pollution caused by marine and road transport, on both sides of the Channel.</p>
Coastal habitats	<p>The cliff face and cliff top grassland is ecologically internationally important, and also provides the setting for several coastal landmarks. Some sections of coastal grassland are currently in ‘unfavourable recovering’ condition, reflecting improved management. The undercliff habitats of The Warren are also currently in an ‘unfavourable recovering’ condition. There is concern regarding ‘coastal squeeze’ of the belt of grassland running along the cliff top sandwiched between the edge of the cliff and the arable land behind, particularly as this strip of land is also occupied by the coastal footpath. In high use areas the quality of the protected cliff top grassland is being damaged by over use from recreational visitors and disturbance is likely to affect other vulnerable species and habitats.</p> <p>During the 20th Century, coastal grassland has been lost to arable agriculture and to woodland growth (such as around the Bleriot Memorial). The extent of coastal grassland is currently being increased by moving the boundary of arable fields further inland, and reverting former arable land back to grassland.</p>
Land management changes	<p>Recent decades have seen an intensification of agricultural land use, resulting in loss of hedgerows and wildlife corridors, which reduces connectivity of wildlife habitat. However, hedgerow loss also recreates the open feel of the unenclosed downland which previously covered this area. Crop choices affect the seasonal patterns and appearance of the landscape. Around Kingsdown there is a noticeable use of land for horse grazing, resulting in subdivision of fields with white tape and electric fencing. The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape.</p>

Issue	<i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i>
Recreation	The continuing popularity of this landscape for recreation brings its own challenges, and can also result in impacts on the very things which people come to seek, such as tranquillity, solitude and closeness to nature. Concentrations of visitors at the White Cliffs visitor centre can result in path erosion, littering and the presence of cars. These problems could be exacerbated if visitor numbers continue to increase.
Military archaeology	Many military structures were abandoned, demolished or ploughed-over in the second half of the 20 th Century. Some were covered through 'Operation Eyesore' in the 1970s but are now being revealed. Other archaeological sites are being damaged by ploughing or vegetation growth, including Connaught Barracks which are a Scheduled Monument 'at risk'. There is still a general lack of awareness and appreciation with regard to the area's military archaeology.
Development	The open, expansive character of this landscape means that it is particularly vulnerable to development which affects its skylines and/ or its open character, sense of naturalness and remoteness. This is true of development within or outside the AONB. The landscape is vulnerable to many different types of development, including housing, traffic management, port-related development and recreation. Offshore developments such as wind farms would affect the seascapes visible from the area. Highways are also a detractor within the landscape, and their future sensitive management is an important priority.



Seawall toppled by storm, Kingsdown



Path erosion around viewpoint near White Cliffs visitor centre



Landslips are not uncommon at The Warren, and the coastal railway line requires sea defences.



Subdivision of land for equestrian use, with electric fencing and white tape



Reclaimed chalk grassland from arable land behind the cliff top, near St Margaret's lighthouse



New wheelchair-accessible path at the White Cliffs Visitor Centre, with the ferry terminal beyond.

8.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The landscape characteristics of expansiveness, relative lack of settlement and generally open horizons are retained. The area's rich military archaeology is understood, celebrated and managed. Landmarks such as Dover Castle, South Foreland Lighthouse, the Dover Patrol Memorial, the Battle of Britain Memorial and the radio masts remain focal points in the landscape and seascape, and St Margaret's at Cliffe village retains its special character.

The ecological value of the landscape is enhanced, with an extensive and linked network of chalk grassland in good condition. Cliff and shoreline habitats are also considered, recognising the constantly-changing nature of these environments. Recreation is well-managed so that people are able to enjoy and experience the landscape without damaging it.

Protect

- Protect archaeology, including 20th Century military sites. Encourage further research and management of these sites, and promote public access where possible.
- Protect open horizons, the sense of expansiveness and the relative lack of development within the landscape.
- Protect and enhance views from viewpoints and the coastal path towards landmark features and out to sea.
- Protect and enhance the distinctive character of St Margaret's at Cliffe Conservation Area, maintaining the relationship between houses and gardens.
- Protect the naturalness, drama and relative remoteness of the coastal landscapes.

Manage

- Manage agricultural land to enhance its biodiversity value and connectivity, for example through the creation of linked grassland strips on field margins or the conversion to permanent grassland.
- Maintain the existing hedgerow network, particularly those running along the contours.
- Continue to manage and expand cliff-top grassland and the grassland components of the Warren undercliff.
- Conserve pockets of scrub and trees.
- Work with landowners to reduce the impacts of equestrian land uses.
- Manage the existing Public Rights of Way network and look at extending it, particularly where this can tie-in with wider initiatives to promote and enable sustainable transport.

Plan

- Develop long-term strategies to disperse visitor pressure in a manner which is sensitive to both the landscape and ecology.
- Consider future strategies to retain coastal access following possible loss of cliffs to coastal erosion.
- Promote partnership working with other organisations working on coastal and maritime heritage in the vicinity.
- Develop Heritage Coast Management Plans.
- Given the importance of this area of coast to the nation, consider a land assembly approach to protective ownership and management to enable integrated management and dispersal of impacts.

- Work with Highways authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- Within the setting of the LCA, work with Local Planning Authorities and designers to achieve the best possible landscape and ecological integration and minimal impact on views, with compensation achieved for lost qualities.
- Encourage partnership working between different Local Authorities, agencies and community groups to enable seamless working across the AONB. Consider environmental/ landscape limits in planning and placemaking.