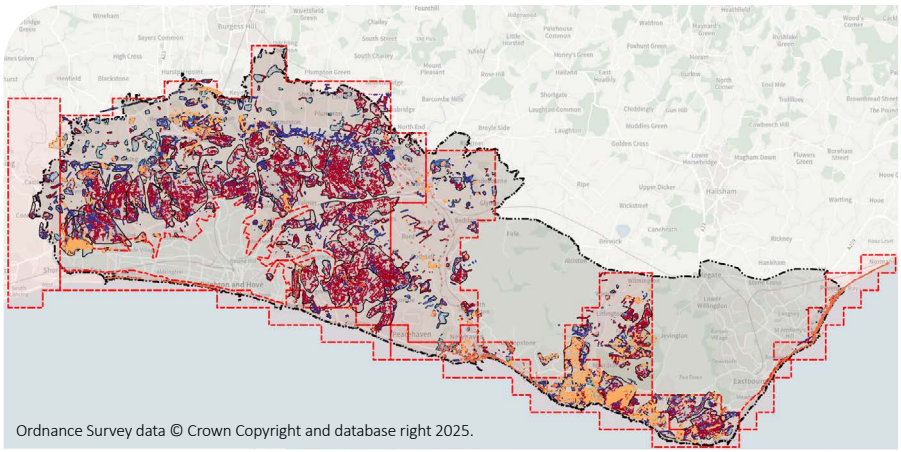
Case Study

Downs from Above – using digital platform to interrogate mapped archaeology and how people engage with heritage

National Trust and Historic England



The Downs from Above portal and mapping *Credit: Historic England*

The Vision

Historic England (HE) mapped archaeological features visible in modern and historic aerial photos and Lidar across the Brighton Downland. The Downs from Above digital platform was developed to allow public access to this data, enabling users to contribute personal stories and monitoring information.

Local volunteers were trained to verify the accuracy of data – known as 'ground truthing'. This process enhanced both the dataset and public engagement with the landscape's heritage.

Key Facts

Over the past century, the Brighton Downland has undergone significant change. Using historic aerial imagery and Lidar, Historic England identified archaeological features – such as earthworks, cropmarks, and parchmarks – often only visible from above.

They mapped 192 square kilometres of this landscape, helping to locate and preserve sites that might otherwise have been lost to time.

What we achieved

Over 350 contributions have been made to the digital platform (at time of writing), with volunteers investigating numerous sites to verify the presence and condition of archaeological features. This shows volunteers actively assessing the landscape and drawing on their knowledge and training.

This process has significantly improved understanding among volunteers of how aerial photography can reveal hidden heritage not as isolated sites but as a network of various features, deepening volunteers' connection to the landscape and equipping them with skills to interpret and engage with its historic character and evolving landscapes.

Non-designated heritage assets have been identified, assessed, and monitored, enriching the dataset.

The data enhances existing records, including the National Trust's and County Historic Environment Records, which now offers greater detail and accuracy, streamlining internal monitoring processes, and making site management choices more informed. The integration into public datasets ensures results are accessible to both the public and heritage professionals. This collaborative approach has created a more robust and inclusive record of the Brighton Downland's archaeological landscape. HE also produced a report with observations after the mapping was complete.

How we did it

Historic England's experience with large scale digital mapping projects helped streamline development. The National Trust collaborated closely to define desired functionality and outcomes. Existing digital infrastructure was utilised, and field testing conducted by staff and volunteers. A methodology guidance document was created for volunteers to explore and contribute to the data, including understanding the platform's layered information.

The Heritage Officer provided training and advice to volunteers using the data throughout the project. They ran a series of engagement events, walks, and talks to engage new audiences, connecting with groups including archaeology societies, 'Friends of' groups, and community groups not associated with heritage (through the Changing Chalk Community Network).

HE-led training sessions covered different approaches to archaeology, such as aerial, geophysical and earthwork surveys. Other expert-led workshops provided deeper insights into archaeological finds and excavation practices for volunteers.

The Historic England mapping survey and digital platform took 18 months to complete – costing £64,000, plus in-kind contributions, such as training provision.

Volunteers needed the guidance document and a smartphone with internet access.

> "I have gained a sense of appreciation of the South Downs and am continuing to find ways to conserve its heritage for everyone to share this understanding…"
>
> Downs from Above volunteer

Further information

The Downs from Above data can be accessed here:
Downs from Above Portal / Aerial Archaeology Mapping Explorer

The Data Report can be accessed here:
Historic England / Aerial Survey of the South Downs north of Brighton

Lessons learnt

Success factors included producing new and enhanced datasets; building a dissemination platform; collaborative development with stakeholders to maximise engagement and research value; delivery of training inhouse by partners; and clear guidance and training for volunteers.

Barriers faced by the project were multiple partners with own internal challenges; complex agreements around data and image ownership (e.g. photo competition issues); learning as we delivered; tenant concerns and scheduling challenges that prevented a planned training excavation.

Recommendations for similar projects would be to build in more time for partnership working to drive data creation and discovery; keep dissemination simple and user-friendly; define clear oversight for data contributions and permissions; address copyright and ownership issues at the start; select training sites and permissions during project development to avoid issues; identify potential policy conflicts earlier in the process; engage stakeholders early and maintain collaboration throughout; plan additional training and excavation logistics time to allow reaction to new results during delivery and to celebrate success.

The Changing Chalk Partnership

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk was a four-year partnership project from 2022 to 2026 working to reverse the ecological decline of chalk grassland in the eastern South Downs, bring histories to life, and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership

Changing Chalk was made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery players. With thanks also to The Linbury Trust, players of People's Postcode Lottery, and other generous supporters.