

Balancing nature restoration and leisure use at Cissbury Fields

A plan
2023 - 2026

Printing courtesy of Jacobs Steel, Findon Valley

Before

People have always used Cissbury Fields. It's here where early humans stopped hunting and became farmers, raised animals for food, grew barley and foraged for fruit nuts and wild flowers.

As people cultivated and looked after the land, a chalk grassland ecology evolved - with short springy grass home to as many species as a tropical rainforest!

Centuries of grazing by sheep and cattle and rabbits ensured no species could out compete another. Instead 40 different plants can live in a single square metre, growing together in a delicate balance.



Now

The last time residents saw animals grazing on the fields was 25 years ago. Since the animals disappeared and farmers stopped using the land, more walkers, dogs and runners enjoyed the fields.

This change in use has changed the ecology - tall tough grass now grows where orchids, wild strawberries and delicate flowers once thrived.

We've learned that grazing is central to chalk grassland habitats. Without the grazing animals, we can't help the flowers, butterflies, insects, reptiles and bird species that thrive in their care. The hedgerows with their messy or scrubby edges and woodland add to the biodiversity of the fields too.

Our ancestors shaped something of great ecological importance. It's now our turn to play a role. We need to find a way forward which restores the habitat without restricting people's enjoyment of the fields.



Grass is thick, coarse and fast growing. Finer grasses and flowering plants do not get an opportunity to grow.

Next

Our vision for the restoration of Cissbury Fields aims to encourage the continued leisure use of Cissbury Fields while restoring the chalk grasslands, hedgerows and woodlands habitats to increase biodiversity and natural beauty, and support the ongoing enjoyment of the fields for recreational use.

We will work across six of the lower fields to reach 4 restoration goals beginning in 2023.

The main changes that will affect human use include:

- A community orchard, possible picnic area and play trails fields 1 and 2
- Improved car parking and formalise entry points
- Improved signs and clearer walking routes
- Workshops and guided walks to learn about the history, biodiversity and farming
- Conservation grazing introduced between 2024 and 2026 fields 3, 4, 5 and 6 in rotation and only in one field at a time
- Fencing to protect people and livestock
- Lots of opportunities to get involved!

We've had a go at writing our goals and visualising the changes so you can imagine what it will be like ...

Goal 1: Educate people about the history and biodiversity of Cissbury Fields

We're all learning about what makes this area special and what we need to do to take care of it. We have collected many stories, expertise and baseline data to understand how nature is responding to current use and future changes. We want to share our knowledge and experiences with each other often. We hope by doing so, we will strengthen our relationships with one another and with the fields.

Goal 2: Improve the access and enjoyment of Cissbury Fields

We would like to create a smaller number of access points into the Fields so we can properly maintain them and make it easier to ensure that everyone using the fields is aware of what we're trying to do to improve biodiversity and natural beauty. We also want to ensure the site remains respectful to local residents by thinking about things like parking and accessibility for those with low mobility.

Goal 3: Make signs for people to navigate their way around Cissbury Fields

We want to drive appreciation and love for other species who enjoy the fields as much as people do by sharing educational content across the site. This will come in the form of signage. This type of signage will be presented at access points to Cissbury Fields.

Goal 4: Involve people in the restoration of Cissbury habitats

There's a lot to be done to enhance the existing habitats of the fields, hedgerows and the woodland areas. We all have a role to play and want to invite you to join in the efforts to encourage biodiversity and natural beauty.

Activities could include:

- Co-designing a community orchard in Field 2, so we have a space to come together as often as we'd like
- Holding events at the community orchard, including picnics, educational talks, nature walks, history walks for everyone to learn from
- Facilitating school and scout visits, so young people can champion restoration of the Fields into the future
- Facilitating visits to other nature restoration sites and inviting others to visit our work at Cissbury Fields

Activities could include:

- Stewarding access into the fields through a smaller number of entry points
- Increasing off-road parking
- Developing suggested walking routes, so it's easier for people to use the Fields for leisure walks
- Developing an easy access walking route
- Licencing commercial dog walkers
- Being a dog ambassador and helping with dog waste

Activities could include:

- Designing what information is important to communicate
- Changing the information depending on the season
- Helping to communicate what to expect, as restoration efforts evolve
- Understanding how people engage with the signage

Activities could include:

- Ecological monitoring
- Maintaining fencing
- Educating others on the introduction and importance of cattle for wildlife
- Widening the hedgerows
- Sowing wildflowers
- Managing woodland including leaving trees that have fallen

These are the 6 fields we'll be restoring (Goals 1, 2, 3 and 4)

Hedgerows: Hedgerows between fields will be planted with additional native species and allowed to expand naturally to enhance this valuable habitat for the benefit of butterflies, birds and small mammal species

Fences will be constructed on both sides of the hedgerows to allow space for them to grow.

Improved signage and clearer walking routes throughout

Retaining existing walking routes through the hedgerows

Maintenance of the woodland areas:
Removal of diseased and dangerous ash trees will be followed up with the replanting of a range of native trees species to increase biodiversity and resilience to the effects of climate change

Fallen trees will be left on site as deadwood
Their decay is an ecologically important component of a the healthy of the forest Woodland.

Community orchard and picnic area in field 1 or 2 and possible natural play trails

Fields used for conservation grazing

Not used for conservation grazing (low restoration potential)

Improved car park and access points



Education, improved access, enjoyment and navigation (Goals 1, 2, 3)



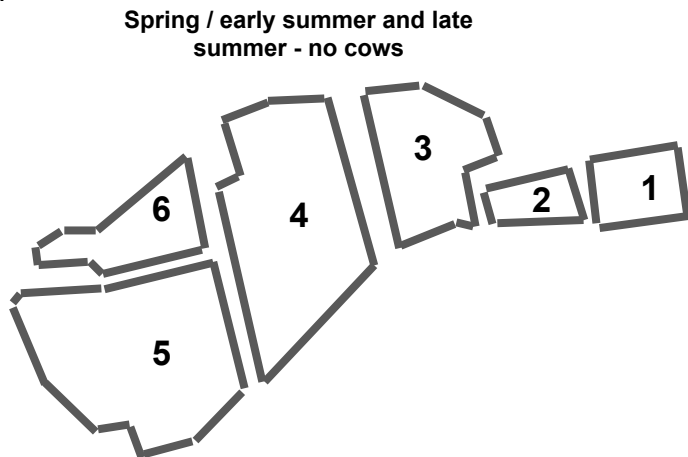
Credit: South Downs National Park photo library



Work will begin work on goals 1, 2 and 3 in 2023 especially in fields 1 and 2 where we are exploring ideas like a community orchard, picnic areas, educational talks, including from local farmers, and natural play trails for children and dog agility.

Conservation grazing across 30 out of 40 hectares by 2026 (Goal 4)

We'll be introducing a phased approach to re-introducing cows into **four fields, between 2024 and 2026**. By 2026, cows will be in one of the four fields (3-6) in the autumn and winter and for a short period of time during mid-summer (avoiding spring / early summer for the nesting birds). Cows will only be in one field at a time. For the handful of weeks they are in the largest field - field 5 - people will still be able to roam in 75% of the site.



March

May



5 cows mid summer

Aug



Nov



10-20 cows in one field at a time

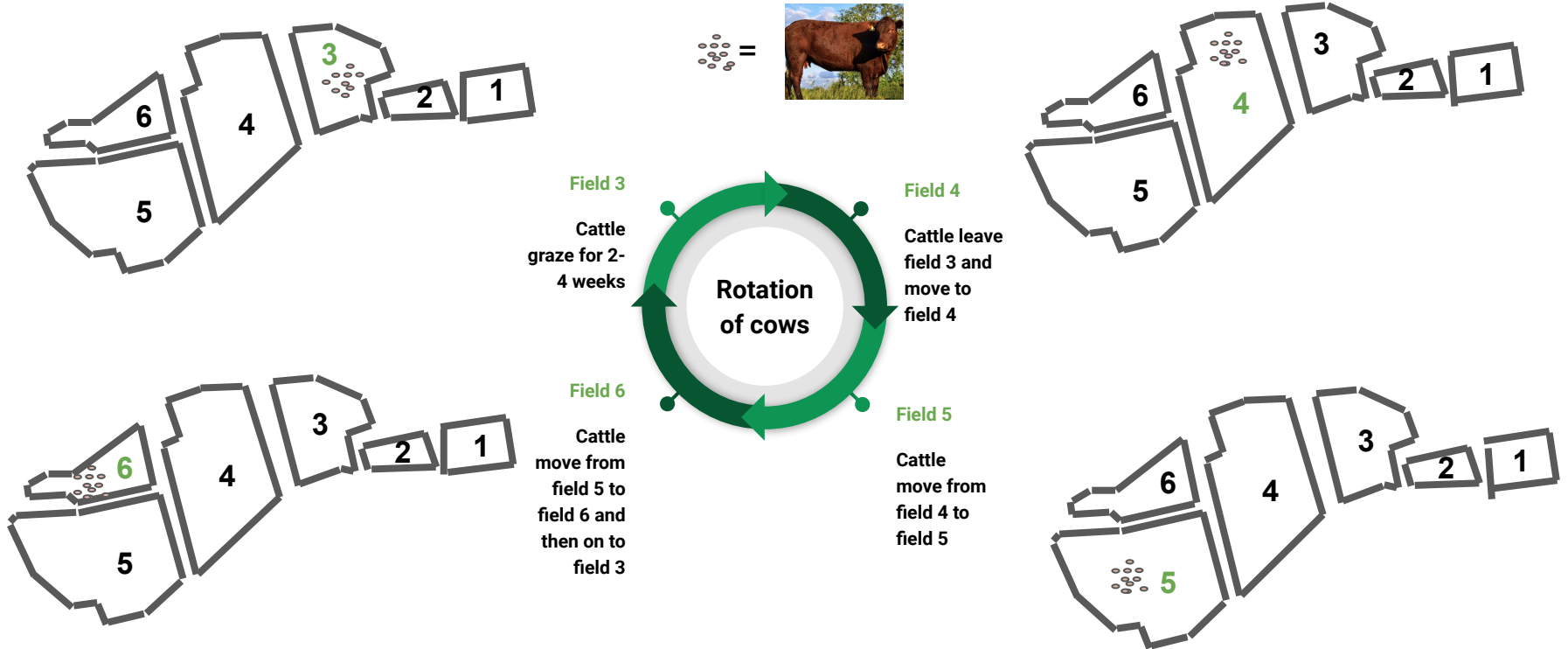
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About the cattle

We will have discussions with graziers. The ideal scenario will be to use a native breed like Sussex Red (pictured) because the cows are accustomed to grazing on coarse grasses and scrub and they are used to grazing close to people and dogs.

Conservation grazing: rotation of cattle (Goal 4)

By 2026 grazing will happen in one field at a time across fields 3-6. For example, cattle will be grazing Field 3 while all the other fields are empty. And then the cattle will move from Field 3 to Field 4 and so on, depending on conservation need. The diagram below illustrates a rotation pattern.



The rotational pattern means people will retain the right to be on the land all year round. Access will only be temporarily restricted to the field where the cows are.

A timeline for introducing conservation grazing (Goal 4)

We will introduce cows to Cissbury fields slowly between 2024 and 2026. Here are some key dates.

2023

Opportunities to learn about the history and biodiversity of Cissbury, including the building of a community orchard and improving signage / access points

2024

Spring 2024 – install fence and gates in field number 3

Summer 2024 – opportunities to learn about conservation grazing

Sept/Oct 2024 – close gates to field 3 and introduce cows

Nov/Dec 2024 – remove cows and open gates free roaming

2025

Spring 2025 – install fence and gate in field number 4

Summer 2025 – opportunities to learn about conservation grazing and close gates to field 3 and introduce cows

Sept/Dec 2025 – close off field 4 and move cows from field 3 to 4 Winter 2025

Winter 2025 – install fencing and gates in fields 5 and 6

Summer 2026 onwards – create rotational grazing between fields 3, 4, 5 and 6



New field and pedestrian gates and surface treatments to improved access and maintain wide walking routes



The plan is to begin work on goal 4 in Field 3 in 2024 - working on hedgerows, fencing, access points and the introduction of cattle

To note:

- 1. Gates will be secured OPEN when cattle are not in the fields so people can enjoy existing levels of access**
- 2. Alternative route options will be available to walk around the fields when grazing is taking place and the gates are closed.**

Hedgerows will widen to increase biodiversity

Fencelines will be set back from existing perimeter paths and tracks to provide generous walking routes (at least 10m wide)



Stock fencing will be used to contain livestock, topped with plain wire (not barbed)



Pedestrian gate and improved access to limit mud



Pedestrian gate and improved access to limit mud

Dogs as a key part of restoration efforts (Goal 1 and 2)

We know people love to walk their dogs in the fields. People need to feel safe to walk their dogs and there's a real community spirit.

There has been a huge increase of dog walkers using Cissbury Fields since Covid lockdown.

While we want to celebrate the use and sharing of the fields, dog poo presents an enormous challenge to restoration efforts. It can carry a parasite which is dangerous to cows and means farmers can't use the hay. They are taking cows off neighbouring fields and this is reducing biodiversity further.

8kg of dog poo was collected in one day on site in November 2022.

We need to support each other to be more responsible with the waste dogs create. Without addressing dog waste, it will be difficult for us to restore the site.



Credit: South Downs National Park photo library



Together with the South Downs National Park, we're exploring the possibility of a 'Dog Ambassador' or 'Dog Life' programme at Cissbury to help encourage responsible dog walking. Dog owners and commercial dog walkers can help us educate people and encourage responsible dog ownership to help protect and preserve Cissbury.

We're also exploring "Hairy not scary" days for dogs to meet cows, free dog behavioural sessions and natural play trails in Field 2.

What it might look like in the years to come



Credit: With the support of [Sarah Drummond](#)

Up the hill, Cissbury Ring is a **Site of Special Scientific Interest** because of the rare species that rely on chalk grassland. But it is isolated. And becoming more so, as farmers on neighbouring land remove their cattle because of the dog poo is making the animals sick. They cut the grass by machine instead, but it removes the biodiversity. By restoring Cissbury Fields we create more habitat close to the ring to bolster populations, while creating a beautiful place for people to enjoy in the years to come.

How we arrived at this plan

At the beginning of 2022, a group of people passionate about the fields formed. With the backing of Worthing Borough Council, who own the land, we formed a core working group made up of representatives from of Findon Valley Residents Association, Adur & Worthing Council Park Rangers, South Downs National Parks Authority, local Councillors, and commercial dog walkers.



Together we ran workshops, surveys, village stalls and bioblitz events to engage young people, parents, older residents, dog walkers, runners, bug specialists, tree specialists and bird specialists.

Using local knowledge we built a timeline of events all the way back to the 1940s and then to the Stone Age. We wanted to plot how human use of Cissbury fields has changed and the impact changes in use have had on other species.



We talked to more people, carried out field visits to other chalk grassland sites, gathered species information, listened to what people love about the fields, plotted popular dog walking routes, reviewed climate projections and came together in the fields again to imagine a different future for Cissbury fields, which works better for people and nature.

And this is the plan we have arrived at for wider review and feedback.

Next steps

We are in the process of sharing this plan with the council, with residents at an exhibition in Findon Valley library, with children and young people, dog walkers, runners, farmers, species interest groups including Shoreham & District Ornithological Society, Sussex Wildlife Trust and the National Trust.



Can you help?

We need everyone involved to make the restoration successful.

There's a lot to be done to enhance the existing habitats of the fields, hedgerows and the woodland areas. We all have a role to play and want to invite you to join in the efforts to encourage biodiversity and natural beauty.

Scan the QR code which will take you to a form to register your interest in joining our efforts. It will explain the various ways you could get involved. We will then try and organise groups of people who share the same interests to help take the plans forward.

Your contact information will not be shared and will be managed internally by Worthing Borough Council.

For any other queries, email cissbury.fields@fvra.org.uk

