



Viewpoint

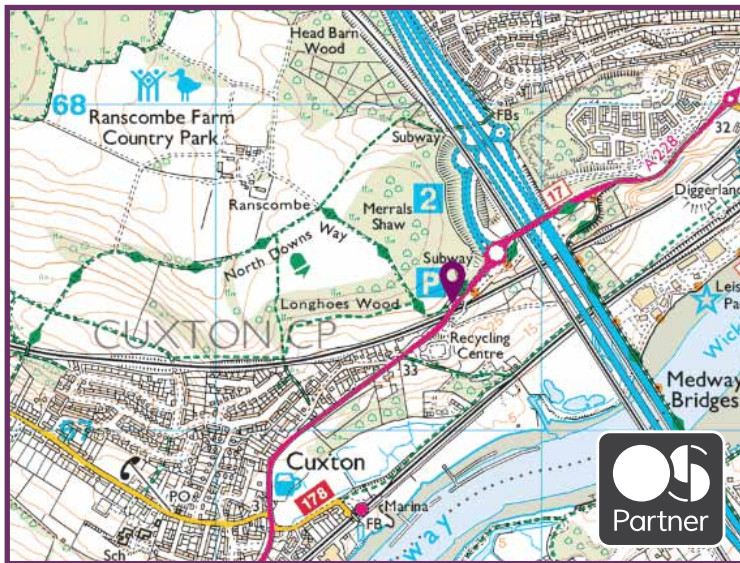
The birds and the bees



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location: Ranscombe Farm Reserve, Cuxton, Kent, ME2 1LA

Grid reference: TQ 71727 67387

Getting there: There is a small car-park at the main entrance on the A228 Sundridge Hill, very close to junction 2 of the M2 motorway.

Keep an eye out for: Views of the Medway Gap - a valley carved by the snaking river Medway carving its way through the chalk downs.

Just past the M2 motorway, where a bridge carries speeding traffic over the River Medway, and a hair's breadth from the Eurostar line to Europe, is some of the most stunning countryside in North Kent.

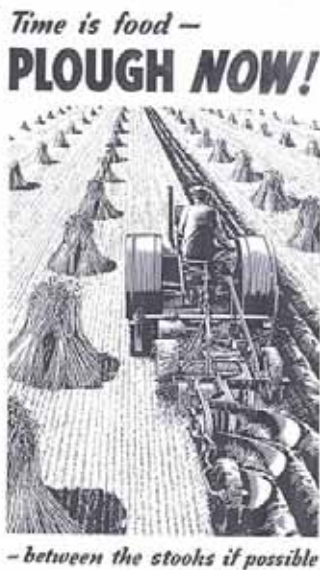
Ranscombe Farm Reserve is a working farm, growing wheat, barley and oilseed rape and grazing sheep and cows. But it's also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI); a wildlife oasis, famed for its orchids, wild poppies, bluebells and populations of dormice, birds, mammals, butterflies and insects.

How can a working farm balance producing food with protecting wildlife?



A visit to Ranscombe today is like stepping back in time. Little has changed: the pattern of woods, fields and tracks being much the same as in the Medieval period. Many of the farming methods are the same too, so that wildflowers and grasses, once a common sight growing naturally among the crops, are encouraged, not weeded out.

Wartime poster encouraging ploughing of fields



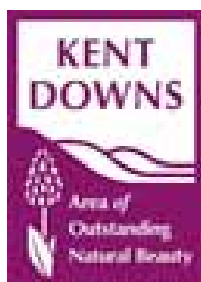
Changes to make farming practices more efficient, particularly during and after the Second World War, caused a huge decline in wild plants and a knock-on effect on wildlife. More land was ploughed up to maximise food production, arable fields became bigger as farming was increasingly mechanised, hedgerows and woodland were lost to the tractor, destroying wildlife habitats in the process. Fields were regularly sprayed to kill weeds - including wildflowers and rare grasses.

At Ranscombe, however, the farm is deliberately managed to encourage wildlife. Wide strips left around the perimeter of the fields are full of native wildflowers. Whole fields have deliberately been uncultivated and left to revert naturally back to chalk grassland - one of our most threatened natural habitats.

The woodland is actively managed too. Sweet chestnut trees are planted, and every 10 years, or so, they are cut down to allow long, straight branches to grow, in a process known as coppicing. The pole-like branches are harvested and used for fencing and broom handles. As a result of this thinning out, bluebells and other spring flowers flourish on the woodland floor. Species once thought to be extinct, like Corncrockle, flourish here and the rare Broadleaved cudweed.



A visit to Ranscombe Reserve is a rare, and much needed, glimpse of man and nature working in harmony and a model for more sustainable farming methods.



This viewpoint is one of 12 created in partnership with **Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)** to celebrate their 50 year anniversary in 2018.

Find out more about the Kent Downs AONB by visiting www.kentdowns.org.uk