



**Kent Downs AONB**

**Landscape Character Assessment**

**Update 2020**

**Revised and Published 2023**





## **Acknowledgements**

The author of this updated Landscape Character Assessment would like to acknowledge the work of the writers and artists of the 1995 publication *The Kent Downs Landscape*. Many of their informative and evocative descriptions of the Kent Downs have been re-used in this update. Thanks are also due to the Kent Downs AONB Team (and members of other organisations) for their assistance with the fieldwork and their generous sharing of specialist local knowledge. Particular thanks are due to Pippa Palmar for her detective work to find the locations of the 1995 photos, and to Tim Owen for producing the maps. A final thank you is due to the many people who attended the consultation workshops and shared their knowledge, concerns and visions for the Kent Downs AONB.

All photos in this document were taken by Fiona Fyfe unless acknowledged otherwise.

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## **List of acronyms used in this report:**

AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
CAMS	Cobham Ashenbank Management Scheme
ELMS	Environmental Land Management Scheme
GIS	Geographic Information System
KDAONB	Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
LCA	Landscape Character Area
LCT	Landscape Character Type
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Purposes of the Landscape Character Assessment Review

- 1.1.1 This updated Landscape Character Assessment is a component part of the statutory Kent Downs AONB Management Plan and was consulted on at the same time as the 2021-2026 revision of the Plan.
- 1.1.2 The original Kent Downs Landscape Assessment *The Kent Downs Landscape* was published by the Countryside Commission in 1995, and was accompanied by the *Kent Downs Landscape Guidelines*. It remains a highly-regarded document, but both the landscape and the accepted methodology for landscape assessment have changed since it was written. *The Landscape Assessment of Kent* was published by Babbie in 2004. This County-wide document drew on *The Kent Downs Landscape* as well as providing additional material on landscape sensitivity and condition, and recommended landscape actions.
- 1.1.3 The project brief states the following purposes of the Landscape Character Assessment Review:
- To bring the Landscape Character Assessment of the Kent Downs up to date in line with current best practice.
  - To assess changes in condition of the landscape character areas, identifying trends, key issues and reporting these particularly in relation to the character and qualities of the landscape which underpin the AONB designation.
  - To identify actions, investments and priorities to conserve and enhance the landscapes of the Kent Downs AONB.
  - To provide an opportunity for members of the AONB team and partnership to improve their skills, practice and understanding of landscape character assessment.

### 1.2 Approach and Methodology

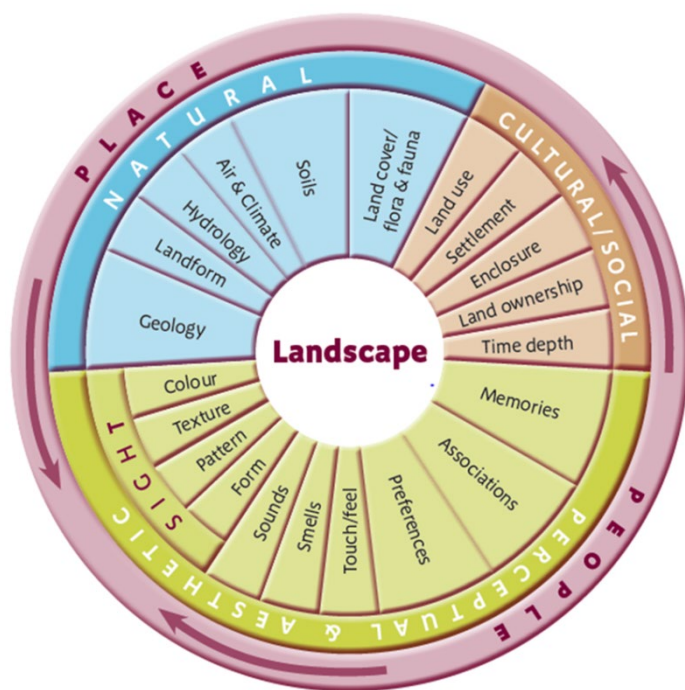
- 1.2.1 This updated Landscape Character Assessment was prepared by Fiona Fyfe, Director of Fiona Fyfe Associates Ltd. Fiona is a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute with 20 years' experience in landscape assessment. This document is in line with the current best practice guidance for Landscape Character Assessment, as set out in *An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment* (Natural England, 2014). This document defines 'landscape' as

*An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/ or human factors<sup>1</sup>.*

- 1.2.2 The following diagram, taken from the Natural England guidance, shows how landscape is influenced by a combination of natural, cultural and perceptual qualities. These qualities can then be used to identify distinctive types and areas of landscape (described more fully below).

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe (2000) European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe, Florence, October 2000



The 'Landscape Wheel' showing component parts of the landscape  
From: 'An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment' (Natural England, 2014 p.9)

- 1.2.3 The following stages of work were undertaken to review the *Kent Downs Landscape Character Assessment* and prepare this Consultation Draft:

#### **Stage 1: Desk Studies**

- 1.2.4 The desk study stage required the drawing-together of many different sources of information. All the existing Landscape Character Assessments were carefully read (i.e. the 1995 and 2004 Assessments, along with those produced by Local Authorities and Landscape Partnerships). A range of other publications providing background information on the Kent Downs landscape and its history were also consulted.
- 1.2.5 Mapped information was collated by KDAONB to be read in a Geographic Information System (GIS) which enables different datasets to be viewed simultaneously on screen. Mapped information included cultural heritage designations (e.g. locations of Scheduled Monuments, Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Registered Historic Parks and Gardens etc.); natural heritage designations (e.g. SSSIs, ancient woodland, geological sites etc.); information on the condition of SSSIs, Scheduled Monuments etc., and existing LCA boundaries.
- 1.2.6 Other sources of information such as historic and contemporary maps, aerial photographs, articles and guidebooks were also consulted.

#### **Stage 2: Stakeholder Workshops**

- 1.2.7 Three workshops took place during the course of the project, covering the eastern, central and western parts of the AONB. This was necessary given the large geographic spread of the Kent Downs AONB, and the wish to gain specialist and local knowledge.
- 1.2.8 The stakeholders who attended the workshops included AONB staff, Local Authority staff, parish representatives, local landowners, the National Trust, the Environment Agency, Historic England, Affinity Water and Kent Wildlife Trust. Together they represent a wide range of stakeholders, and have extensive local knowledge and professional expertise.

- 1.2.9 The workshops started with an introduction to the concept of landscape character assessment, and the Kent Downs Landscape Character Areas. Attendees were then invited to form groups around tables (one table per Landscape Character Area) and to discuss the key features of Landscape Character Areas, the forces for change acting on the landscape, and the vision for the Landscape Character Area. KDAONB staff facilitated the discussions, and recorded the findings. The exercise was repeated, enabling each attendee to contribute to three Landscape Character Area discussions per workshop.

### ***Stage 3: Fieldwork***

- 1.2.10 Three sessions of fieldwork were held during the course of the project to enable full geographical coverage of the AONB area. During the fieldwork, the landscape architect was accompanied by KDAONB staff, Local Authority staff or staff from other organisations. This enabled local knowledge to be shared effectively, covering a range of specialist topics including archaeology, ecology, orchards, farming and planning. It also provided an opportunity for staff to learn first-hand about the landscape character assessment processes.
- 1.2.11 During the fieldwork (which took place in three blocks between June and September 2017) as much as possible of the AONB was visited, in order to verify or update the descriptions from existing Landscape Character Assessments. Forces for change and issues affecting landscape condition were also noted during this process.
- 1.2.12 Photos were taken to show 'typical' scenes, items of interest and forces for change. In addition, the photo locations from the 1995 Assessment were re-visited and a comparative photo taken. These are valuable in showing the landscape changes which have occurred in the intervening 22 years.

### ***Stage 4: Writing up***

- 1.2.13 This stage brought together all the findings from the desk studies, stakeholder workshops and fieldwork. A series of profiles (one for each Landscape Character Area) were produced, illustrated with photographs. The starting point for the profiles was the text of the 1995 Assessment, but this was updated and extended where necessary. New sections were added on landscape condition and landscape management recommendations.

### ***Stage 5: Stakeholder Consultation***

- 1.2.14 The draft profiles were sent to all attendees of the stakeholder workshops, and their comments fed in to the draft final Assessment. The draft final assessment was then included in the full consultation for the statutory Kent Downs AONB Management Plan; any further comments received at this time have been taken into account in this final version.

## 1.3 Landscape Character Types and Areas within the Kent Downs AONB

### 1.3.1 Landscape Character Types (LCTs) are defined as

*Distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogenous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different areas...but wherever they occur, they share broadly similar combinations of geology, topography, drainage patterns, vegetation, historical land use and settlement pattern.<sup>2</sup>*

There are six key LCTs within the Kent Downs AONB, reflecting the area's underlying geology and its topography. These are listed below and shown on Map 1.

LCT 1: Chalk Downs

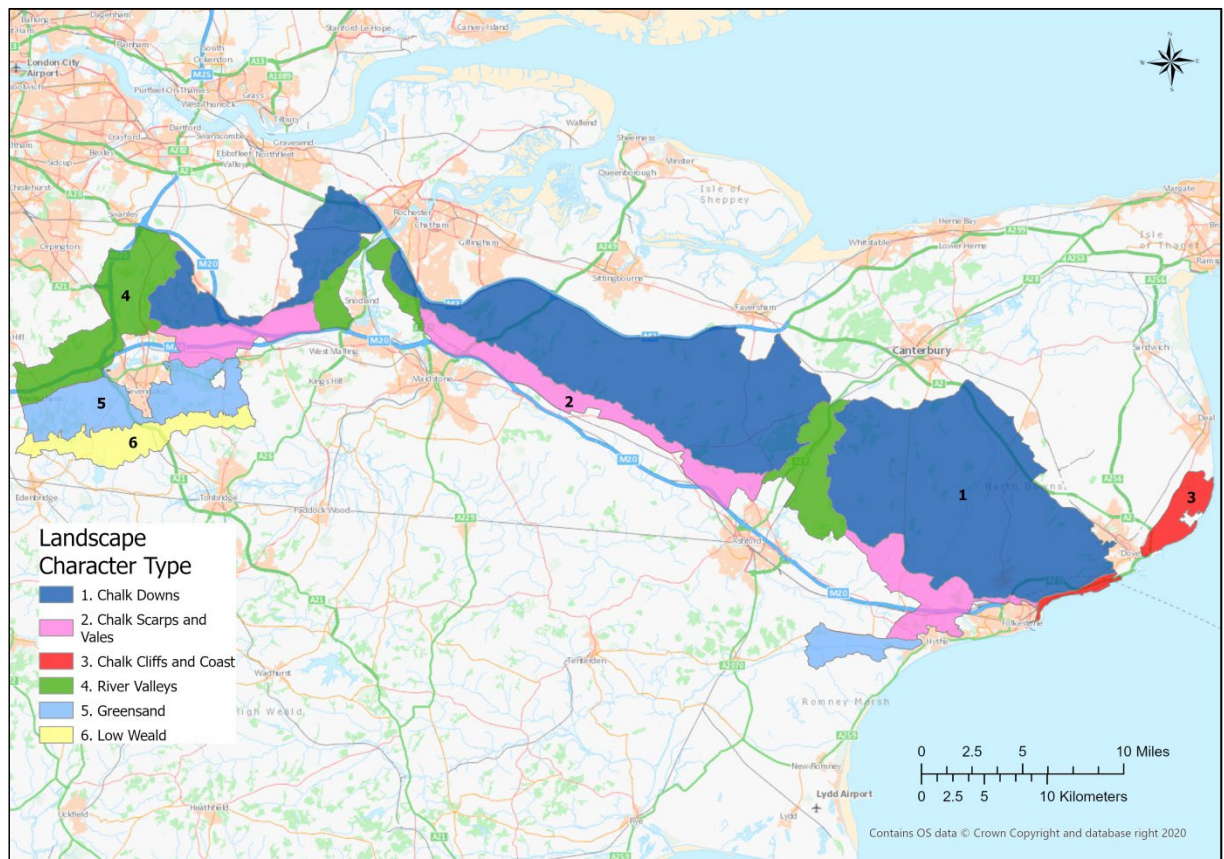
LCT 2: Chalk Scarps and Vales

LCT 3: Chalk Cliffs and Coast

LCT 4: River Valleys

LCT 5: Greensand

LCT 6: Low Weald



Map 1: Landscape Character Types within the Kent Downs AONB

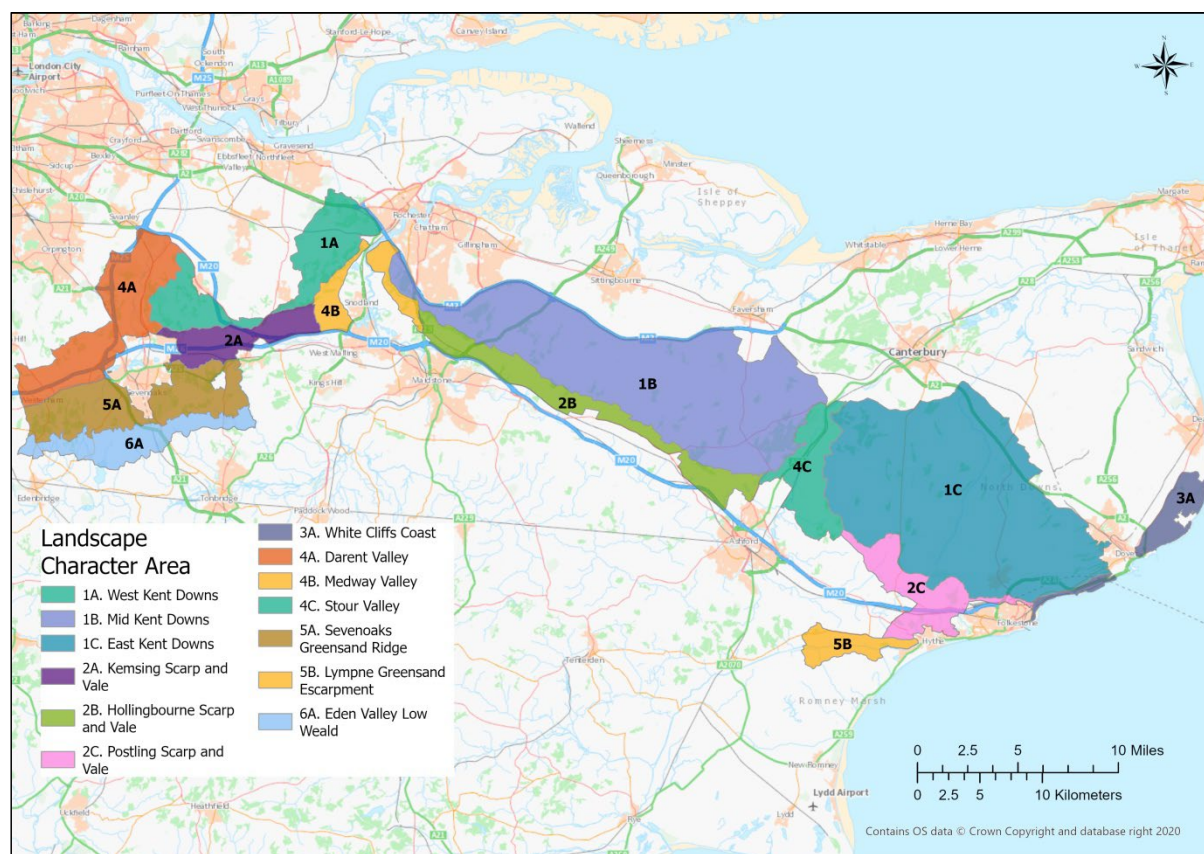
<sup>2</sup> An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment (Natural England, 2014) p.54



### 1.3.2 Landscape Character Areas (LCAs) are defined as:

*Single unique areas which are the discrete geographical areas of a particular landscape type. Each area has its own individual character and identity, even though it shares the same generic characteristics with other areas of the same Type<sup>3</sup>.*

The 6 LCTs within the Kent Downs AONB are divided into 13 LCAs, as shown on Map 2 and the table overleaf.



Map 2: Landscape Character Areas within the Kent Downs AONB

Some LCAs are sub-divided into Local Character Areas to reflect their internal variation. There are a total of 32 Local Character Areas. 31 of these were used in the 2004 Babbie Landscape Assessment of Kent. The 32<sup>nd</sup> (Folkestone Cliffs and The Warren) was identified during this Landscape Character Assessment Review. The review and consultation process also suggested better names for some of the Local Character Areas.

The following table shows the relationship between Landscape Character Types, Landscape Character Areas and Local Character Areas.

<sup>3</sup> An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment (Natural England, 2014) p.54

Landscape Character Type	Landscape Character Area	Local Character Area
1 Chalk Downs	LCA 1A West Kent Downs	Kingsdown
		Luddesdown
		Cobham
		Shorne
	LCA 1B Mid Kent Downs	Nashenden Valley
		Bredhurst (formerly Chatham Outskirts)
		Bicknor
		Faversham Fruit Belt
		Challock
	LCA 1C East Kent Downs	Petham
		Elham
		Alkham
2 Chalk Scarps and Vales	LCA 2A Kemsing Scarp and Vale	None
	LCA 2B Hollingbourne Scarp and Vale	Boxley Vale
		Detling to Eastwood
	LCA 2C Postling Scarp and Vale	Folkestone Outskirts
		Saltwood
		Stowting
3 Chalk Cliffs and Coast	LCA 3A White Cliffs Coast	Folkestone Cliffs and The Warren *
		South Foreland
4 River Valleys	LCA 4A Darent Valley	Chevening (formerly West Darent)
		Shoreham (formerly North Darent)
		Knockholt
	LCA 4B Medway Valley	Western Scarp
		Eastern Scarp
	LCA 4C Stour Valley	Wye
		Hampton
		Chilham
5 Greensand	LCA 5A Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge	Westerham Greensand
		Ightham Greensand
	LCA 5B Lympne Greensand Escarpment	Hythe Escarpment
		Aldington
		Romney Marsh
6 Low Weald	LCA 6A Eden Valley Low Weald	None

\*This is a new Local Character Area, and was formerly the southern edge of the East Kent Downs LCA

## **1.4 A note on LCA boundaries**

- 1.4.1 The review was not intended to be a full check of the Landscape Character Area boundaries. However, in a small number of locations, the Landscape Character Area or Local Character Area boundaries were adjusted in order to improve consistency (for example, if a small part of a scarp slope was included in a different LCA, the boundary was adjusted so that the whole scarp is now within the same LCA). It is possible that some of these inconsistencies in the boundaries may have occurred when they were digitised from the original hand-drawn boundary maps.
- 1.4.2 Occasionally, the workshops would flag anomalies in the boundaries, which would be checked in the field, and amended if appropriate. For example, the Saltwood Local Character Area was extended to include part of Stowting Local Character Area, because its landscape character was closer to that of Saltwood than that of Stowting. Another example is the Low Weald, which was formerly two Local Character Areas, but its character was felt to be sufficiently homogenous for the Local Character Areas to be merged.
- 1.4.3 The most major change to the boundaries was the removal of the coastal strip from the East Kent Downs LCA and its inclusion (together with the existing South Foreland Landscape Character Area) in a new 'White Cliffs Coast' Landscape Character Area.
- 1.4.4 It is important to note that the 13 Landscape Character Areas are at a strategic scale, reflecting the large size of the Kent Downs AONB. Hence subdivision into Local Character Areas is helpful in adding local nuance to the descriptions.
- 1.4.5 It is also important to note that many of the boundaries (particularly those between Local Character Areas) are transitional in nature. The boundary line as drawn represents a line within this zone of transition. Where a site is located towards the edge of an area, it is therefore necessary to look at the character of (and any implications of change on) the adjacent character area(s).

## **1.5 Summary of landscape condition and trends**

- 1.5.1 A range of data sources were used to establish landscape condition throughout all stages of the project methodology described above. Data was gathered consistently across all Landscape Character Areas relating to the following themes:
- SSSI condition (Natural England dataset)
  - Presence of invasive species (SSSI condition, workshops, fieldwork, local knowledge)
  - Field boundaries condition (previous studies, fieldwork, workshops)
  - Scheduled Monuments condition (Historic England dataset)
  - Listed building condition, including 'at risk' (Historic England dataset)
  - Conservation Area Appraisal findings (where available)
  - Presence or absence of intrusive development, including in setting (workshops, fieldwork, previous studies)
  - Changes in landscape management (comparison with previous studies, then and now photographs, fieldwork, workshops, local knowledge)
  - Condition-related issues raised in 1995 and 2004 Assessments
  - Condition-related issues raised in Local Authority and/ or Landscape Partnership Assessments
  - Condition-related issues raised in workshops

- 1.5.2 The findings of this condition assessment informed the write-up of the Landscape Character Area profiles. Although there is local complexity and variation (as recorded in the Landscape Character Area profiles) there are some general landscape trends across the AONB, which are summarised below. A particularly valuable exercise whilst undertaking the Landscape Character Assessment Review was to re-visit the viewpoints from the 1995 Assessment and to compare the photos.
- 1.5.3 Overall, within the AONB, it is generally a positive story with regard to landscape management. In recent decades there have been a number of landscape enhancement initiatives, including Higher Level Stewardship schemes, projects to revert arable to grassland, extensive woodland management projects, community orchard projects, and landscape enhancement schemes (such as hedgerow and woodland planting) as mitigation/ compensation for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL – now called High Speed 1). The trends for removing hedgerows and ploughing grassland and scrub (at their peak in the 1970s and 1980s) have now been reversed. However, the majority of landscape management is still driven by agri-environment scheme funding, including the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) which is currently being developed.
- 1.5.4 A major landscape change within the AONB in recent years has been the decline in commercial orchards and hop gardens (traditional Kent land uses) and the increase in viticulture (linked to warming temperatures). Extensive polytunnels are also now a more frequent feature in the Kent agricultural landscape.
- 1.5.5 Another noticeable trend is the increased pressure for development outside the AONB and on its margins. Such development inevitably impacts on the AONB itself, through its visibility in views, impacts on tranquillity, increased light pollution, increased traffic, recreation pressure etc. Development also increases demand for groundwater extraction, which is a concern as the chalk aquifers are already low. Examples of development on the periphery of the AONB include the expansion of towns such as Ashford and Sevenoaks, and the redevelopment of former industrial sites in the Medway Valley. Road and rail corridors (within and outside the AONB) face particular pressure to accommodate new development. Upgrading of transport, energy and infrastructure networks (from increasing road capacity, to additional pylon lines, to enhancing mobile phone signal coverage) add further pressures. However, the UK Power Networks/ Kent Downs AONB initiative to underground low-voltage power cables has had a very positive impact on local landscapes.
- 1.5.6 Wider environmental factors are also having a major impact on the landscapes of the Kent Downs AONB. Sadly, one of the most obvious changes visible during the review is the spread of Ash Dieback disease, with the consequent loss of woodland, roadside and in-field ash trees. It is already impacting on landscape character, and will continue to do so.
- 1.5.7 Climate change is already affecting the Kent Downs AONB landscape in a variety of ways, including increased intensity and frequency of storms (with subsequent coastal erosion), changing precipitation patterns and milder temperatures. These changes will affect many different aspects of the Kent Downs landscape. For example, cliff-top habitats are at risk from coastal erosion; beech trees are relatively intolerant to hot dry summers; many trees and plants are vulnerable to damage by pests which thrive in warmer conditions, and some traditional apple varieties cannot thrive without a sufficiently cold winter. Other environmental concerns are the reduction (noticed across Europe) of flying insects, and increased levels of air, water and soil pollution.



- 1.5.8 It is important to remember, however, that landscapes can be resilient to change. In the photographs from the 1995 Assessment, damage from the 1987 hurricane is noticeable, particularly on wooded ridges. In the intervening years, woodland has re-established and the storm damage is no longer immediately apparent.
- 1.5.9 Naturally-occurring and man-made changes affecting the various Landscape Character Areas are recorded in the Landscape Character Area profiles. The profiles also contain landscape management recommendations (under the headings of 'protect' 'manage' and 'plan') to try and mitigate negative impacts, and to promote and enable positive landscape change.



*Orchids in chalk grassland at Castle Hill near Folkestone*