

## Looking at the Countryside

9th August 2022 St Catherine's Down

14 members set off from the Blackgang Viewpoint Carpark on a hot day for a walk across St Catherine's Down to look at some of the features of the Down including local history and surrounding landscape. We stopped to look at the wall that is crossed on the National Trust boundary which dates from the 16th century and it is recorded that it was built in an attempt to settle a dispute about grazing rights.

We continued onto the highest point of St Catherine's Hill marked by the Oratory's sturdy tower and earthworks as well as the adjoining bronze age barrow to the east. We talked about the story of the foundation of Oratory and documentary and physical evidence relating to it. Prior to the dedication of the Oratory to St Catherine, possibly in 1312, it is thought that the Down has been known as Cheall or Chale Down.

We walked northwards and noted how the grassland on the hill was in a very droughted condition and it was a cheering site to see a bright looking clump of harebells to freshen the scene. On the north and western face of St Catherine's Hill we looked at the extensive 'Marl' quarries and noted that there is documentary evidence to suggest that quarrying was going on in the 13th century and that the extensive size of them suggest continuity of use over several centuries.

As we continued northwards along the Down, noting another bronze age barrow and an area of acid grassland, we saw several bird species including goldfinches, linnets, buzzards and quite a few kestrels. We looked at the Hoy Monument and reflected on the irony of the stone plaques on either side of the monument before proceeding back under the welcome shade provided by the woodland and shrubs of the western side of the Down. At one place we noted two of the Islands commonest willow species growing side by side, the goat and the grey.

Towards the southern end of the Hill, we stopped to view a greensand outcrop marked on the map as Tolt Rocks. There are several outcrops of rock further to the north but because of the sizable flat area at the base of the outcrop it was identified as a sizable quarry. Here we speculated on the use of the quarry stone and lamented that documentary evidence rarely stated where materials from quarries were used.

The walk concluded back at the Viewpoint Car Park where some participated in a well-deserved ice cream after a very warm morning!

