

Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000

**NOTICE OF RELEVANT AUTHORITY DECISION
FOLLOWING REASSESSMENT OF DIRECTION RESTRICTING
CROW ACCESS**

Prepared by Natural England

Access Authority: Wiltshire Council

Relevant Authority: Natural England

Local Access Forum: Wiltshire and Swindon Countryside Access Forum

Land Parcel Name	Direction Reference	Dates of restriction/ exclusion on existing direction	Reason for restricting/ excluding access
Quarry Bottom	2008020070	15 June to 1 February annually	No public access s24 Land Management - To prevent disturbance to game and disruption to shooting
Woodley Down (comprising Woodley Down, Ashgrove Bottom, and Long Down)	2008090037	1 September to 1 February annually	No public access s24 Land Management - To prevent disturbance to game and disruption to shooting

Natural England has now decided how to proceed following its reassessment of the above long-term directions to restrict open access on this land. A consultation was held between 14 February 2025 and 14 March 2025 with statutory consultees and the general public.

We received two comments. The first was from a member of Wiltshire and Swindon Countryside Local Access Forum, who expressed concern about the closure of public rights of way, in particular for horse riders. To clarify, directions to exclude access to open access land have no effect on public rights of way, which remain available for use.

The second response was from The Ramblers (Wiltshire Area) who stated that they were content for the restrictions proposed for these sites to continue as the impact on the public is likely to be minimal.

1. Outcome of the review

Natural England's decision is to leave the original directions unchanged in the way they were originally proposed and extend the end dates for a further six years. As we are not varying the extent or nature of these directions, a second consultation is not required.

2. Summary of the Ashcombe Estate Shoot

Ashcombe Shoot run by Ashcombe Estate is a partridge and pheasant shoot covering approximately 1634 acres, including five parcels of open access land totalling around 163 acres. These parcels are known as: Quarry Bottom, Woodley Down, Ashgrove Bottom and Long Down (collectively referred to as Woodley Down for the purpose of this review) and Burial Ground (not subject to a restriction and therefore not part of this review).

The shoot consists of 24 principal drives (reducing to 14 over the course of the shooting season), with 13 (54%) utilising open access land, and four utilising the three rented parcels covered by this restriction. This is an intensive shoot which holds around 45 days of shooting over the season, managed in-house by the Ashcombe Estate. Since these directions were given the number of shooting days has varied, increasing to around 60 per season in 2013.

On a typical shoot day, a team of eight guns cover five drives, or four from mid-November. Of the 13 drives associated with the open access land, 62% are classed by the shoot (in relation to all drives on the shoot) as being of high or very high quality and include those that are considered to be the shoot's 'signature' drives. Within the shooting community 'signature' drives are those that the reputation of a shoot is based on and are often the principal attractants for paying guns.

The areas of open access land at Quarry Bottom are utilised by the game birds from their release in June/July/August through to the end of the shooting season. At Woodley Down the game birds use the land from September. Partridge forage, rest and roost on the open access land, while pheasants return to woodlands to roost.

As part of this review in 2025, Natural England contacted Ashcombe Estate to request up to date information on the shoot. The Estate Manager confirmed that the restrictions are still required, and the number of shoot days are currently at around 45 per season.

The estate operates an extensive line of beaters, loaders and pickers up who are briefed on what to do in the event of members of the public straying into the area, or using any of the public footpaths during a drive. It was noted that people only very

occasionally access the land parcels during the restricted periods, usually because they are lost.

All other details of the shoot are essentially as they were at the time of the last reviews.

3. **Summary of existing directions**

The existing directions were given under section s24 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act to restrict access for three reasons:

- 1) to prevent disturbance to the game during the pre-shooting season (Quarry Bottom)
- 2) to prevent disturbance to the game on non-shooting days and shooting days during the shooting season (Quarry Bottom and Woodley Down)
- 3) to prevent disruption to the shoot on shooting days (Quarry Bottom and Woodley Down)

In determining an application or a review of an application to restrict or exclude Open Access Land Natural England follows its Relevant Authority Guidance (2010) (RAG). Criteria Set 16.1: 'Released game bird management' and Criteria Set 18: 'Shooting Live Quarry' are relevant to this application.

The reasons for the restriction are described below.

1) Disturbance to Game during the pre-shooting season (15 June to 31 August) - Quarry Bottom

The Ashcombe Estate Shoot release their pheasant poults in June, and partridge in July or August. The birds forage, rest and take cover on the access land, and any disturbance to them during this stage can adversely affect their health and therefore the success of the shoot. Partridge are particularly prone to disturbance whilst they are habituating on the downland. Dogs off leads are especially disruptive during this period. The national restriction to keep dogs on short leads only runs from 1st March until 31st July.

There is the possibility that visitors could access Quarry Bottom, as a Public Right of Way (PROW) leads into the northern edge of the site from nearby Win Green. Win Green is a busy National Trust run site with a large car park and extensive panoramic views. Many people walk their dogs from this car park, and even though there are no attractors into Quarry Bottom there is still potential for visitors to Win Green to enter the land and cause disturbance to the shoot. Once in Quarry Bottom there are estate tracks that allow easy access around the parcel.

Even a low level of disturbance could have a detrimental effect on this shoot, so a precautionary approach was taken to have a total exclusion on Quarry Bottom during the pre-shooting season.

2) Disturbance to game during the shooting season

As described above, a PROW allows access to Quarry Bottom and people walking here could cause disturbance to habituated partridge on the down. At Woodley Down and Ashgrove Bottom a PROW runs along the bottom of the sites, and the Wessex Ridgeway runs along the bottom of Long Down. These PROW give good public access to all three parcels and are managed by stops or banksman who ask walkers to pause if shooting is in progress. As these access routes pass very close to the drives and vegetation cover on the downland is sparse, it is likely that the game birds would fly away if people did access these areas. It may then be difficult to recover the birds back in time for the drive and they could be lost from the next day's shooting. People with dogs running off leads would be the most significant risk here as dogs could easily cover a large area and possibly even cause disturbance to the birds in the cover crops outside the downland from which the birds are driven. As the use by released birds is intensive and the cover sparse, even low access levels could have a significant effect in disrupting the shoot.

3) Disruption to the shoot on shooting days

The shoot uses stops to ask people not to enter the access land when shooting is taking place. However, if people were already on the access land or chose to ignore signage or the stops, they could cause significant disruption to the shoot.

As the various PROW bring people close to the guns, people determined to disrupt the shoot would be very difficult to manage. Any continual disruption, particularly to the signature drives of the shoot, could have a substantial effect on the day's shooting and be significantly detrimental to the shoot.

These factors combined with some shoot days being organised at short notice dictated that a total exclusion was necessary on shoot days at both Quarry Bottom and Woodley Down.

The above directions were considered to be the lowest level of restriction to meet the needs of the shoot.

The importance of signage to inform people that a closure is in place was discussed with the Estate Manager, who confirmed that new robust signage would be installed ahead of the 2025/2026 season.

Natural England's policy for long-term directions is that they should not be given for a period of more than six years. Therefore, the original directions will be extended to an end date of 24 March 2031.

Where a direction restricts access indefinitely, for more than five years, for part of every year, or for part of at least six consecutive years, we have a statutory duty to review it within five years of the date of its issue.

Details of the restriction will appear on the relevant map of access land on the Open Access website - www.openaccess.naturalengland.org.uk.

Date review completed: 24 March 2025