Helping Hamm Beach's habitats

Those of you who know Hamm Beach will recognise that today it largely supports extensive areas of tall grassland, alongside smaller areas of fine grasses with limited bare ground. Did you know though that until relatively recently Hamm Beach was a lot more open, with expansive areas of bare, sandy, soil supporting a wide range of special plants and insects? Many of these species have declined, with some even disappearing from the site, as their important, pioneer, sandy habitats have been lost.

Hamm Beach, looking south towards Portland along the old dismantled railway. Note the dense, grassy, habitat which is now dominant across the site.

Plants such as the impressive Sea Holly, the diminutive Sand Cat's-tail, and Sea Bindweed have either already disappeared from the site or decreased in number and extent. One particularly important resident of Hamm Beach, the tiny micromoth *Scythris siccella*, has also potentially been lost from the locality (it's only home in the entire UK) due to the changes in habitat.

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The micromoth *Scythris siccella* is only known from Hamm Beach, and targeted surveys in recent years have failed to find it. It's hoped that a small population may still exist and benefit from habitat works carried out there.

Alan Fryer / Celyn y môr (Eryngium maritimum) Sea Holly / CC BY-SA 2.0

Sea Holly was once harvested by local people from Hamm Beach, but the sandy habitats it needs to thrive are now practically absent from the site.

The loss of open, sandy, habitats from Hamm Beach has been driven by human activity and compounded by the ongoing effects of climate change. The construction of the Portland Harbour breakwaters and the (now defunct) Portland Branch Railway placed physical barriers upon Hamm Beach's formerly dynamic processes, stopping sand from being deposited upon the relict dune system that underlies the site. The beach itself has subsequently been covered by expanses of shingle, and a dense thatch of grassy vegetation has taken hold on the stabilised dunes inland of it. A thick layer of humus has also built up beneath the tall grasses, with vehicle emissions from the nearby road further enriching the radically altered habitat now found on Hamm Beach. Some remnant, sandy, areas were historically maintained by visitor footfall, but the repeated heavy trampling of well-used routes meant that few plants could colonise them and led to the installation of boardwalks to minimise severe localised erosion.

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Hamm Beach stretches south along the Chesil Beach isthmus from Ferrybridge to the sailing academy. The photograph above shows the thick sand deposits which have been largely covered by a dense mat of humus and grassy material.

An attempt is therefore being made in 2022 to return some of the lost habitat of Hamm Beach to its former glory, in the hope that many of the special plants and animals associated with it will return or increase in number. The work is being undertaken as part of the Creating Space for Species project, which aims to reinstate some of the natural dynamic processes which used to occur on site whilst recognising the important value Hamm Beach holds for local people. The work is being carried out with the support of Natural England, local conservation organisations, the Commoners represented by the Portland Court Leet, and the site owner: The Crown Estate.

You may therefore notice several small areas of cut vegetation and sandy patches, which have been undertaken to slow the accumulation of nutrients on site and remove bulky grasses, creating space for open, sandy, habitats to develop and for the species dependent on them to return.

If you'd like more information on the work being undertaken by the Creating Spaces for Species project then please contact info@footprint-ecology.co.uk