



# **Lime Down**

## Solar Park

# **Environmental Statement**

## **Volume 3, Appendix 8-4: Character Area Descriptions**

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## Introduction

As part of Natural England's responsibilities as set out in the Natural Environment White Paper,<sup>1</sup> Biodiversity 2020<sup>2</sup> and the European Landscape Convention,<sup>3</sup> we are revising profiles for England's 159 National Character Areas (NCAs). These are areas that share similar landscape characteristics, and which follow natural lines in the landscape rather than administrative boundaries, making them a good decision-making framework for the natural environment.

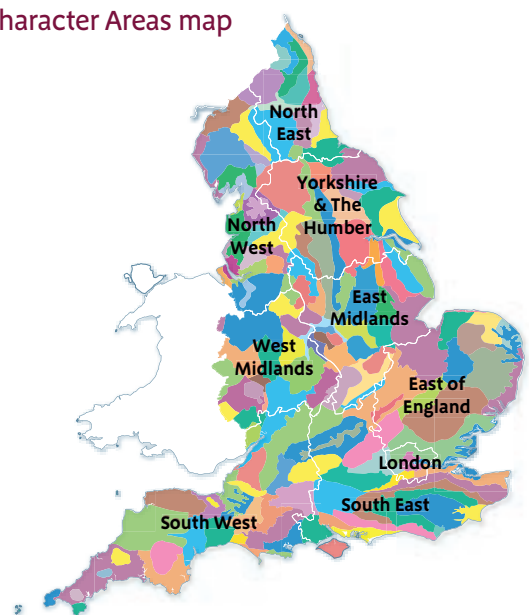
NCA profiles are guidance documents which can help communities to inform their decision-making about the places that they live in and care for. The information they contain will support the planning of conservation initiatives at a landscape scale, inform the delivery of Nature Improvement Areas and encourage broader partnership working through Local Nature Partnerships. The profiles will also help to inform choices about how land is managed and can change.

Each profile includes a description of the natural and cultural features that shape our landscapes, how the landscape has changed over time, the current key drivers for ongoing change, and a broad analysis of each area's characteristics and ecosystem services. Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEOs) are suggested, which draw on this integrated information. The SEOs offer guidance on the critical issues, which could help to achieve sustainable growth and a more secure environmental future.

NCA profiles are working documents which draw on current evidence and knowledge. We will aim to refresh and update them periodically as new information becomes available to us.

We would like to hear how useful the NCA profiles are to you. You can contact the NCA team by emailing [ncaprofiles@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:ncaprofiles@naturalengland.org.uk).

## National Character Areas map



<sup>1</sup> The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature, Defra (2011); URL: [www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm80/8082/8082.pdf](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm80/8082/8082.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services, Defra (2011); URL: [www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020-111111.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020-111111.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe (2000); URL: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/176.htm>

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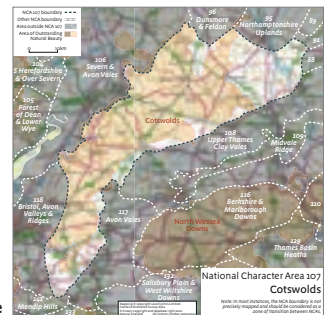
## Summary

The Cotswolds form the best-known section of the predominantly oolitic Jurassic Limestone belt that stretches from the Dorset coast to Lincolnshire. The dominant pattern of the Cotswold landscape is of a steep scarp crowned by a high, open wold; the beginning of a long and rolling dip slope cut by a series of increasingly wooded valleys. The scarp provides a backdrop to the major settlements of Cheltenham, Gloucester, Stroud and Bath and provides expansive views across the Severn and Avon Vales to the west. Smaller towns and villages nestle at the scarp foot, in the valley bottoms and on the gentler valley sides at springlines. Scattered hamlets and isolated farmsteads are found on the higher ground. The limestone creates a strong sense of place and unity which carries through to the buildings and walls which have been built using local limestone for centuries. The distinctive character of the area is reflected in its designation as the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with sixty five percent of the NCA being covered by this designation.

Nationally important beech woods feature in the landscape and are a notable feature on the scarp edge and in a number of the incised valleys. Mixed oak woodlands are concentrated on the upper slopes of valleys and on the flat high wold tops. Woodlands can contain a wide and notable range of calcicole shrubs and ground flora. Parkland and estates are characteristic of the area. Farming is mixed, with much of the high wold dominated by arable on thin, brashy soils prone to erosion. Pasture is predominant in the valleys, and in particular on steeper slopes and on more clayey soils. Meadows and tree-lined watercourses are found along the valley bottoms.

Important habitats include unimproved limestone grassland along the scarp, for example Rodborough Common Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and wet meadows with alder and willow and springline flushes. Two further SAC are also designated: Cotswold Beechwoods SAC and Bath and Bradford-on-Avon Bats SAC. Steeply-incised stream and river valleys cut through the north-west-facing scarp, flowing westwards towards the Severn. The watercourses of the dip slope provide the headwaters of the Thames and flow eastwards within broad shallow valleys, and these rivers and underlying aquifer are an important supply of high-quality water for populations within and around the area.

The area has a rich history, with nationally and internationally important evidence of prehistoric, Roman, medieval and later settlement in the form of archaeological sites, historic buildings and the wider historic landscape. Roman roads are prominent, including the Fosse Way which extends from north to south through the whole area. It is a notable visitor destination and has a longstanding reputation as the 'quintessential English landscape'.



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## Statements of Environmental Opportunities:

- **SEO 1:** Protect and enhance the highly distinctive farmed landscape, retaining the balance between productive arable, pastoral and wooded elements and the open, expansive views particularly from the scarp, high wold and dip slope.
- **SEO 2:** Safeguard and conserve the historic environment, cultural heritage and geodiversity that illustrate the history, evolution, foundations, land use and settlement of the Cotswolds landscape, and enable access to and interpretation of the relationship between natural processes and human influences.
- **SEO 3:** Protect, maintain and expand the distinctive character of the Cotswolds and the network of semi-natural and arable habitats, including limestone grassland, beech woods and wetlands along streams and rivers, to enhance water quality, strengthen ecological and landscape connectivity, support rare species and allow for adaptation to changes in climate.
- **SEO 4:** Safeguard and manage soil and water resources, allowing naturally functioning hydrological processes to maintain water quality and supply; reduce flooding; and manage land to reduce soil erosion and water pollution and to retain and capture carbon.



Cotswolds field pattern seen at Longborough.

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## Description

### Physical and functional links to other National Character Areas

The Cotswold scarp, rising to 330 m, provides long, expansive views westwards over the Severn and Avon Vales to the Forest of Dean and Wales, to the Malvern and Shropshire hills and the nearby outliers such as Bredon Hill. From the dip slope, long easterly views can still be seen across the Vale of the White Horse to the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns. Unlike the scarp, the eastern side of the National Character Area (NCA) merges gently with the neighbouring NCAs. The scarp forms the backdrop to the Severn and Avon Vales and in particular the setting for Cheltenham, Gloucester, Stroud and Bath, a World Heritage Site (WHS).

Most of the principal rivers in the NCA are tributaries of the Thames and flow south-eastwards into the Upper Thames Clay Vales, providing strong ecological and functional links. Rivers in the south and west flow into the River Avon and then the Severn Estuary. The area is underlain by a limestone aquifer, and both this and the rivers are a key supply of high-quality water for this and the surrounding areas, including the Cotswold Water Park.

The Cotswolds provide drinking water for populations as far away as Birmingham and London, but also provide outdoor recreation and learning, and many other services. The Cotswolds are also internationally renowned and popular with overseas visitors and as a domestic short-break and day-trip destination. There is an extensive network of public rights of way, particularly

footpaths, including the start of the 184-mile Thames Path National Trail, the majority of the 102-mile Cotswold Way National Trail and parts of the National Cycle Network, which connect beyond the Cotswolds. The A46 and A429 run the length of the Cotswolds along the route of the former Roman road, the Fosse Way. The A41 follows the route of Akeman Street, another former Roman road, from east to west. These Roman roads connected Exeter to Lincoln and St Albans and Cirencester respectively. The M4 and A40 cross the area from east to west linking it to major cities and communities, as do the M40 in the north-east near Banbury and the Oxford to Worcester and London to Bristol, Bath and South Wales railway lines.

The Cotswolds area is famed for its building stone, used extensively within the NCA but also much further afield, for example in Oxford and London.



Limestone grassland at Swellshill.

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### Key characteristics

- Defined by its underlying geology: a dramatic limestone scarp rising above adjacent lowlands with steep combs, and outliers illustrating the slow erosion of escarpments. The limestone geology has formed the scarp and dip slope of the landscape, which in turn has influenced drainage, soils, vegetation, land use and settlement.
- Open and expansive scarp and high wold dipping gently to the south-east, dissected by river valleys.
- Arable farming dominates the high wold and dip slope while permanent pasture prevails on the steep slopes of the scarp and river valleys with pockets of internationally important limestone grassland.
- Drystone walls define the pattern of fields of the high wold and dip slope. On the deeper soils and river valleys, hedgerows form the main field boundaries.
- Ancient beech hangers line stretches of the upper slopes of the scarp, while oak/ash woodlands are characteristic of the river valleys. Regular blocks of coniferous and mixed plantations are scattered across the open high wold and dip slope.
- Large areas of common land, important for unimproved calcareous grassland, are characteristic of the scarp and high wold around the Stroud valleys and along the crest of the scarp to Cleeve Hill.
- The majority of the principal rivers flow south-eastwards forming the headwaters of the Thames with the exception of rivers in the west which flow into the River Avon and then the Severn Estuary.
- Rich history from Neolithic barrows, iron-age hill forts and Roman roads and villas to deserted medieval villages, grand country houses, cloth mills and Second World War airfields. The field patterns largely reflect both the medieval open field system, with fossilised areas of ridge and furrow, and later planned enclosures.
- Locally quarried limestone brings a harmony to the built environment of scattered villages and drystone walls, giving the area a strong sense of unity for which the Cotswolds are renowned. Bath stone is also famous and has been used for building since Roman times, both locally in the principal buildings and streets of Bath and more widely, for example for Buckingham Palace in London. Parkland, gardens and historic designed landscapes are features particularly of the dip slope and broad lowland, such as Lawrence Johnston's garden at Hidcote, and Heather Muir's garden at Kiftsgate, parkland at Stanway, Chastleton and Blenheim Palace.
- Prominent natural and built features in the landscape include the City of Bath WHS, Brailles Hill, Broadway Tower, Cleeve Hill, the Tyndale monument, Freezing Hill, Kelston Round Hill and Blenheim Palace WHS.

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## The Cotswolds today

The Cotswolds area extends from Mells in Somerset to Brackley in Northamptonshire. It is a distinctive landscape of national significance; 65 per cent of the area is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The Cotswolds are part of the oolitic limestone outcrop that stretches from Dorset to Lincolnshire. The steep western scarp is the edge of the harder, more resistant limestone lying on top of predominantly softer mudstones which form the landscape to the west of the rolling high wold and the long, descending eastern dip slope. All this creates a rich and diverse landscape, unified by the underlying geology. A visual harmony is derived from the scale and simplicity of the landform and from the widespread use of the distinctive oolitic limestone as a building material.

The north-west-facing scarp slope is dissected by enclosed valleys and dominates the vales of Evesham, Gloucester and Berkeley. The crest of the scarp is punctuated by many notable features such as beech hangers and iron-age hill forts, and structures such as Broadway Tower and the Tyndale monument. Ancient woodlands are a key component of the landscape and often crown the upper slopes of the scarp and enclose the valley sides. The beech woods of the scarp are of particular importance for their nature conservation interest. Cotswold Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC) has been designated for its botanical interest and at 585 ha forms the core of a much larger woodland area. Pasture occupies the lower slopes and valley floors, often divided by overgrown hedgerows and fingers of woodland. Commons, such as Cleeve and Selsley, are found along the middle section of the scarp between Winchcombe and Dursley. Rodborough Common is designated an SAC for its semi-natural dry grasslands.

The unimproved grasslands contain nationally rare species, including pasqueflower and Cotswold pennycress, alongside typical calcicole species such as musk orchid, rock rose, bastard toadflax and thyme and associated butterflies such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly and the chalkhill blue, Adonis blue, large blue and small blue butterflies.

The large-scale, open landscape of the high wold is characterised by expansive views and arable cultivation, intersected by limestone walls and hedgerows, particularly in the valleys and alongside quiet lanes. There are lush, narrow, sheltered valleys including dry valley systems which contrast with the wider high wold. Woodlands on the high wold are characteristically of small to moderate size and geometric, many comprising plantations, copses and shelterbelts. Only small hamlets and isolated farmsteads are found on this higher ground.

The lowlands of the eastern side include rivers, such as the Windrush and Evenlode, flowing eastwards in broad shallow valleys. These rivers provide the headwater tributaries of the Thames, many flowing through the Cotswold Water Park and contributing to its network of wetlands. Flood plain meadows, including remnant watermeadows, are found in this landscape. The rivers of the south and west of the area flow into the River Avon and then into the Severn Estuary.

Humans have long influenced the landscape. Visible ancient examples include Neolithic chambered tombs, as at Belas Knap, stone circles such as the Rollright Stones, and hill forts such as Sodbury Camp. Former Roman roads, in particular the Fosse Way and Akeman Street, cross and run the length of the Cotswolds, and there are well-preserved Roman villa sites at

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North Leigh and Chedworth. Field patterns are influenced by the former medieval open field system overlain by subsequent piecemeal and planned enclosure which resulted in many of the drystone walls and hedgerows seen in the landscape today. Evidence of industry can be seen in the former cloth mills along the Stroud valleys, the canals, principally the Kennet and Avon canal, and railways – both disused and operational – which bisect the area. In addition to those archaeological monuments surviving as earthworks or structures, there are also many thousands of buried archaeological sites reflecting the intensity of past human use of this landscape.

A walk or ride through the arable landscape reveals the surprising richness of wildlife, particularly farmland birds such as skylark, yellowhammer and corn bunting, and arable plants including shepherd's needle. Many roadside verges are important for their grassland species including, in spring, white and cream of cow parsley, followed by the blue of meadow cranesbill, the purples of scabious and, around Bath, the rare Bath asparagus. The Bath and Bradford-on-Avon Bats SAC supports 15 per cent of the UK's greater horseshoe bat population along with Bechstein's bat and the lesser horseshoe bat. Woodchester Park is particularly notable for bats and historic designed landscape.

The local Cotswold stone is a unifying element of the landscape, used in buildings, drystone walls, cottages, grand houses and churches, all built in a locally distinctive style. The high quality of the domestic architecture is particularly notable, with steep roofs of graded limestone slates, parapeted gables with finials, stone mullions, rectangular dripstones and dormer windows, and four-centred arches over doorways. Refinement, simple elegance and quality pervade. The colour of the stone varies across the Cotswolds due to variation in the iron content, ranging from the brown ironstones of the north-east, through

to the grey, almost white stone of Northleach and Painswick, to the honey-coloured stone found in and around Bath.

The principal Cotswold towns and cities – Stroud, Cirencester and Bath – lie on the edge of the area. Bath is internationally known and designated as a WHS for its Roman and Georgian architecture. The scarp and dip slope landscape around Bath is less pronounced, breaking up into a series of hills and valleys often referred to as combes. The smaller market towns and villages tend to lie in the valley bottoms, occasionally along the valley sides and at the scarp foot on springlines. Stow-on-the-Wold is an exception as a hill top town. Settlement patterns vary from compact to dispersed and ribbon forms, with some lying round a central green. Away from these sheltered town and villages, which are usually never far from water, the higher ground is often sparsely populated, with only a few hamlets and isolated farmsteads. On the open, high wold and dip slope the oldest and most recent roads sweep across the landscape in almost straight lines; however, along the valleys the typical road is a winding lane linking villages. The combination of high-quality landscape, tranquillity and an excellent rights of way footpath network has made the Cotswolds a popular destination for quiet outdoor recreation.



The Cotswold escarpment at Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire.

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## The landscape through time

The whole area is underlain by the Lias Group, formed in a muddy sea, which is exposed in the valleys, except where there have been extensive landslips. The oolitic limestones were deposited between 100 and 170 million years ago when the area was under a clear warm tropical sea. Two types dominate: the Great and the Inferior Oolites. Both are prized building materials. The Inferior Oolite forms the scarp, while the younger Great Oolite forms most of the high wold and dip slope. The strata dip gently, with younger rocks found in the south-eastern extremities of the area, and Oxford Clay and Cornbrash found around the north-eastern edges. The geology is particularly important for the study of stratigraphy, or rock layers, and William Smith, the 'father of English geology', made some of his key observations of stratigraphy in the Cotswolds. The area is also important for palaeontology, the study of fossils and fossil environments, and the first scientifically described dinosaur fossils were discovered here at Stonesfield.

Virtually every settlement within the area has an associated, now nearly always disused, quarry. Thousands of delves – shallow pits from which stone has been taken for walls, infilling, slates, sheds and other small-scale operations – are found across the area, alongside larger worked quarries, some active for many years. Stone has remained an important building material and places like Taynton Limestone Quarry near Burford are listed in Domesday Book; the last extraction of stone took place in 1939. Stone from Taynton was used by Sir Christopher Wren in London for churches and St Paul's Cathedral.

There is evidence of over 6,000 years of human occupation and land use. Although Mesolithic remains have been found, archaeological evidence suggests that the large-scale clearance of the lime-dominated woodland and settlement

did not begin until the Neolithic. Visible remains can still be found from this period in the form of causewayed enclosures and long barrows such as at Belas Knap. Other notable features of the prehistoric period include bronze-age stone circles or henges, such as the Rollright Stones near Chipping Norton, and iron-age hill forts, with 17 strategically located along the crest of the scarp.

Roman influences are prominent in the landscape; Roman roads, settlements and the remains of villas can be found throughout the area. Cotswold stone has been used for construction since at least the Neolithic, but it was the Romans who developed the materials for buildings, both for the grand civic centres of Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester and for villas, villages and town houses. Roman roads have had a lasting influence on the area, and of particular note is the Fosse Way which runs the full length of the Cotswolds. The Romans are thought to have introduced the long wool breed of sheep which was the ancestor of the Cotswold sheep, commonly known as the Cotswold Lion.

Saxon settlement saw the establishment of much of the human infrastructure of the area; most place names in the Cotswolds are of Saxon origin. W.G. Hoskins considered 'the landscape of the Cotswold uplands ... was even in Saxon times much as we know it today'. The presence of water was an important factor, and many villages were established along the springlines on both scarp and dip slopes. The principal land uses have long been agriculture, particularly sheep grazing. In the north-east, where the soil was overlain with poor-draining clay, woodland cover was preserved as the royal hunting forest of Wychwood near Charlbury.

Reference to Domesday Survey of 1086 shows that many present-day villages were already in existence at that time, surrounded by very large

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open fields subdivided into strips. Much of the land was owned by extensive ecclesiastical and feudal estates, some of these based outside the Cotswolds. There were few large woods in the Cotswolds except those clinging to the steep uncultivated slopes along the escarpment and within valleys. Irregular and species-rich hedgerows along the slopes, and often well-preserved ridge and furrow patterns, are evidence of the clearing of land for agriculture (often promoted by these landowners). Market centres such as Stow, Moreton-in-Marsh, Chipping Campden and Northleach developed in the same period, many being planned as new settlements. Some settlements developed around areas of common land.

Population decline, beginning in the mid-14th century and resulting from climate change, poor harvests and plague (including the Black Death of 1348), precipitated significant change in the Cotswolds. Sheep farming became a major occupation, especially on the established ecclesiastical estates, and wool and cloth production became a mainstay. Wool market towns such as Stow-on-the-Wold and the medieval planned towns of Northleach and Chipping Campden grew and prospered on the back of the wealth generated by the wool trade. One of the longest worked groups of medieval quarries came from this period of growth and stretched from Painswick to Nailsworth to meet the need for building stone for the rapid growth in market towns. Cloth was mechanically finished in fulling mills powered by the fast-flowing streams in the area and new mills were established at Wickwar, Dursley, Wotton-under-Edge and Stroud, also generating growth and prosperity.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries and on the back of the wealth generated by wool production, many fine country houses and parks were established including Blenheim Palace, now a WHS, Compton Wynyates,

Sherborne Park, Dyrham Park, Badminton and Cirencester Park. This wealth also contributed to the development of a distinct architectural tradition within settlements and across the rural landscape. The 16th-century expansion of wool production led to enclosure across the Cotswolds to create sheepwalks and folding, a process which often went hand-in-hand with the shrinkage of settlements and the establishment of fine houses with small estates.

Further enclosure of farmland and downland for cropping and pasture followed, mostly on a piecemeal basis, in tandem with the creation of new farmsteads and the building of large barns but principally driven by Parliamentary enclosure in the late 18th century and early 19th century (concentrated in the central and eastern wolds). Thousands of miles of



Mumfords Vineyard near Bath.

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drystone walls and hedgerows appeared in the landscape along with avenues, shelterbelts, plantations and turnpike roads. The newly enclosed fields became famous for the quality of their barley, used for malting and livestock feed. Dairy farming and cheese-making also rose in prominence, although wool production remained important.

Mixed fortunes shaped the Cotswolds until the Second World War. The cloth industry expanded from the 17th to 19th centuries in the valleys around Dursley, Stroud, Chalford and Painswick. Taking advantage of local water power and deposits of fuller's earth, large multi-storey stone mill buildings were erected to card, spin, weave and finish the cloth, such as Bliss Mill at Chipping Norton. Communities expanded with modest terraced houses for workers built along hillsides, while mill owners erected fashionable grand houses.

By 1850 the wool industry was in decline as the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions shifted competitive advantage to other parts of the country, and increasingly to mills in the north of England. The area also saw lower levels of investment in agriculture than did other chalk and limestone areas of England. In the late 19th century, leading figures in the Arts and Crafts Movement were attracted to the Cotswolds: William Morris purchased Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire and C.R. Ashbee established the Guild of Handicrafts in Chipping Campden. The Arts and Crafts Movement left its most profound mark on the landscape in the restoration of the area's churches and in its distinct 'Cotswold style' of domestic architecture which inspired new buildings by national figures such as Detmar Blow and Guy Dawber and also fostered local talent such as Ernest Gimson and Norman Jewson. By the 1930s, places such as Bourton-on-the-Water had become popular with tourists, bringing much needed income, while a heightened

awareness of the beauty of the area shaped new developments, such as the facing in local stone of the RAF bases of Hullavington and Little Rissington.

During the Second World War, the area was strategically important. Many wartime airfields were created by clearing the landscape of nearly all natural and manmade features; while some, like Kemble, remain in use, many more have been given back to farming, though they are still evident in the form of very large, featureless fields. After the war farms prospered anew as home-produced meat and cereals were in demand and new techniques and heavy mechanisation meant that profitable farming once again became possible. This brought more changes to the landscape with the construction of large agricultural sheds to house machinery, the widening of field entrances and the removal of field boundaries. Mechanised road traffic and improvements to the road network opened up the area to tourism and commuting. The M5 running parallel to the scarp, the M4 cutting across the southern part of the area, and the M40 touching the north-eastern edge of the NCA, provided fast links to London, Bristol, Birmingham and the West Midlands.

Early in the 20th century J.B. Priestley identified this area as one that 'needed protection for the good of future generations'. Its value was recognised more formally in the wartime and post-war reports on landscape protection. In 1966 part of the area was designated as an AONB, and this was extended in 1990 to cover 65 per cent of the NCA. With such a large area of the NCA designated as a protected landscape there has been relatively little change in the last decade. The name 'Cotswolds' is a recognisable brand nationally and internationally as representing the quintessential English landscape. This reputation is leading to visitor pressure in some places such as Bourton-on-the-Water and Castle Coombe.

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## Ecosystem services

The Cotswolds NCA provides a wide range of benefits to society. Each is derived from the attributes and processes (both natural and cultural features) within the area. These benefits are known collectively as 'ecosystem services'. The predominant service are summarised below. Further information on ecosystem services provided in the Cotswolds NCA is contained in the 'Analysis' section of this document.

The complexity of interactions across these ecosystem services and across adjoining character areas means that the summary provided here requires further refinement and analysis of evidence at a more local scale.<sup>4</sup>

### Provisioning services (food, fibre and water supply)

- **Food provision:** The principal agricultural production for this NCA remains arable cropping and sheep rearing, although dairy, beef and poultry all form a part of the mix, alongside horticulture in the north of the area. Mixed farming is predominant, although an increase in farm size and a move towards less mixed farming and more arable cultivation are growing trends.
- **Water availability:** This NCA provides a key catchment for good quality drinking water for populations within this area and large conurbations in neighbouring NCAs. The large limestone aquifer which underlies the area is of strategic importance for this water supply. Hotter, drier summers

<sup>4</sup> The evidence, sources and analysis for these summaries can be found in the supporting document 'Analysis supporting statements of environmental opportunity'. Where there are currently gaps in data, these will be addressed through further evidence gathering as part of this work.

affect flow in limestone rivers and many of the rivers and parts of the aquifer are classified as having no more water available for abstraction. Rivers, particularly those which flow south and eastwards are strategically important as the headwaters of the Thames. It is essential to manage abstraction to ensure that water remains available further downstream.

### Regulating services (water purification, air quality maintenance and climate regulation)

- **Regulating soil erosion:** The main soils of this area are free draining, base rich and relatively shallow. When these are protected by semi-natural habitats such as limestone grassland, or managed through good soil husbandry, erosion rates can be low. However, when exposed or when vegetation cover is lost, they can be highly prone to erosion, compaction and wind blow, which can have an adverse effect on many other services.
- **Regulating soil quality:** Historically, soils in this area provided good conditions for sheep grazing on the limestone grassland. More recently there has been an increase in arable cropping, taking advantage of the good quality soil. This can leave soils prone to thinning, compaction and nutrient run-off, especially from the application of artificial fertiliser which can, over time, reduce the value of this service. Sedimentation can damage salmonid fisheries and increase the maintenance of drainage features.
- **Regulating water quality:** The area is important as a source of good quality drinking water for populations in the Cotswolds and in neighbouring areas with larger population centres downstream such as Oxford. This water is abstracted from a strategically important underlying limestone aquifer and from the area's principal rivers, particularly those

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which run south and eastwards forming the headwaters of the Thames. The majority of the rivers in the NCA are classed as having good chemical and ecological quality, except for the upper Evenlode, mid Windrush, the rivers Coln and Glyme and the Ampney Brook. Some smaller tributaries of the Thames in the south of the catchment also have problems associated with diffuse pollution. Around half of the area's groundwater is classed as being of poor quality, particularly in the north and west, due to pollutant inputs. Nitrate and pesticide pollutants are of particular concern for aquifer waters, and phosphates are high in some rivers, reducing not just water quality but biodiversity and fisheries interest.

- **Regulating water flow:** In general this is not an area of high flood risk, although there are areas susceptible to localised flooding. Limestone forms the parent material within the majority of catchments, allowing precipitation to infiltrate to the groundwater, from where it can be released at a slower rate back into rivers, helping to mitigate flood risk but sometimes leading to low flows. Areas to the north-east around Banbury and to the north of Bath are susceptible to localised flooding. During periods of heavy rain – such as in July 2007 – rivers which supply the headwaters of the Thames can cause flooding of communities along the valleys and further downstream in the Thames catchment. Water company groundwater abstractions for drinking water supply can affect spring flows and reduce river levels in this area. To mitigate this, water abstracted from aquifers deep underground is discharged into the rivers to increase flow.

#### Cultural services (inspiration, education and wellbeing)

- **Sense of place/inspiration:** Sense of place is especially strong in the Cotswolds NCA with a unifying harmony provided by the use of local limestone in buildings and drystone walls. It is an area of biodiversity value in the form of beech woods and limestone grassland. The dramatic scarp slope fretted by valleys provides panoramic views and a sense of inspiration and openness. The rural nature of the Cotswolds has strong associations with the Arts and Crafts Movement and the area is often thought of as the quintessential English landscape, drawing and inspiring many thousands of visitors each year.



Workman's Wood, Cotswold Commons and Beechwoods NNR.

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- **Sense of history:** The area has a rich history with clearly visible evidence of human occupation, from Neolithic long barrows, bronze-age henges, iron-age hill forts, Roman towns (Bath and Cirencester), villas and roads, to impressive 17th- and 18th-century estates and parklands (for example, Blenheim Palace), and a legacy of industrial archaeology, with wool mills (such as at Chipping Norton) and canals. Field and road patterns and quarrying all sit alongside this visible record to reveal a long history of land use and settlement.
- **Tranquillity:** The area has long been associated with a sense of rural peace, particularly in the undeveloped valleys, along the scarp and within woodlands and parklands. The expansion of some urban centres and the road network are eroding this tranquillity in places, reducing the level of this service.
- **Recreation:** There is an extensive network of public rights of way especially for those on foot, combined with open access, with the start of the 184-mile Thames Path National Trail, the majority of the Cotswold Way National Trail and parts of the National Cycle Network. The network is less comprehensive for other users such as horse riders. There are many popular visitor destinations, especially some of the villages such as Bourton-on-the-Water and Stow-on-the-Wold and Roman remains around Cirencester, while the City of Bath is a world-renowned destination. There are two National Nature Reserves (NNRs) within the NCA: Cotswold Commons and Beechwoods NNR and Wychwood NNR – both important for nature conservation. The former is also important as an educational and recreational resource.
- **Biodiversity:** The Cotswolds has a rich biodiversity and is particularly important for its internationally renowned beech wood hangers, and nationally important limestone grassland and associated species such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, the large blue butterfly and many farmland birds. It is also important for species such as greater horseshoe bat, holding 15 per cent of the UK's population. The network of habitats, in particular beech hangers and limestone grassland, along the scarp edge are a good foundation for an ecological network running north to south. The rivers that run west to east, including the Evenlode, Windrush and Coln, and their associated habitats also serve as an important ecological network. Both networks could be enhanced to increase their biological value and to aid biodiversity in adapting to changes in climate.
- **Geodiversity:** Geology is a unifying theme across the NCA, providing much of its character and interest. The use of local stone in buildings and stone walls gives a visual harmony to the built environment. Quarrying remains important, particularly for the supply of stone for local use to maintain the character of new developments and for the repair and maintenance of older, notable buildings and structures. The wealth of opportunity for the study of geology and geomorphology, and in particular stratigraphy, fossils and the history of geology, also makes this an important educational service. And the resultant soils significantly influence agriculture, land use and water resources.

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## Introduction

As part of Natural England's responsibilities as set out in the Natural Environment White Paper<sup>1</sup>, Biodiversity 2020<sup>2</sup> and the European Landscape Convention<sup>3</sup>, we are revising profiles for England's 159 National Character Areas (NCAs). These are areas that share similar landscape characteristics, and which follow natural lines in the landscape rather than administrative boundaries, making them a good decision-making framework for the natural environment.

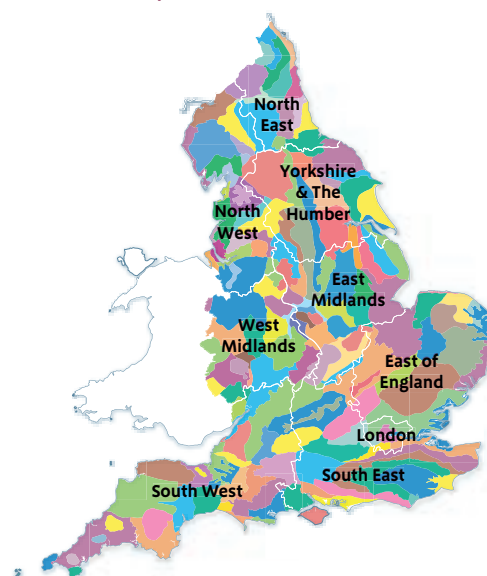
NCA profiles are guidance documents which can help communities to inform their decision-making about the places that they live in and care for. The information they contain will support the planning of conservation initiatives at a landscape scale, inform the delivery of Nature Improvement Areas and encourage broader partnership working through Local Nature Partnerships. The profiles will also help to inform choices about how land is managed and can change.

Each profile includes a description of the natural and cultural features that shape our landscapes, how the landscape has changed over time, the current key drivers for ongoing change, and a broad analysis of each area's characteristics and ecosystem services. Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEOs) are suggested, which draw on this integrated information. The SEOs offer guidance on the critical issues, which could help to achieve sustainable growth and a more secure environmental future.

NCA profiles are working documents which draw on current evidence and knowledge. We will aim to refresh and update them periodically as new information becomes available to us.

We would like to hear how useful the NCA profiles are to you. You can contact the NCA team by emailing [ncaprofiles@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:ncaprofiles@naturalengland.org.uk)

## National Character Areas map



<sup>1</sup> The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature, Defra (2011); URL: [www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm80/8082/8082.pdf](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm80/8082/8082.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services, Defra (2011); URL: [www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020-111111.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020-111111.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe (2000); URL: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/176.htm>

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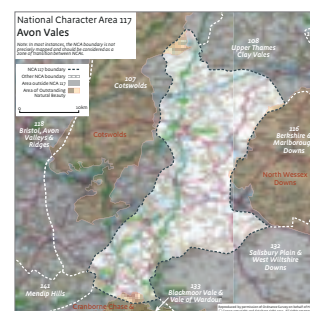
## Summary

This is an undulating, low-lying landscape of mixed, predominantly pastoral agriculture and small limestone-built towns, cut by the (Bristol) River Avon and its tributaries, and surrounded to the west, south and east by higher land. Woodlands lie on the steeper slopes and by watercourses, and in a few other areas within a structured farmland of medium to large fields and now straggly hedgerows. It is more than 80 per cent agricultural (both arable and pasture, with some localised nurseries and market gardening) and less than 10 per cent urban, but from the late 20th century onwards it has been subject to much development. There is evidence of Saxon occupation in the many '-ham' place names, and there are prehistoric hill forts, with extensive areas of ridge and furrow that indicate medieval arable cultivation. This area still reveals its past role in broadcloth production and trade in its fine late medieval churches and merchants' houses in market towns and in its many stream-side mills. Smaller settlements and farmsteads are clustered along streams and lesser rivers, linked by narrow winding lanes. Ancient patterns of flood meadows and drainage ditches dominate these valley floors, with their wet grasslands and woodlands. Flooding affects many communities in this National Character Area (NCA), and the opportunities to restore wetland habitats within river corridors to alleviate problems with water flow and to aid climate change mitigation will be important ecosystem services here, to add to food provision and cultural services.

Large historic parks and mansions, such as Bowood and Lacock, which often still feature major woodlands, enrich the landscape and historical context and provide much local recreational resource, to the benefit of the local economy. The same can be said of the towns such as Malmesbury and Frome, with their historic and attractive town centres.

Less than 5 per cent of the land here is designated for any purpose. This 5 per cent is mostly accounted for by the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the north-west and the 17 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a slight majority of which are of geological interest. The NCA is crossed by a wide communications corridor running broadly from east to west; most of the major settlements are clustered along this corridor. This was initially reliant on water routes, namely the (Bristol) River Avon and the Kennet and Avon Canal, as well as the Great West Road, now the A4. Now the M4 motorway and Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Great Western Railway, link London and the West Country and have spread wide the travel-to-work net.

This area can be easily overlooked, surrounded as it is by the high-quality designated landscapes of Cotswolds AONB and North Wessex Downs AONB, but it has a restful and undramatic charm of its own.



Click map to enlarge; click again to reduce.

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Coir rolls with purple loosestrife in pond at Biss Meadows Country Park.

## Statements of Environmental Opportunity

- **SEO 1:** Protect, manage and enhance the semi-natural habitats, including the pastoral waterside landscape of permanent pasture and wet grassland, calcareous and neutral grasslands, and (as site appropriate) ponds, and investigate and pursue opportunities to create such habitats, to increase resilience to climate change, reduce soil erosion and provide benefits to the water environment and biodiversity in general.
- **SEO 2:** Protect, manage and enhance the area's woodlands and parklands for their rich ecological, historical and archaeological resource, to foster a sense of place and to provide benefits to wildlife, and work to establish appropriate access, thus enhancing cultural, health and recreational benefits for local residents.
- **SEO 3:** Plan for the creation of new landscapes associated with the expansion of towns such as Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge, while incorporating the existing landscape features into green infrastructure planning. This will serve the interests of local landscape character, access and recreation, biomass provision, biodiversity and water flow regulation.
- **SEO 4:** Protect and manage the varied rural landscape of small urban areas amid gently rolling arable and pasture, and thick hedges interspersed with small woods, securing wide-ranging views, reinforcing landscape character, preventing soil erosion, promoting sense of place and tranquillity, and providing recreational benefits.

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## Description

### Physical and functional links to other National Character Areas

The Avon Vales form a low-lying, clay-dominated open landscape, with the higher ground of the Salisbury Plain and West Wiltshire Downs National Character Area (NCA) to the south, Berkshire and Marlborough Downs NCA to the east, and the Cotswolds NCA to the west. In the south and north there is a gradual merging with the clay of the Blackmore Vale and Vale of Wardour NCA and the Upper Thames Clay Vales NCA respectively. The town of Frome forms a 'gateway' to the eastern tip of the Mendip Hills NCA.

There are wide views over the Vales from these adjoining, more elevated areas, to the west and south.

There is an extensive road network within the NCA, with links generally to all directions, but the historic links east-west between Bristol and London remain strong. The main rail connections are still on this route, although connections to Warminster and Weymouth to the south also pass through the area.

The main river connection is the (Bristol) Avon, meandering somewhat from its source north of Malmesbury and flowing generally south to Trowbridge, where it heads west towards the Bristol, Avon Valleys and Ridges NCA. The (Somerset) Frome rises in the NCA and flows through the town of Frome to the north, joining the Avon near Bath in the Cotswolds NCA.

The NCA is largely underlain by hard rock aquifers, with little scope for greater water extraction; it also benefits from access to water from the adjoining chalk of the Salisbury Plain and West Wiltshire Downs NCA to the south.



Lock at Seend on the Kennet and Avon Canal.

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### Key characteristics



Looking east towards Horsingsham, Wiltshire.

- An undulating clay vale with a mix of arable and pasture.
- Small- and medium-sized fields with mostly hedgerow boundaries with few hedgerow trees, varying in shape from irregular piecemeal enclosure to rectilinear planned enclosure.
- Numerous low ridges with local views over towns and villages.
- Wide River Avon corridor, with an ancient pattern of flood meadows and closely associated settlements and more recent development.
- Transport corridors along roads and watercourses, heavily influential on all development in the NCA.
- Large historic parks and mansions, often established from former monastic establishments.
- Attractive stone-built centres to market towns that reflect the former agricultural productivity and wealth of the area.
- Wide views across whole area from higher areas of surrounding chalk downs.

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## Avon Vales today

The distinctiveness of the Vales lies as much in the settlement pattern and building styles along the (Bristol) Avon as in the countryside. The areas next to the Avon Vales – the dip slope of the Cotswolds to the west, the North Wessex Downs to the east, and Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs to the south-east – have been designated for their outstanding scenic and natural beauty; in a few, very small areas, these landscapes extend into the Avon Vales.

It is a varied landscape, with much open arable land with low hedgerows and many areas of smaller fields, often under pasture. The mean height of this NCA is 78 m above sea level, and the landform is generally flat, rising to long, low ridges with small streams between them, often with willow pollards and alders. The open quality is emphasised by the lack of hedgerow trees in some areas, a consequence of Dutch elm disease in the later 20th century. There is, however, considerable local, subtle variation in the landscape. The farms are mostly mixed or solely grazing livestock. There is a small horticultural presence in the central area around Bromham, and some poultry production. There was a rise in arable farming generally in the early 21st century, with the national decline in dairy farming being reflected in this NCA.

The towns contribute much to the distinctiveness of the area, mainly through the range of stone used in their historic centres. Most towns, including Calne and Chippenham, are dominated by centres built of limestone ashlar, reflecting their post-medieval prosperity as centres of the wool trade or their location on trade routes. Particularly relevant here are the A4 – formerly the Great West Road – and the M4, linking London and the West Country; the A361, which links important market towns from Oxfordshire to Somerset and beyond; and the A350, a spine for more modern development, north to south. Some are more ancient still: Malmesbury may be the longest continually inhabited town

in England as a borough, since the time of Alfred the Great, and hosts the country's oldest operating purpose-built hotel (inherited from the medieval abbey); and Frome dates back to the Saxon period. Many towns contain exceptional collections of buildings, and most lie close to the Avon and thus along the historical lines of communication. There was much urban development in the late 20th century, and towns are much larger in population than was the case immediately post war. In particular, Chippenham has prospered from its position on the Bristol to London train line built in the mid 19th century and being, as a result, within the London travel-to-work area.



Lacock: an estate village in the clay vale near Chippenham, a honeypot for tourism.

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Within a short distance of many of the towns are large landscaped parks with aristocratic connections, for example Bowood. Some of these parks reflect the work of major landscape designers such as Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, and it is around these parks that many of the few larger woodlands are found.

The River Avon is of importance both as a historical transport corridor and due to the water quality, which is judged responsible for much of the sediment that reaches Bristol harbour to the west. The Avon drains most of the area directly and through a network of tributaries. Near the Avon and its tributaries are pleasant, compact, stone-built villages with spired churches. The flood plain is still marked by the low mounds of abandoned flood meadows and there are many attractive and remote areas with pollards, alders and much lush pasture. It also includes small areas of tranquillity and remoteness, qualities not otherwise generally found in this NCA. The (Somerset) Frome and the Biss are the other rivers of interest; they are both tributaries of the Avon. The former rises west of the town of Frome and joins the Avon near Bath; the latter rises on Salisbury Plain and flows through Trowbridge (where its meadows now serve as welcome green infrastructure) onward beyond Bradford on Avon, to join the Avon near Staverton.

This NCA includes several geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), with exposures of richly fossiliferous sandstone. The Seend Ironstone SSSI is one of the (Cretaceous) ironstone exposures of the Greensand – the rock lies unconformably on the (Jurassic) Kimmeridge Clay. Although there are few places designated for their biological scientific interest, there is much to appreciate, with many rare bird species to be found in the farmed and parkland landscapes, such as the yellowhammer. Rare greater horseshoe bats forage here from their roosts in nearby areas of Wiltshire.

The Kennet and Avon Canal was once a major communication and trade route between Bristol, the West Country and London, along the NCA's central east-west axis. Long neglected after the decline in canal trade, in the later 20th century it

was the beneficiary of much local volunteer enthusiasm. It is restored and is an attractive feature of the NCA, now popular and in use for recreation and tourism.

## The landscape through time

The Avon Vales are dominated by Middle and Upper Jurassic clays (some around 160 to 150 million years old), including both Oxford Clay and Kimmeridge Clay. These are the fossil-rich deposits of tropical sea floors.

Prehistoric occupation is evident, with the area overlooked by hill forts and barrows (notably Cley Hill) on the surrounding high ground of the Cotswolds and the chalk downs. There is limited evidence of Roman presence within the NCA. In the Saxon period the locations of the later towns such as Calne along – or easily accessible from – the Avon began to emerge as major centres. Malmesbury was one of the great ecclesiastical and pilgrimage sites of pre-conquest England. Although much of the area lay within the later medieval forests of Chippenham and, to the south-west, Selwood, the place names indicate that by the Saxon period much of the land had been cleared. The principal settlements of the '-tons' and '-hams' were along the river and low-lying ground, but there were considerable patches of woodland marked by '-leah' and '-wood' names. Commons were also frequent and, in the high Middle Ages, there were probably extensive open fields around most settlements.

During the later Middle Ages new monastic sites were founded at places such as Lacock, in addition to the growth of the ancient foundations of Malmesbury and Frome. Much of their wealth was founded in the pastoral landscapes of the Vales, producing sheep for wool and dairying. The land acquired by gentry and noblemen following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the mid 16th century formed the basis of large, wealthy estates and ultimately of the imposing landscaped parks such as Spye and Bowood. Although in the Middle Ages wool and cloth had been important industries throughout Wiltshire, in the post-medieval period the processing and sale of cloth became concentrated along

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the Avon Valley and the 'wool towns'. Prosperity continued through the 18th century and is reflected in the area's town houses, civic buildings and mansions. Although it remained competitive during the 19th century, the cloth industry gradually lost out to northern manufacturers.

Areas of extensive open fields around settlements have been subject to piecemeal enclosure from the 14th century. As with the settlement pattern, there is considerable variation to the field boundaries and shapes – small and irregular to areas of ancient enclosure, but more varied in areas of later, piecemeal enclosure. This process was generally complete by the late 18th century, including areas of large-scale and regular enclosure.

The Avon continued as the main communication axis until the late 18th century, with turnpike roads and canals gradually taking over, and then, in the mid 19th century, the railways. The Bristol–London rail connection was made by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and his name for the line – the Great Western Railway – has returned to that route, which traverses the NCA's centre, past Chippenham. Much of the urban landscape dates from the mid 19th century onwards and the arrival of the railways, together with later 20th century development. Wiltshire now sees much development in this NCA, since it includes so few designated and/or protected sites.

Some of the development since the mid 20th century is sprawling and, in places, unsympathetic to the landscape and the fringes of historic towns and villages. Until the millennium it was also often ad hoc, as at the northern edges of Calne and Chippenham. Expansion – much of which follows the spine of the A350 – has been largely met by the demands for residential and light industrial uses at the outer areas of settlements, rather than within their historic cores. With the building of the M4, which has little noise impact over any distance, there has been a major expansion to the adjacent towns.



Handle House in Trowbridge; a building for storage of teasles, used in cloth finishing from the medieval period until the modern era and thus revealing a trace of the NCA's industrial cloth trade heritage.

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## Ecosystem services

The Avon Vales NCA provides a wide range of benefits to society. Each is derived from the attributes and processes (both natural and cultural features) within the area. These benefits are known collectively as 'ecosystem services'. The predominant services are summarised below. Further information on ecosystem services provided in the Avon Vales NCA is contained in the 'Analysis' section of this document.

### Provisioning services (food, fibre and water supply)

- **Food provision:** The NCA provides dairy products, although this is in decline, with beef and sheep products. Since the early 21st century arable production has increased. More than 15 per cent of the soil in the NCA (particularly towards the centre) is of high agricultural quality (Grades 1 or 2).
- **Timber provision:** The NCA contains 3,990 ha of woodland (6 per cent of the total area), of which 1,754 ha is ancient woodland. The Great Western Community Forest, one of twelve community forests established to demonstrate the contribution of environmental improvement to economic and social regeneration, covers 1,580 ha of this NCA. The aspiration is to increase woodland cover if possible, increasing the potential for sustainable timber provision.
- **Water availability:** There is not believed to be any potential for increased abstraction from groundwater sources or from the rivers Avon or Frome. Areas east of Chippenham and west of Malmesbury are Source Protection Zones, and this will add to concerns about supply as the development of towns in this NCA increases.

### Regulating services (water purification, air quality maintenance and climate regulation)

- **Regulating soil quality:** Much of the soil in the NCA is clayey and has proved fertile in the past. With careful land management it should remain so, with reduced compaction and the resulting reduced levels of sedimentation and diffuse pollution.
- **Regulating soil erosion:** This has not been a major issue in the NCA, as the soil types are broadly not susceptible and the landform unsuitable. There is concern, however, as some erosion occurs to the detriment of the Avon and areas downstream, such as Bristol harbour. Work to address this issue commenced in the early 21st century and the impact is uncertain.
- **Regulating water quality:** The water quality has been assessed as good in this NCA, both for chemical and biological status. While 81 per cent of the NCA is a nitrate vulnerable zone, the nitrate and phosphates are currently broadly at acceptable levels.
- **Regulating water flow:** The NCA has a long history of river flooding, affecting particularly Malmesbury (which is surrounded by rivers in steep valleys), Chippenham, Melksham and Frome. The urban and industrial development taking place in these settlements in the early 21st century allows scope to implement green infrastructure to (among other aims) reduce flooding impacts. Trowbridge is already well served. The Wiltshire Core Strategy, in place from 2013, placed flood risk management and sustainable drainage at the core of new development and sees the River Avon corridor as a key multifunctional space, notably for flood management.

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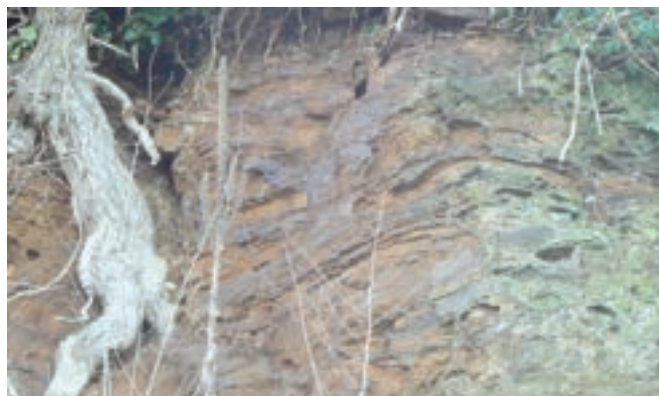
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## Cultural services (inspiration, education and wellbeing)

- **Sense of place/inspiration:** The NCA has a strong settlement pattern, and the towns are distinctive in their stone construction. Most were market towns, developing with the prosperous medieval wool trade, and many have royal connections (Frome, Chippenham and Melksham, for hunting) or were developed on communication routes or crossing points (Trowbridge, Chippenham, Melksham and Calne). Frome and Malmesbury were from an early stage heavily influenced by local monastic interests. There is a wealth of historic features, from relic and surviving field systems to parklands. The wet grasslands and woodlands are also characteristic of this area and not its surroundings. There is little cultural history inspired by this NCA, although the agricultural landscape has and continues to have a clear influence on the area. Elements of landscape history are well supplied, with the foundations of the monastic seats through to the work of 'Capability' Brown. When discovered, they create a strong sense of place. Frome is now prominent in 'alternative' culture.
- **Sense of history:** The ancient towns show the long settlement history here and the use made of the landscape over time. Canal restoration and management is popular with volunteers, both on the Kennet and Avon and on the Wiltshire and Berkshire canals. Lacock (where the village is now commonly a film location) is the site of pioneering work in photography carried out in the mid 19th century, and Malmesbury has been identified as the location of the first flight in England, by a medieval monk. The agricultural landscape also shows the past, with medieval field patterns still plain, for example at Whaddon, and there is much remaining ridge and furrow.
- **Recreation:** As is typically prominent throughout Wiltshire, there is a strong rights of way network, with a density of some 2.3 km per km<sup>2</sup>, and much fishing, not least in the Kennet and Avon Canal and in the (under restoration) Wiltshire and Berkshire Canal. Fishing is common both in the canals and in the River Biss.

- **Biodiversity:** The NCA has few designated sites; those sites that are designated are mostly meadow lands. It is rich in birdlife, with species such as the linnet, corn bunting and yellowhammer found locally. It also serves as a feeding ground for many bats, notably the greater horseshoe bat, which arrives from the Special Area of Conservation at Winsley and Box, in the nearby Cotswolds NCA. Spye Park is designated for lichens and bryophytes. Parkland in the NCA in general is a notable habitat, under-represented in designations, the continuity of tenure and land management creating reserves of biodiversity within the otherwise farmed landscape.
- **Geodiversity:** There are many geological SSSI, largely in favourable condition, and the area is rich in fossils. They provide a valuable educational resource.



Seend Ironstone Quarry SSSI; view of the Cretaceous ironstone.



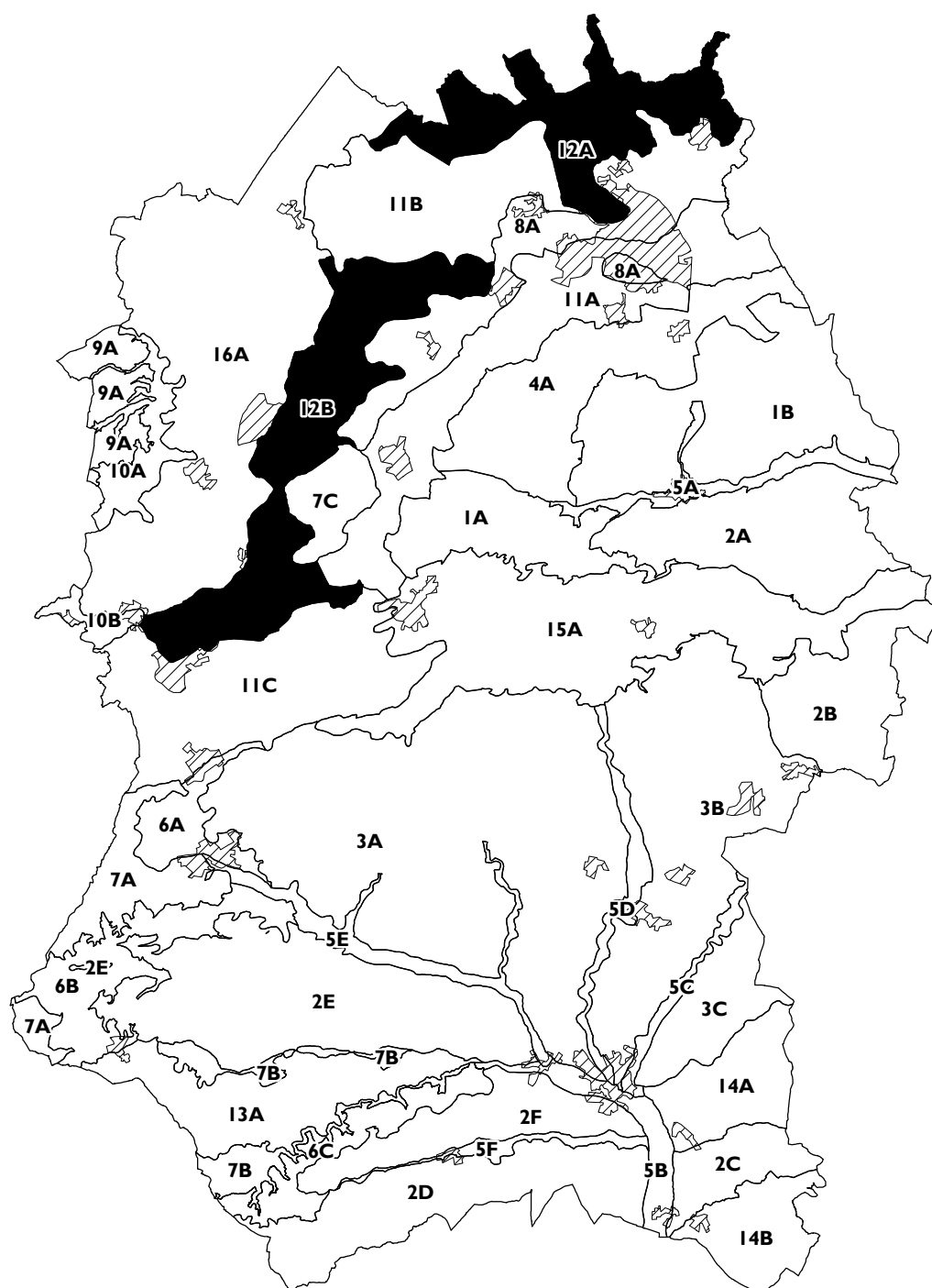
## LANDSCAPE TYPE 12: OPEN CLAY VALE

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## I2: OPEN CLAY VALE



### LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

**I2A** Thames Open Clay Vale

**I2B** Avon Open Clay Vale

 **Urban Area**

## TYPE 12: OPEN CLAY VALES

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### DESCRIPTION

#### Location and boundaries

The *Open Clay Vales* Landscape Type contains the open lowland centred on the floodplains of the Rivers Thames and Avon. Area *12A: Thames Open Clay Vale* is situated at the far north of the county and area *12B: Avon Open Clay Vale* runs through the north western section of the county. Boundaries are defined by topography and usually follow a physical feature, often a road that runs along the first contour above winter flooding level.

#### Key characteristics

- Level land form with wide open skies and views to ridges and downs.
- Pastoral land use with some arable.
- Large scale geometric fields with hedgerows or open drainage channels defining boundaries.
- Presence of rivers, tributaries, drainage channels and open water bodies.
- Watercourses lined with riparian vegetation with prominent lines of willows (some pollarded).
- Floristically rich hay meadows.
- Settlement pattern varies from large towns and small scattered villages to sparse farmsteads.
- Buildings in varied materials of brick, render and stone.
- Crossed by major transport corridors, and a network of minor roads linking settlements.
- Historic use for transport evident in canals.

#### Physical influences

The *Open Clay Vales* have a varied geology with Alluvium and River Terrace Gravels around the watercourses to Oxford and Kellaway Clays in the slightly higher marginal areas and tracts of Sand throughout the vales. Soils vary from loam over gravel to seasonally wet deep clay and land use reflects this in a concentration of arable in the free draining soil over sand and gravel and of pasture on the wet Alluvium and Clay. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was extensive quarrying of Sand, Gravel and some Clay (deriving from the Jurassic Limestone of the Cotswolds Hills) in area *12A: Thames Open Clay Vale*. These pits flooded and the lime rich waters have formed the Marl lakes of the Cotswold Water Park.

Landform is level or very gently shelving with area *12A: Thames Open Clay Vale* ranging from 70m to 100m AOD and *12B: Avon Open Clay Vale* ranging from 30m to 70m AOD.

## Biodiversity

The *Open Clay Vale* landscape type is predominantly intensively farmed pasture and arable however there are some unimproved hay that are nationally significant for their diversity of grassland plants. These include Clattinger Farm SAC, the only lowland farm in Britain known to have received no agricultural chemicals, plus Pike Corner SSSI, Sutton Lane Meadows SSSI, Upper Waterhay Meadow SSSI, Haydon Meadow SSSI, Acres Farm Meadow SSSI and North Meadow SAC, Cricklade SSSI.

Another site of ecological importance is the Cotswold Water Park SSSI, located in area *12A*. Here quarrying has created over a hundred lakes with nationally scarce marl waters caused by the lime rich geology. The series of lakes that form the SSSI include a range of the varied plant communities including open water (including those associated with marl waters), reed beds and surrounding grassland habitats. The area supports a wide range notable species including wintering and breeding birds such as pochard and gadwall, as well as water vole, otter, bittern, freshwater white clawed crayfish, and the lesser bearded stonewort *Chara curta* all of which are targets of the Cotswold Water Park BAP.

County Wildlife Sites include: Swillbrook Lakes Reserve, former gravel pits within the Cotswold Water Park which are rich in bird and dragonfly diversity, including reed warbler, nightingale, hobby and four-spotted chaser and downy emerald dragonflies; and Grove Farm Meadows, high quality unimproved neutral grassland which is mostly cut for hay. Species indicative of old hay meadows present here include betony and pignut.

## Historic environment

Although the lowlands do not have the outstanding archaeological sites of the nearby Chalk uplands there is evidence of continuity of settlement on the gravel spreads of the vales from the Iron Age through the Saxon and Roman periods and beyond. Place names of the Saxon period indicate that much of the land had been cleared. Development during the Romano-British period included the major communication route of the Ermine Way built on a raised embankment above the floodplain of the Thames. Other major roads followed, along with canals (the Kennet and Avon Canal is still a prominent feature) and railways. The surviving pattern of scattered nucleated villages is largely medieval.

In the post-medieval period the process and sale of woollen cloth became concentrated along the Avon Valley leading to the growth of towns along the river. These continued to expand in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and modern developments at the edges of Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge making the southern section of area *12B: Avon Open Clay Vale* more settled and urbanised in character.

The long history of water meadows in the *Open Clay Vale* landscape type is shown by the inclusion of grazed meadows at Cricklade in the Domesday Book. Ancient field systems are evident as crop marks on gravel areas. Ridge and furrow is evident for instance at Haydon Meadow SSSI where it has been protected from damage by ploughing. Field patterns vary with the topography and geology with small scale irregular water meadows and pasture on alluvial areas and large regular arable fields on free draining gravels.

## Settlement and built character

Throughout the type are small, nucleated villages and 19<sup>th</sup> century isolated farmsteads, usually sited on slightly elevated gravels to avoid flooding. Area 12A: *Thames Open Clay Vale* is sparsely settled while 12B: *Avon Open Clay Vale* is more settled to the south with the large towns of Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge. The widespread use of brick and tile reflects the use of local clay, but there is also render and Oolitic Limestone, a mixture of the latter and the local brick characterising the historic centres of settlements. The expansion of the towns in area 12B during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to large scale developments which are prominent in the level vale landscape. This is combined with major trunk roads throughout the area.

## CHARACTER AREAS

### 12A: Thames Open Clay Vale

Area 12A: *Thames Open Clay Vale* is a low lying area centred on the River Thames and its floodplain. It is a largely tranquil, rural landscape, predominantly level, with vertical elements of lines of willow and other wetland trees. The agricultural use of the area combines arable and wet pasture, with open water ditches as well as hedgerows defining boundaries. Field patterns vary from small and irregular to larger, geometric fields often in arable use on dryer or drained gravel areas. A major feature of the area is the large extent of open water resulting from gravel extraction and afterwards put to leisure use as the Cotswold Water Park. The many water bodies with their varied vegetation are of national significance as scarce marl waters (Cotswold Water Park SSSI). There are also a number of hay meadows of high ecological interest. The presence of water is felt throughout this area in the rivers, tributaries, drainage ditches with frequent lines of willows and other wetland vegetation. Settlement is sparse in the *Thames Open Clay Vale* with a few small settlements such as the village of Ashton Keynes and the town of Cricklade, but mainly scattered isolated farmsteads. Vernacular building materials are brick and stone. Although the Roman Ermine Way, now the busy trunk road of the A419, runs through the area, most of the roads are minor rural routes with small bridges crossing the waterways and ditches.

### 12B: Avon Open Clay Vale

Area 12B: *Avon Open Clay Vale* is an extended area following the course of the River Avon from Great Somerford in the north to Bradford on Avon in the south. As well as the Avon the area is characterised by the presence of other rivers, tributary streams, lakes, and, to the south, the Kennet and Avon Canal. The *Avon Open Clay Vale* is a level, open area with views to the higher ground of the *Limestone Ridge* to the east. Land is predominantly intensively managed permanent pasture with some arable and small isolated pockets of meadow (such as Sutton Lane Meadow SSSI). Hedgerows, gappy or low flailed in places, enclose fields of varying size. There are sparse hedgerow trees plus willows lines (some pollarded) marking the waterways and poplar shelter belts. Sections of the area remain rural and tranquil despite major routes travelling through (the M4, A350, A342) plus railway lines in cuttings and embankments and the visual influence of modern large scale development on the edges of Chippenham, Trowbridge and Melksham. This urbanising influence is particularly prevalent to the south of the area while the northern section is more akin to area 12A with scattered settlement of small brick and stone built villages and farmsteads.



## EVALUATION

### Positive landscape features of significance

- Wide open skies and views to ridges and downs.
- Rich variety of rivers, tributaries, drainage channels and open water bodies, including scarce marl water habitats.
- Watercourses lined with riparian vegetation with prominent lines of willows (some pollarded).
- Hay meadows with unimproved grassland of ecological interest.
- Villages and farmsteads with vernacular mix of local stone and brick.
- Visible archaeology in Roman roads, pattern of medieval villages, long established grazing meadows, and the Kennet and Avon Canal corridor.

### Forces for change

- Agricultural intensification threatens the remaining small scale field patterns and traditional pastoral landscape.
- Loss of hedgerows boundaries and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus poor management of remaining hedgerows.
- Elm loss of the 1970s.
- Intensification in farming leading to drainage and improvement of permanent pasture and water meadows on the floodplain and loss of riparian vegetation.
- Pressure for further expansion of settlement and new development threatening the character of the small villages and scattered farmsteads.
- The presence of major transport corridors particularly the trunk roads has brought pressures for development and associated amenity planting and signage.
- Increasing road use which will further diminish the rural tranquillity of the vale landscape.
- Pressure to upgrade roads through additional kerbing and signage to accommodate an increase in traffic volume.

### Condition

The *Open Clay Vales* are an intensively managed type with large areas under arable cultivation. Although there are limited areas still managed as unimproved grassland most of the meadows, a substantial part of the hedgerow network and riparian vegetation has been lost. The condition of the *Open Clay Vales* is judged as **moderate**.

## Strength of character

There are still some highly rural, tranquil areas within the *Open Clay Vales* which are dominated by the varied waterways with their lush vegetation, with small scattered villages and farmsteads of vernacular materials. However elsewhere in the type the influence of the busy transport corridors and the large urban areas is pervasive making the type as a whole **moderate** in strength of character.

## Inherent landscape sensitivities

- Rural tranquillity.
- Hedgerow pattern.
- Water bodies and water ways of varied character and ecological value.
- Streamside willows and other riparian vegetation.
- Remnant hay meadows.
- Wide open views.
- Settlement pattern of nucleated villages with variety of vernacular building materials.

## STRATEGY

The strategy for the *Open Clay Vales* Landscape Type is to **conserve** the elements that contribute to the rural, tranquil landscape; the rivers, streams and open water, the meadows and riverside tree lines, the brick and stone villages and farmsteads and to **improve** elements in decline such as the hedgerows and hedgerow trees, and the visual influence of the large settlement edges and major transport corridors.

## Broad management objectives

- Retain and manage the hedgerow network and nurture new hedgerow trees.
- Promote appropriate management of arable land including retaining areas of fallow land and maintaining an unploughed margin around fields to encourage wildlife, particularly farmland birds.
- Retain and manage hay meadows.
- Introduce new tree planting along watercourses using typical riparian species such as alder and willow.
- Take opportunities to extend and enhance the varied wetland habitats (reedbeds, wet grassland and wet woodland) of the Cotswold Water Park through appropriate restoration of mineral workings.
- Minimise small scale incremental change such as signage, fencing or improvements to the road network which could change the rural peaceful character of the landscape.

- Consider developing guidance for built development to ensure both future construction and changes to existing buildings are designed to integrate with the existing character and structure of settlements.
- Consider screening views to intrusive urban edges through planting new woodland.

## THE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER CONTEXT

The character of the Wiltshire landscape has already been investigated in a number of studies as detailed in Appendices 1 and 2. The *Open Clay Vales* Landscape Type is covered in the Swindon Landscape Character Assessment and the North Wiltshire District Landscape Character Assessment.

*Area 12A: Thames Open Clay Vale* is partially within Area 2D: Thames Vale, within the Clay Vales type of the Swindon assessment and also includes areas of the North Wiltshire types Alluvium River Terrace Farmland (Area 1: Thames Valley Floor) and Lowland Clay Farmland (Area 2: Thames Valley Lowland).

*Area 12B: Avon Open Clay Vale* is, apart from its southern end which is outside the district, largely contiguous with the North Wiltshire character area Avon Valley Lowland of the Lowland River Farmland type.

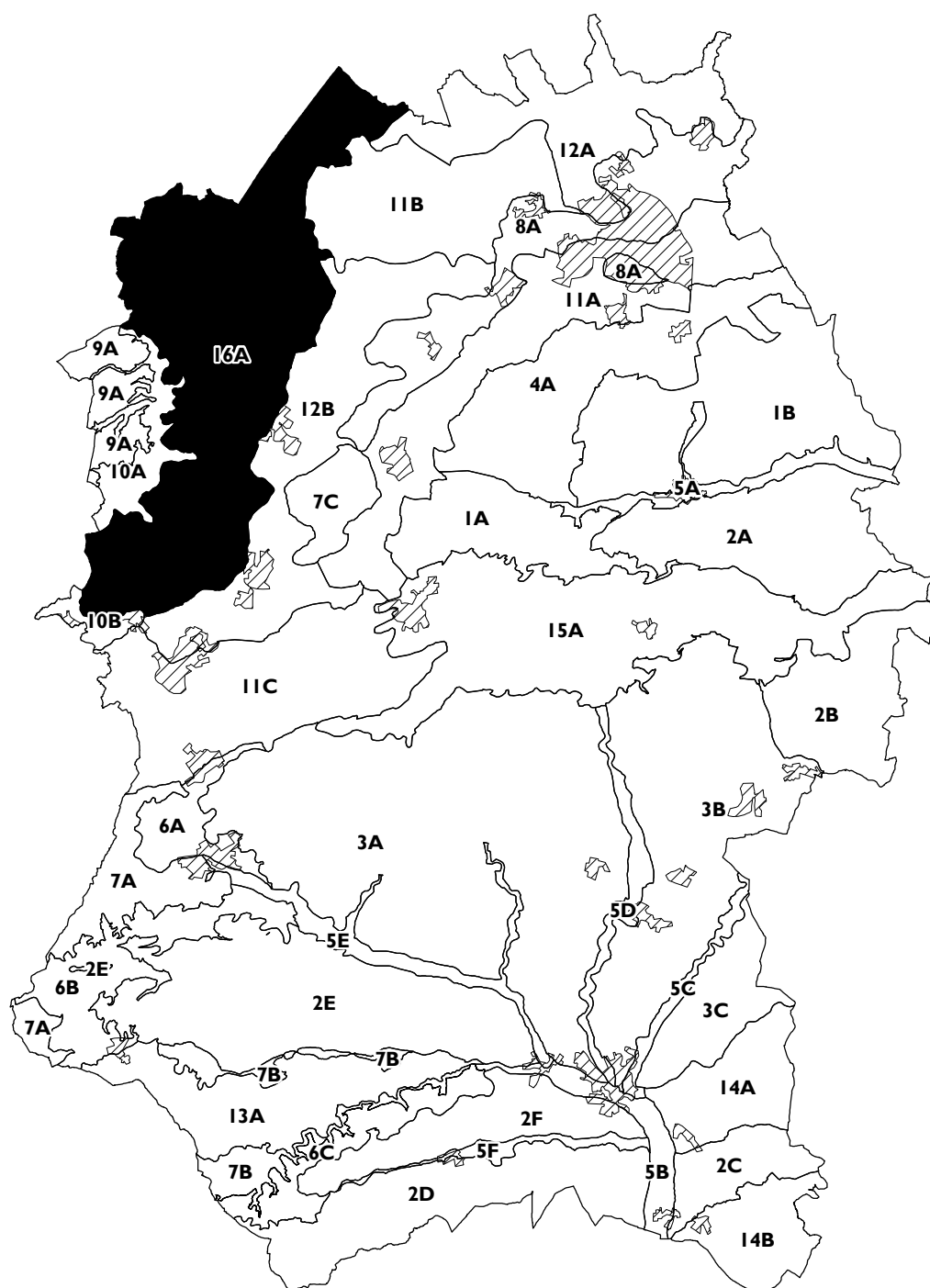
## LANDSCAPE TYPE 16: LIMESTONE LOWLAND

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# I6: LIMESTONE LOWLAND



## LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

### I6A Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowland

 Urban Area

# TYPE 16: LIMESTONE LOWLAND

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## DESCRIPTION

### Location and Boundaries

The *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type covers a large swathe of northwest Wiltshire. The area extends from Bradford-on-Avon in the south to the Kemble Airfield in the far north. The county border constrains the area to the north and west. The boundary to the east is a less distinct transition, occurring with the change in underlying geology from limestone to clay. There is only one character area within the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type, 16A: *Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowlands*.

The western edge of the *Limestone Lowlands* Landscape Type forms part of the Cotswolds AONB.

### Key Characteristics

- Gently undulating lowland farmland over underlying geology of predominantly mudstone and limestone with some pockets of clay.
- A peaceful and rural landscape with subtle variations in character relating to the varied geology, topography and water courses.
- Mix of permanent pasture and arable farmland.
- Strong network of hedgerows with hedgerow trees.
- Dry stone walls field boundaries in some areas and around settlements.
- Field pattern predominantly large geometric field typical of eighteenth and nineteenth century enclosure with small scale irregular fields of medieval pattern close to close to settlement.
- More open areas of higher ground to the west offer panoramic views over the type, elsewhere occasional woodland blocks, copses and frequent hedgerow trees give a greater sense of enclosure, with intermittent views.
- Numerous rivers forming shallow valleys, with the watercourses sometimes lined with willows.
- Settlements in the form of historic market towns, villages and scattered farmsteads distributed throughout the type linked by network of rural roads.
- Traditional buildings of local limestone buildings an outstanding feature.
- Presence of historic parkland and estates marked by stone estate walls, grand entrances and parkland trees and avenues.

## Physical Influences

The underlying geology of the *Limestone Lowland Landscape Type* is from the Great Oolite Groups, formed in the Mid Jurassic Period. A parallel band of Forest Marble mudstone and Cornbrash limestone underlie most of the area. The boundary between these formations is irregular and intermittent occurrences of Forest Marble limestone and Kellaways clay are also apparent, to the west and east respectively. This fragmentation in underlying geology gives rise to the subtle variations in land cover and character over the type in a gradual transition from the west which is dominated by limestone to the eastern borders of Kellaways clay.

There are two SSSIs designated for their geological interest. Corsham Railway Cutting exposes an area of Forest Marble Mudstone revealing important coral 'reef knolls' of palaeontological interest and inter-reef oolitic sediment. Stanton St Quintin Quarry SSSI provides one of the country's few complete exposures of cornbrash, yielded ammonites of biostratigraphic importance.

The landform undulates, rising from around 60m to 130m AOD with an overall slope from higher ground in the west to the lower clay land to the east. Some flatter areas occur on higher ground and localised valleys associated with the numerous rivers are also evident throughout.

## Biodiversity

The landscape as a whole is a valuable habitat for bats, in particular Box Hill Mine (SSSI and part of the Bradford on Avon SAC). There are several areas of ecological interest in the *Limestone Lowland Landscape Type* including three nationally important SSSIs (one of which is also a SAC) and numerous Country Wildlife Sites, often where ancient woodland or pockets of chalk grassland are present. There is also a strong network of hedgerows and frequent hedgerow and standard trees including veteran oaks, ash and willow along water courses.

Inwood SSSI is an area calcareous ash-wych elm and dry maple woodland with an extremely rich ground flora including species of plant that are nationally rare. The area also includes an area of unimproved neutral hay meadow. Harries Ground SSSI at Rodbourne is also an area of species rich neutral lowland hay meadow on an area of clay in the Avon vale.

Box Hill Mine is designated as a SSSI and as a SAC. It comprises a network of man-made tunnels which is used by bats for hibernation, mating and as a staging post prior to dispersal. Box mine seasonally supports up to 10% of the total British population of greater horseshoe bats.

County Wildlife Sites include: Stanton Park, an ancient woodland on the site of a Roman villa with a very rich ground flora including wood millet, wood spurge and woodruff in the semi-natural areas; Hazelton Wood, a small ancient semi-natural woodland site which, although is now mixed plantation, retains much of the understorey and ground flora of interest including bath asparagus; and Hebden Leaze House Meadows, species-rich meadows of limestone grassland adjacent to Luckington Brook - upright brome is abundant and also present are burnet saxifrage, cowslip and dwarf thistle.

## Historic environment

Prehistoric sites include two chambered long mounds near Luckington plus a Neolithic chambered long barrow at Lanhill and a Bronze Age bowl barrow at Barrow Farm. The area became more heavily settled in the Roman period with Easton Grey, to the north of the area, dating from the first century A.D. There are also a number of Roman roads in the area.

The Domesday Book shows that a large part of the *Limestone Lowlands* Landscape Type was at one time owned by the Bishop of Glastonbury. The boundaries of royal forests lying to the west of Chippenham were declared in 1228, although these were largely felled and enclosed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Evidence of small and irregular medieval field patterns are still apparent, particularly close to settlement, although most of the fields are larger and more regular indicating more recent enclosure.

There are a number of imposing houses set in historic parkland, such as Luckington Court, notable for its tree collection, and Corsham Court where Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and Humphrey Repton worked on the grounds.

## Settlement and built character

Settlement in the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is in the form of scattered villages and farmsteads, connected by a network of rural roads, and constructed almost universally of limestone to the west of the area with occasional use of brick on the eastern edges of the type. Villages are peaceful and rural, often centred around a village green, pond or area of common land. Buildings are traditional in style, with many dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Large stately homes and manor houses also occur throughout the landscape, often with large parkland estates. Dry stone walls occur more frequently around and close to villages in western areas but are less common as field boundaries elsewhere. This distinctive pattern and style of settlement within the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is a key element of its character.

Larger stone settlements are Corsham and the ancient market town of Malmesbury. Chippenham however, is the largest settlement in the area, expanding considerably since the 1950s. More recent housing development is visible from the A350, which defines the western edge of the town and acts as a main north/south route through the area.

Other developments that have an impact on the landscape include two air fields, on areas of higher and flatter ground Kemble and Hullavington. Most of the roads in the type are modest rural roads however the M4 motorway passes through from east to west with an increased sense of movement and localised noise.

## CHARACTER AREAS

### 16A: Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowlands

*Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowlands* is the only area within of the *Limestone Lowlands* Landscape Type. It covers a large area of northwest Wiltshire occurring between areas of limestone valleys and higher limestone wold to the west (outside the county) and clay to the east.

The area is predominantly rolling mixed pastoral and arable farmland, in a pattern of large fields bounded by hedgerows with hedgerow trees. The hedgerows vary in condition with some gappy and low flailed hedges in evidence for example around Grittleton.

Changes in the underlying geology and land use cause subtle localised variations throughout the area within an overall graduation from higher ground founded on limestone to the west to lower ground on clay to the east. On the higher and steeper ground of the Forest Marble Limestone to the west, and particularly to the south of Corsham, hedgerows are less prominent with dry stone walls dividing the fields. With less visual obstruction, there are panoramic and distant views the farmland as it falls away gently to the east. There are also some more open areas around Biddestone and to the north of the area. Here a comparative scarcity of tree cover creates a greater sense of exposure. Shallow valleys along the numerous springs and brooks in the area have a more intimate and enclosed feeling. The most prominent of these is along the River Avon where the locally steep valley sides give a sense of containment, and the rich vegetation including willows line the river bank. There are also areas of estate and historic parkland, often associated with large houses. Areas of open pastoral land with numerous standard trees can be found throughout the area, some contain more designed element such as the large avenue near Monkton Farleigh.

A key element in the area is the distinctive limestone villages and towns, connected by a network of winding rural lanes and straight Roman roads. Some brick built dwellings and farmhouses appear to the east of the area reflecting the changing geology. Traditional buildings are frequently centred around village greens and ponds or form a more linear settlement forming a main street along one of the rural roads.

## **EVALUATION**

### **Positive landscape features of significance**

- Peaceful rural landscape.
- Panoramic views from higher ground.
- Strong network of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and occasional woodland copses.
- Dry stone walls.
- Remaining areas with medieval field pattern.
- Historic parklands.
- Remaining areas of ancient woodland, chalk grassland and other areas of ecological diversity.
- Distinctive traditional limestone villages.
- Network of rural road.



## Forces for change

- Continued amalgamation and enlargement of fields.
- Some hedgerow field boundaries have been intensively flailed.
- Some dry stone wall field boundaries are becoming overgrown.
- Increasing traffic on narrow rural lane network leading to urbanisation through kerbing, additional lighting and signage.
- Pressure for new development along rural lanes and around existing settlements.

## Condition

The condition of the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape type is generally **good** with intact hedgerows, traditional villages of vernacular stone dwellings, village greens and stone walls. In some sections of the areas there are elements in poorer condition such as gappy and flailed hedgerows, overgrown stone walls and encroaching horse pasture close to some of the larger settlement.

## Strength of character

The *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is united by the strong character of its traditional stone built settlements however, other elements such as land use, topography and field boundaries vary subtly across the type making it less distinctive and cohesive and therefore the strength of character overall is judged as **moderate**.

## Inherent landscape sensitivities

- The peaceful rural nature of the area.
- Areas of ecological importance including ancient woodland and chalk grassland.
- The setting, containment and scale of the limestone villages.
- The remaining medieval field patterns and dry stone walls around and close to settlement.
- Historic parkland.

## Strategy

The strategy for the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is to **conserve** those elements intrinsic to the type's character or important in their own right, such as the distinctive stone villages, the areas of ecological importance and the historic parkland and to **strengthen** locally degraded elements such as the flailed hedgerows and overgrown stone walls.

## Broad Management Objectives

- Conserve the network of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodland copses and take opportunities for new planting where this will strengthen local character (for instance

avoiding planting that will affect the open views in the high ground at the west of the area).

- Encourage conservation and rebuilding of dry stone wall field boundaries, particularly close to settlement.
- Conserve the remaining areas of ecological interest such as those with statutory designations, areas of ancient woodland, veteran hedgerow trees and chalk grassland.
- Maintain the subtle variations that occur throughout the landscape, encouraging local distinctiveness for instance in the variation in field boundaries from hedgerows to stone walls.
- Encourage management and restoration of the historic parkland landscapes that are characteristic of the area.
- Retain the distinctive character of the villages; ensuring any change respects the traditional stone built character and vernacular form.
- Resist urbanisation of the country lanes through addition of road markings and concrete kerbs or lamp posts or excessive signage that detracts from the rural character of the area.

## LANDSCAPE CHARACTER CONTEXT

The character of the Wiltshire landscape has already been investigated in a number of studies as detailed above in Appendices 1 and 2.

The *Limestone Lowland* landscape type is largely within the area covered by the North Wiltshire Landscape Character Assessment (2004). The type broadly covers the same area as the Limestone Lowland Farmland Landscape Type from the North Wiltshire study, and includes areas of the following North Wiltshire character areas: Sherston Dipslope Lowland, Minety and Malmesbury Rolling Lowland, Hullavington Rolling Lowland, Corsham Rolling Lowland and Upper Avon Valley.

The western part of the type is also covered in the Landscape Character Assessment and Guidelines for Cotswolds AONB (2004). Areas of the Dip Slope Lowland and Cornbrash Lowlands Landscape Types are encompassed in the *Limestone Lowland*.

## 11 DIP-SLOPE LOWLAND

### Character Areas

- 11A South and Mid Cotswolds Lowlands
- 11B Stonesfield Lowlands



### Key Characteristics

- Broad area of gently sloping, undulating lowland with a predominantly south-easterly fall, changing to a north-easterly fall in the southern perimeter of the area;
- lowland landform gently dissected by infrequent small watercourses flowing into the main rivers that cross the area, reinforcing the general grain of the topography;
- strong and structured farmland character, more intimate and smaller in scale than the High Wold and High Wold Dip-Slope;
- well-managed, productive agricultural landscape of mixed arable and improved pasture, together with more limited areas of permanent pasture, mainly within the valley bottoms;

- seasonal variations in colour and texture associated with mixed arable farming;
- medium to large scale, regular fields predominate mainly enclosed by hedgerows, with hedgerow trees, together with some stone walls or post and wire fencing;
- woodland cover limited to intermittent copses and shelterbelts within agricultural land, but balanced by extensive broadleaved, mixed and coniferous plantations within the large estates and associated farmland areas;
- limited areas of ancient woodland and species rich grassland;
- settlement pattern of intermittent small nucleated villages, hamlets, and isolated farmsteads, together with occasional larger settlements;
- distinctive pattern of large estates and associated planned parkland landscape and woodland occurring throughout the Dip-Slope Lowland; and
- evidence of long period of occupation of the area.

### Landscape Character

The Dip-Slope Lowland comprises a broad tract of land that forms the transition between the High Wold Dip-Slope to the north-west, and the lower lying and flatter Thames Basin to the south-east. The principal section of this landscape type extends north of Bath near Marshfield and North Wraxall and then sweeps first northwards, and then north-eastwards along the south-eastern perimeter of the AONB as far as Burford. In contrast to this large and almost continuous tract of land, broken only by the valleys of the Churn and Coln, there are a number of much smaller and fragmented sections of this landscape type. These principally occur in the extreme south of the

AONB, forming small sections of a larger area of Dip-Slope Lowland that extends to the east of the Limpley Stoke section of the Avon Valley, and beyond the designated area, encompassing land extending up to the settlements of Bradford-on-Avon, Melksham and Corsham. A further area of Dip-Slope Lowland occurs in the north-eastern part of the AONB in the vicinity of Stonesfield, forming a transitional landscape above the Evenlode Valley.

The Dip-Slope Lowland is underlain by the limestone formations of the Great Oolite Group, including outcrops of the Forest Marble Formation. It comprises an area of gently undulating lowland, approximately 160m AOD to 100m AOD, with a gentle fall from north-west to south-east, except for the southern sector which assumes a more pronounced west-east fall. Tributary streams are generally infrequent, but where they do occur they have gently dissected the lowland area resulting in local variations in landform. These small valleys generally follow the orientation of the regional slope and dip of the underlying strata, and therefore give the landscape a well-defined grain.

Agriculture is the principal land use across the Dip-Slope Lowland with much of the land under mixed arable and improved pasture, and some permanent pasture predominantly within the valleys. It is generally well managed, within a mosaic of medium to large regular fields, mainly contained by hedgerows. There are also areas where stone walls predominate, generally confined to land surrounding villages, adjacent to farms and within the main estates. It therefore has a strongly structured and productive character. In contrast to the High Wold and Dip-Slope, the area has a smaller and more intimate scale, with views often limited by the flatter landscape and intercepting effect of the mosaic of fields and succession of field boundaries. Nevertheless, from a number of vantage points and more open sections, it is possible to obtain wider views to the south-east towards the North Wessex Downs.

Designed parkland and estate landscapes are a distinctive feature of this landscape character type and include a number of nationally important Registered Gardens and Parks. The extensive woodlands, and planned features, such as avenues and vistas, impart a dramatic and impressive scale to the landscape, and have a strong influence on local landscape character. The large scale of the estate woodlands contrasts with the otherwise generally limited woodland cover across the Dip-Slope Woodland, which is mainly confined to a pattern of small deciduous or mixed copses and shelterbelts, and occasional larger areas of woodland, within the farmed structure. Coniferous plantations of geometric shape are occasional conspicuous elements.

A pattern of small, mainly dispersed villages and hamlets, together with numerous isolated farmsteads and individual buildings, extends across the Dip-Slope Lowland, with Tetbury comprising the only larger settlement within the area. A network of mainly direct local roads connect the numerous villages, while the main section of the A433, a principal route within the area, crosses the general south-easterly grain of the landform. The M4 and main line railway crosses the southern part of the Dip-Slope Lowland.

Archaeological evidence indicates that this landscape has been occupied since the Neolithic period. The time layers of occupation, with successive patterns of land management, have largely been removed or integrated into the enclosure of the land that occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is this process which has had the most significant effect on landscape character, with the resultant strong pattern of regular fields that extends across the area.

### Physical Influences

The Dip-Slope Lowland is located at the eastern and south-eastern limit of the outcrop of Oolitic Limestone within the Cotswolds. Underlain by the succession of Middle Jurassic limestones and mudstones of the Great Oolite Group, including the Forest Marble Formation, only the adjacent and younger Cornbrash Formation is not represented. This latter rock unit underlies the adjacent Cornbrash Lowlands character type (Landscape Character Type 14), and is identified as a separate type as a consequence of the particular characteristics of the rock unit and its surface expression. Beyond this, and to the south-east, the younger Upper Jurassic Oxford Clay form the bedrock to the extensive, low-lying Thames Basin.

The drainage pattern across the main section of the Dip-Slope Lowland has two distinct and separate catchment patterns. The southern section forms part of the Bristol Avon catchment, which follows a particularly tortuous course across the southern perimeter of the AONB. The confluence of the two separate Sherston and Tetbury branches of the upper reaches of this river occurs at Malmesbury, beyond the AONB boundary to the south-west. Infrequent tributaries have gently dissected the lowland area, feeding into the Avon which flows initially within a generally south-west / north-east alignment. It is only beyond the Dip-Slope Lowland that its course alters to east-west, then south, before finally assuming a west flowing course to the Severn. Further north the Dip-Slope Lowland forms part of the Upper Thames Catchment area. Indeed, the source of the Thames is located within this character type, at Thames Head. The Thames catchment rivers of the Churn, Coln and Leach cross the Dip-Slope Lowland in north-west / south-east aligned valleys,

following the dip of the underlying strata. Tributaries of these three main rivers within the Lowland area are infrequent, but where they do occur, together with interconnecting networks of dry valley systems, the valley forms are locally significant.

The small, detached area of Dip-Slope Lowland on the eastern perimeter of the AONB in the vicinity of Stonesfield, forms part of the Evenlode Catchment. This is a gently sloping area with subtle landform variations reflecting dry valley systems connecting into the Evenlode.

Stone slates have been quarried at locations on the Dip-Slope Lowland, largely from the thin fissile limestones at the base of the Great Oolite. Perhaps the most famous are the Stonesfield Slates that were quarried from the fringes of Great Oolite in the vicinity of Stonesfield from the 16th century until the beginning of the 20th century. The extensive use of these natural stone 'slates' for roofing contribute as much to the character of local buildings and vernacular of the Cotswolds as does the stone used for buildings and walls.

As a result of the extensive agricultural 'improvements' and ploughing up of much of the Dip-Slope Lowland, old pasture and calcareous grassland is now very limited. There are, however, a few remnants of calcareous as well as mesotrophic (neutral) grassland remaining within the area, although their impact in the wider landscape is very limited. Ancient woodland is also sparse, although notable stands occur with the managed estates of Badminton and Westonbirt. Much of the woodland areas that cover the area today date from the previous two centuries and the period of enclosure, resulting in a 'planned' character. A pattern of geometric and linear plantations and shelterbelts therefore prevails.

### Human Influences

A number of prehistoric long barrows, and burial mounds are present within the Dip-Slope Lowland. Although less numerous than on the High Wold and High Wold Dip-Slope, their presence is evidence of occupation of the land since the Neolithic. It also suggests that this lower part of the Cotswolds would also have been extensively cleared of trees from this period to ensure visibility of these symbolic features and territory markers, as well to enable cultivation of the land to support these early sedentary, farming communities.

Remnants of Roman occupation are also notable, with the Roman roads of Akeman Street, Fosse Way and Ermin Way running through the Dip-Slope Lowland, converging

on the significant Roman settlement of Cirencester (CORINIVM). Although Cirencester lies immediately outside of the Dip-Slope Lowland, and indeed the AONB, it is surrounded by this landscape type.

The series of historic parks, gardens and designed landscapes that permeate the Dip-Slope Lowland are one of the most significant visible historic landscape features. A number are very extensive, notably Badminton Park, Westonbirt Arboretum, and Cirencester Park, and exert a strong influence over wide tracts of the surrounding landscape as a result of the extensive woodlands, avenues, parkland and planned vistas. The impressive scale and formality of these estates contrast with the smaller scale rural landscape and field mosaic that surrounds them.

Field patterns across the Dip-Slope Lowland comprise a mosaic of both irregular enclosure reflecting former unenclosed cultivation patterns, and regular enclosure that ignores former unenclosed cultivation patterns. In some areas, such as around Rodmarton, the field pattern is identified as regular enclosure of former common pasture. Floated water meadow systems and riverine pastures and meadows are also prevalent along a number of the river channels.

Villages and hamlets tend to be dispersed, with villages mainly having a radial form and hamlets a linear form usually centred at the point where numerous roads converge, e.g. Luckington, and in sheltered locations within the small tributary valleys. Despite this predominance, examples of linear and organic dispersed villages can also be found along with examples of radial and organic dispersed hamlets that are relatively compact. Isolated farms and individual buildings are widespread across the landscape, often located adjacent to roads or at the end of short lanes off roads.

There is little in the way of formal recreation provision in the landscape. However, a number of the historic parks and gardens are open to the public, notably Westonbirt Arboretum, which is of national importance in respect of its tree collection. Numerous footpaths cross the landscape and the Macmillan Way, Thames Path, Wysis Way and Monarch's Way, all long distance footpaths, are located in the west of the landscape type.

There are few landmarks in the landscape although church spires and towers represent important focal features and points of orientation within the lower lying landform. Although infrequent, pylon lines have a significant impact where they occur. Views to the south from the Dip-Slope Lowland are often long and expansive, although to the north, landform of the High Wold limits the extent of views.





## Character Areas

### 11A

#### South Cotswolds Lowlands

The South Cotswolds Lowlands forms an almost continuous area of Dip-Slope Lowland along the eastern and south-eastern side of the Cotswolds, broken only by the valley of the River Churn at Cirencester. Despite the linear extent of the area, there is a strong continuity in its character principally relating to the landform. Generally below the 160m AOD levels, the area has a gently sloping mainly south-easterly grain with more subtle undulations and shallower slope profiles than in the adjacent Dip-Slope Character Type. In the eastern part of the South Cotswolds Lowlands, however, small, often tree lined tributary watercourses and dry valleys systems have dissected the otherwise gentle terrain. There is a consistent pattern of well-managed, productive mixed arable and pastoral landscape across this lower tract of land enclosed by both stone walls and hedgerows with hedgerow trees being a common feature.

This main section of the Dip-Slope Lowland is remarkable for the concentration of Historic Parks, Registered Gardens and private estates throughout the area. A particularly strong cluster occurs in the south-west including Badminton, Westonbirt, Highgrove and Estcourt House, and part of the smaller Pinkney Park adjacent to the River Avon. Further east the planned landscape of Cirencester Park is noteworthy while further east again, Barnsley Park, and the Williamstrip Park adjacent to the Lower Coln Valley, are also significant historic parks. It is likely that the relatively more sheltered locations occurring on the lower slopes of the Cotswolds, together with marginally deeper soils than on the High Wold plateau areas, were important factors in influencing the location of these major estates.

Woodlands within this Character Area vary between the extensive woodlands and plantations within the large estates and a pattern of intermittent smaller woodlands associated with the farmed landscape. Many of the farm copses have been planted within the last two centuries following enclosure and are generally geometric in form, functioning as shelterbelts and game coverts. The extent of ancient woodland is limited, but there is a large area at the north-western side of the Badminton Estate at Swangrove, and, not surprisingly, also within the extensive woodlands associated with the Westonbirt Arboretum, at Silk Wood. Elsewhere, pockets of ancient woodland are generally small in scale such as Alderton Grove to the north of Littleton Drew, and at Shipton Wood to the south of Tetbury within the Estcourt House parkland. These are important but much-depleted remnants of a once more extensive cover. There are notable concentrations of parkland trees within the Badminton Estate and at Westonbirt, which increases the sense of tree cover.

There are very few areas within the Character Area where habitats are sufficiently important or rare to receive national designation. Land to the east of the village of Box and Box Hill is designated as a SSSI and cSAC. The area supports an important habitat and includes one of the few parts of the country where Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) grows naturally. The scattered and generally small areas of calcareous as well as neutral (mesotrophic) grassland are of considerable ecological importance, but their impact on landscape character is only of local significance. Local stone mines are of particular significance and form part of the Bath and Bradford-on-Avon Bats candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC). This is notable for the presence of the Greater Horseshoe Bat, one of the largest and rarest bats in the UK, and currently only found in south-west England and south and west Wales. The total UK population is about 5,000. In winter the bats depend on caves, abandoned mines and underground sites for undisturbed hibernation.

Apart from the network of principal and local roads that cross the area, the southern sector is crossed by the M4 and the Swindon / Bristol main railway line. Further north, the Swindon / Stroud railway crosses the area in the vicinity of Thames Head. These major transport routes follow the general grain of the Dip-Slope, and many sections are in cutting so their impact is limited. Nevertheless they generate noise and movement, which affects the peace of the surrounding rural landscape. High voltage power lines have a greater impact, and the sequence of pylons to the north east of Tetbury, and also to the north of the Leach Valley in the vicinity of Aldsworth, are intrusive elements in the landscape.

## 14 CORNBRAsh LOWLANDS

### Character Areas

- 14A Biddestone Lowland Farmland
- 14B West Malmesbury Lowland Farmland



### Key Characteristics

- Flat or very gently undulating landform with occasional low hills;
- occasional wide views over productive farmland limited only by small farm copses and woodlands;
- vertical elements such as hedgerow trees and pylons gain visual prominence;
- network of tributary streams draining eastwards occupy shallow valleys with course of narrow streams marked by alder and other wetland tree species;
- fertile soils derived from the Cornbrash Formation bedrock;

- predominance of arable farming together with some pastoral land mainly bordering water courses;
- medium to large scale rectilinear fields with intermittent hedgerows and occasional stone walls;
- dispersed settlement pattern of mainly nucleated villages, hamlets and farms;
- infrequent woodland cover of mainly geometric broadleaf and coniferous plantations;
- network of principal roads surround or cross the area but have limited effect on the quiet settled rural character; and
- quiet rural lanes bordered by tall hedgerows, narrow grass verges and drainage ditches that weave through the landscape.

### Landscape Character

The Cornbrash Lowlands landscape type extends beyond the eastern perimeter of the Cotswolds Dip-Slope Lowland. Within the boundary of the AONB, the areas of land classified as Cornbrash Lowland is very limited, and confined to two separate sections in the vicinity of Biddestone and immediately to the west of Malmesbury.

An examination of the wider context of the landscape that adjoins the Cotswolds AONB provides a better understanding of the setting of the designated area and the potential effects arising from landscape change and development within these adjacent landscapes. Therefore the descriptions below apply to areas of Cornbrash Lowland Landscape Character Type within the AONB, but consider their wider landscape setting.

The Cornbrash Lowlands form a transition from the South Cotswolds Lowlands area of Dip-Slope Lowland to the flatter and more open landscapes to the south-east, beyond the AONB. The area forms part of the catchment of the upper River Avon and its tributaries, which have dissected the area to form a subdued, gently undulating topography with occasional very low hillocks rising above the general landform. The rich and fertile soils derived from the underlying Cornbrash Formation that extends across the area, support a land use focused on arable cultivation, together with more limited pastoral areas, principally utilising wetter areas of land bordering water courses. The area has a predominantly rural character derived from the expanse of cultivated arable fields, and a dispersed pattern of small villages, hamlets and farms. Intermittent woodlands, mainly geometric in form, and comprising both broadleaved, and mixed coniferous and broadleaf trees, extend across the area. These provide local enclosure and landmarks within an otherwise undistinguished agricultural landscape.

A small number of towns and major roads are located within or bordering the boundary of the Cornbrash Lowlands. However, despite these factors, the landscape retains a quiet rural character.

### Physical Influences

The Cornbrash Lowlands are confined to the south-eastern section of the AONB and represent a transition between the more elevated Dip-Slope Lowland to the west and the extensive and flatter agricultural landscapes to the east. The landscape shelves gently from west to east, dropping just 30m over a distance of as much as 2km (1.2 mile) and is generally perceived as being flat or only very gently undulating.

The landscape is underlain by Cornbrash Formation, the youngest rock within the Great Oolite Group. Cornbrash consists of a coarse, crumbly shelly limestone and outcrops on the perimeter of the Upper Jurassic Oxford Clay. The limestone is overlain by brown marl that produces a particularly fertile and friable soil well suited for arable farming and crops such as corn. Indeed the name of the rock relates specifically to its suitability for arable farming and was in usage in the 18th century. The Cornbrash is of little value for building or road-making, although it is used locally.

West of Malmesbury the area is drained by the upper reaches of the River Avon and its tributaries, at the commencement of the Avon's tortuous course eastwards, southwards and then westwards, eventually re-entering

the southern part of the Cotswolds at Bradford-on-Avon. These watercourses, together with the Avon's tributaries further south and west of Chippenham, have dissected the area to create a gently undulating landform. While occasional small hillocks rise above this lower lying terrain, such as Lan Hill to the east of Biddestone, the general topographical form is subdued. This makes the course of rivers and streams often difficult to trace in the wider landscape except at crossing points or where their course is marked by riverside trees and linear belts of woodland.

As would be expected on the Cornbrash, arable fields predominate. These are often located in large or moderately sized fields and are enclosed by a network of generally well-maintained hedgerows and occasional stone walls. Some of the larger fields may have been created by a process of field amalgamation and hedgerow removal. Improved pastures are generally located along the course of the main watercourses such as the Avon.

In this managed agricultural landscape, there are few areas of nature conservation interest. However, small remnant areas of unimproved mesotrophic and calcareous grasslands survive bordering the Tetbury Branch of the River Avon.

Some larger stands of woodland are located to the north of the M4 in the vicinity of the settlements of Pinkney Park. Elsewhere intermittent smaller woodland blocks permeate the farmed landscape providing local landmarks. These comprise a mix of coniferous plantations and broadleaved woodlands, including some areas of ancient woodland on the steeper southern banks of the Sherston Branch of the Avon.

### Human Influences

In common with the Dip-Slope Lowland to the west, it is likely that this landscape has been occupied since the Neolithic period. However, the time layers of occupation and successive patterns of land use and land management have largely been removed or integrated into the field patterns created by the enclosure of the land that occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is this that has had the most significant effect on landscape character, with the resultant strong pattern of medium to large regular fields that extends across the area. It is also to this period that many of the areas farm houses and impressive barns date.

Settlement within the Cornbrash Lowlands is confined mainly to compact hamlets, although examples of dispersed villages and hamlets can also be found. Scattered throughout the landscape are a number of farmsteads and individual buildings.

The course of the Fosse Way is a significant historic landscape feature although this is now preserved only in the course of field boundaries and footpaths. To the east of Easton Grey, a former villa site marks the point where the road crossed the Sherston Branch of the Avon. Other less tangible traces of early occupation also exist, most notably the earthwork within Whitewalls Wood; strip lynchets on the steep banks of the Avon; and a mound in woodland to the north of Hartham Park.

The area is surrounded or crossed by a network of major roads, notably the A4(T), A420, A350, and the A429 that bypasses Malmesbury. The east-west routes of the M4 and the Swindon to Bristol main line railway also pass within close proximity of the area within the Dip-Slope Lowland Character Type. Despite the local impact of these principal routes, the area retains a quiet, rural character focused on agriculture.

## Character Areas

### 14A

#### Biddestone Lowland Farmland



The character area forms the western part of a local watershed between the By Brook Valley to the west, and the series of streams that flow eastwards into the River Avon, at or in the vicinity of Chippenham, located immediately east of the AONB. The gently domed and undulating landform supports a rural farmed landscape of predominantly arable and some pastoral fields. The area is crossed by the A420, together with a network of minor roads. Despite the impact of these principal routes, the area retains a quiet, rural settled character with occasional nucleated villages, notably Biddestone, West Yatton and Yatton Keynall, together with a pattern of dispersed farms. Well-maintained, neat hawthorn hedges enclose fields and border roads where they are located on banks above ditches. Although not



generally frequently found in the area, stone walls are located in the vicinity of Hartham Park. Housing surrounding the Park display details that are intricate and ornate.

Biddestone is the main settlement within the character area, and possibly dates back to the Saxon period when the village was founded by a Saxon settler named Beida. It has a compact form looking onto a village green. Many buildings date to the early part of the 18th century and were built from the profits of the wool trade. These, along with the ancient church, utilise the local warm grey stone. The walls are mostly built of rubble-stone, occasionally coursed and embellished with ashlar quoins and copings. The local stone also appears in garden walls and outbuildings and the great stone barns that are reached along narrow hedged lanes that radiate out from the village westwards towards the Upper By Brook Valley.

Woodland cover is generally sparse but there are a number of small, predominantly geometric areas of coniferous plantations to the south east of Biddestone. These provide some enclosure and local landmarks within this otherwise undistinguished but gentle rural farmed landscape.



## 14B

## West Malmesbury Lowland Farmland



This character area to the west of Malmesbury comprises part of the valley of the upper reaches of the River Avon, into which flow a number of small tributaries. Slope orientation and the general grain of the gently undulating or shallow falls of the landform have been largely determined by this drainage pattern. Thus to the north and south of the river, there is a general fall to the south-east and north-east, respectively. This is a quiet rural area dominated by arable farming although improved permanent pastures are prevalent in low lying areas bordering river channels. Fields are generally medium to large scale enclosed by hedgerows with hedgerow trees. These provide strong vertical elements within an otherwise flat landscape. A number of woodlands extend across the southern side of the River Avon and comprise a mix of small geometric coniferous farm plantations, and broadleaved woodland in the vicinity of the River Avon. A number of these are ancient in origin. Parkland trees and shelter belts contribute significantly to woodland cover in the character area, with three parks located in close proximity to each other bordering the Sherston section of the Avon valley.

In view of the limited extent of the character area, settlement is sparse and confined to the hamlets of Foxley Green and Easton Grey and the village of Brokenborough which is located at the northern perimeter of the character area. All are sited at crossing points over the river. At Easton Grey, for example, a cluster of whitewashed rubble stone houses are located adjacent to the stone bridge that crosses the river. Beyond these small villages, settlement consists of isolated farms. To the east the ancient town of Malmesbury borders the character area. It occupies a natural strongpoint on a hill almost entirely surrounded

by the Avon, which the Saxons occupied at an early date. It is close to their castle that an Irish monk Maildolph formed a hermitage in 642 AD, which was later to become a monastery in 676 AD.

On the northern perimeter of the character area, the presence of a Romano-British Settlement and an earthwork provides evidence of earlier occupation of the area although few other traces remain.





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## VOLUME 2

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Cover photographs from top to bottom:

- Avon valley lowland
- Colerne from the south
- Cherhill Hill with monument and White Horse

## Character Area 6

# Upper Avon Valley

### General description

4.100 This small area lies to the west of Malmesbury, focused on the Sherston branch of the River Avon. The area is defined by two roads – the B4040 which runs between Malmesbury and Chipping Sodbury, and an unclassified road to the south. The river runs eastwards on a convoluted course, in a valley which is in places steep sided, and in other locations more open and shallow. The topography lies at between 85-110m AOD, and sits on a complex geology of Oxford Clay, Cornbrash, Forest Marble and alluvial deposits.



4.101 The area is rich in history, with a major Roman settlement, Easton Grey, at the convergence of the Fosse Way with the river. It was the site of a small town which played a vital part in the economic life of the area. It sat where the ancient Fosse Way, an arterial route between the West Country and the Midlands, crossed the River Avon.

4.102 There are many other archaeological sites in the area, from the Bronze Age including the earthwork at Whiteworth Wood, as well as from Roman, Saxon and medieval periods. Strip lynchets are also found on the steep ground near Easton Grey, which are medieval terraces formed by ploughing and are reflect the growing need to find extra cultivatable land from which to feed the local population.

4.103 This continuity of settlement reflects several factors, including the more fertile soils, particularly on the shelly limestone of the Cornbrash, and the rich grazing meadows and clean water from the river. Field patterns vary, from the small and irregular medieval fields especially in the steeper western area, to large fields which have been created to suit arable agriculture in the shallower valley areas. The wetter areas beside the river are more commonly permanent pasture.

4.104 Small blocks of woodland and copses are also a feature of the area, in particular on the steeper slopes and where closely related to the estates at Pinkney Park and Easton Grey. They comprise both deciduous woodland dominated by oak with hazel coppice, some of which is ancient

woodland, as well as softwood plantations. Mature oak trees are also a feature of the agricultural land, some in hedgerows and some singly in larger fields. Adjacent to the river and tributaries, there are also characteristic groups of mature willow and lines of alder. In places in winter, the orangey colour of the stems of Crack willow stands out brightly, and complements the lighter brown of the ploughed fields. The river and bank side is also an important habitat for wildlife, particularly the brown trout, bullhead and rare and protected native white-clawed crayfish.

4.105 Settlement also reflects the status and fertility of the area, with a number of fine estate buildings and large farmsteads. Sherston village, at the western edge of the area, also acts as a major village closely associated with the market town of Malmesbury to the east. Building materials are predominantly limestone from the Cotswolds, for both houses and the dry or bonded boundary and field walls. Buildings include the use of undressed stone to walls, ashlar quoins, lintels and mullions, and stone slates. In some farms, however, new barns and other modern buildings in unsympathetic materials detract from the rural character.

### Main characteristics

4.106 The main characteristics of the area can be defined as follows:

- Steep and intimate or more open, shallower valley.
- Complex geology and resulting variation in fertility and agriculture, from riverside meadows to arable.
- Variation in field sizes and shapes, from small irregular medieval, to larger fields enclosed or amalgamated in the modern period.
- Continuity of settlement and richness of archaeological sites.
- Important river ecology.
- Small blocks of woodland and copses, both deciduous and coniferous.
- Mature oaks on drier land, and willow and alder by stream-sides.
- Bright winter colours of crack willow and soils on the cornbrash.
- Fine stone buildings, and use of undressed limestone to walls, ashlar quoins, lintels and mullions, and stone slates.
- Dry stone walls as field boundaries.
- Quiet and unspoilt character, with a strong sense of time depth.



## Management guidelines

4.107 The overall objectives for the area are to protect the rich historical and ecological heritage of the area, and to conserve and enhance its distinctive and unspoilt character. The diversity of the area's landscape features, relating to the topography, rivers and different forms of agriculture, combined with the mature trees and fine stone buildings, creates a distinctive area of high landscape quality.

4.108 Good practice in the management of both agricultural systems and built form will be a priority in this area. Particular care will be needed in areas of historical or archaeological significance.

4.109 Biodiversity should be protected and enhanced particularly relating to the river corridor and woodland.

## Management strategy: actions

4.110 The following actions are recommended to help realise the overall objectives for the area:

### Short term

- Conserve hedgerows and mature trees, including planting new trees in existing hedges and planting specimen trees in field corners.
- Enhance the wetland character in riverside and meadow areas, by planting willows and alders along watercourses in informal groups and broken lines.
- Discourage hedgerow loss and field amalgamation.
- Encourage woodland management to provide continuity of cover while optimising ecological value.
- Conserve and enhance the valley floor watercourse corridor optimising ecological value.
- Prepare guidelines for the management of landscape features of historical significance and the protection of sites of archaeological value.
- Discourage new development particularly in the valley floor.

### Long term

- Ensure agricultural buildings reflect the character and scale of the landscape in their location and design.

## Key views management strategy

4.111 There are many views from the roads which mark the boundary of the area, although no one location is an obvious viewing point.

- Indicators of change from chosen viewpoints within this

- Species such as willow relating to wetter ground conditions.
- Loss of or deterioration of dry stone walls.
- Change in the character of farm buildings.
- Use of traditional stone materials and detailing in new built form.

## Landscape sensitivity

4.112 The area is within the Cotswold AONB which is an indication of its value. Its character is distinctly rural, tranquil and unspoilt, with a strong sense of time depth and man's shaping of the landscape. Whilst there is some diversity in landscape elements, the area has a strong coherence with the river as a unifying feature. Some of the riverside locations have an enclosed and intimate feel, whilst the more open areas allow wider views and a better sense of the continuity of the valley.

4.113 The landscape is rich in features which contribute to its maturity, especially the mature trees, diversity in riverside character, stone walls and small woodlands. These could be lost through intention or neglect, especially if the agricultural future for pasture in particular become more uncertain. The distinctive riverside and wetland features could easily be lost in future generations if not actively conserved and enhanced. The archaeological and ecological heritage of the area is also very strong, and requires pro-active measures to conserve this resource.

4.114 Only sensitively designed small-scale single, infill or restoration development, appropriately associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts.

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## VOLUME 2

### Natural Environment and Landscape Policy Recommendations

Cover photographs from top to bottom:

- Avon valley lowland
- Colerne from the south
- Cherhill Hill with monument and White Horse

## Character Area 7

# Sherston Dipslope Lowlands

### General description

4.115 This area lies on gently undulating land underlain by the Forest Marble limestone. The land rises from an average of around 90m to 125m AOD towards the Cotswolds in the west, with some localised higher ground. There are a number of shallow river valleys and associated alluvial soils, and some dry valleys especially towards the south. Some of the river valleys have locally steeper and more enclosed valley forms. Towards the south of the area the area becomes segmented, divided by steep valleys.



4.116 The area has a number of prehistoric remains, including two long mounds with possible chambered tombs lying a few hundred metres apart near Luckington. Roman occupation is also evident, with the Fosse Way running through the area towards Cirencester.

4.117 It is in most places a fairly open landscape of large fields with low hedges or dry stone walls. There are broad panoramas and distant views to the hills and large woodlands to the west, although in places the landscape is more intimate and views are contained by hedgerows and mature trees. Some field boundaries west of Sherston include great numbers of stately veteran oak trees, some of which are ancient pollards. Close to the rivers, groups of mature willows are also a feature.

4.118 Agriculture is a mix of permanent pasture and arable, with a field pattern that varies from an irregular medieval layout, especially close to villages, to the more regular shaped and more recently enclosed larger fields.

4.119 Woodland cover varies, with many areas quite bare except for shelterbelts, although there are a number of small woodlands in the north of the area, and large parkland woods to the immediate west of the District boundary, including the Westonbirt Arboretum.

4.120 The area includes unimproved limestone grassland characterised by upright brome and tor grass, which in the wider area of the Cotswolds is a nationally significant resource. The limestone grasslands are rich in plants and invertebrates, particularly butterflies. Many of these grassland areas are fragmented and no larger than 1 ha in extent, and as a result, are ecologically isolated.

4.121 Settlement on the area is confined to dispersed small villages, hamlets and farmsteads. The villages are mainly located adjacent to the Avon and its tributaries, and include some fine stone buildings in the local stone. The Oolitic limestone is most notably used for the finely crafted stone slates for roofing. Luckington Court is one such stately home, Queen Anne for the most part, which was famed as the Bennet's home in *Pride and Prejudice*. It has a three-acre garden, whose mature ornamental trees can be seen from several locations near the village.

4.122 A number of important footpaths cross the area, including the Macmillan Way. This is a network of routes linking the south coast, Bristol Channel and North Sea coast of England, taking in the Cotswolds. It also forms part of the Cross-Cotswold Pathway, an 86-mile walk linking public transport interchanges at Banbury and Bath.

4.123 Kemble Airfield lies at the extreme north of the area, with associated hangars and related buildings; and in the extreme south the presence of Colerne and its neighbouring airfield have a significant detracting visual impact on the character of the area. The M4 motorway also crosses the area and with nearby Castle Combe racing circuit, forms a contrast to the tranquil rural character of the rest of the area.

### Main characteristics

4.124 The main characteristics of the area can be defined as follows:

- Gently undulating, broad low hills and shallow river valleys.
- Locally steeper and more enclosed valley forms.
- Rich heritage of human settlement and archaeological sites.
- Broad panoramas and distant views.
- Continuity of hedgerows and veteran oak trees.
- Dry stone walls as field boundaries and in relation to larger properties and village houses.
- Variation in field sizes and shapes, from small irregular medieval, to larger fields enclosed or amalgamated in the modern period.
- Variation in woodland cover, with many areas devoid of woodland cover, and other areas with small woods or copses.
- Small areas of unimproved calcareous grassland.
- Dispersed settlement and few villages.



- Fine stone buildings, and use of undressed limestone to walls, ashlar quoins, lintels and mullions, and stone slates.
- Long distance footpaths.
- Localised developments such as Castle Combe circuit and Colerne airfield.



### Management guidelines

4.125 The overall objectives for the area are to enhance the character of the area through strengthening the landscape elements which contribute to its distinctiveness, and conserve the ecological heritage and unspoilt character. The diversity of the area's landscape features, relating to the topography, broad views, mature trees, dry stone walls and fine stone buildings, will require care and good stewardship.

4.126 The veteran hedgerow trees are features of high local significance, and a programme of long term replanting should be established.

4.127 Good practice in the management of both agricultural systems and built form will be a priority in this area.

4.128 Particular care will be needed in areas of historical or archaeological significance.

### Management strategy: actions

4.129 The following actions are recommended to help realise the overall objectives for the area:

#### Short term

- Conserve hedgerows and mature trees, including planting new trees in existing hedges and planting specimen trees in field corners.
- Enhance biodiversity through good practice in woodland management and by encouraging farming practice which supports good environmental management.
- Encourage wetland habitat creation and planting of willow and alder by waterside areas in enclosed river valleys.
- Ensure development reinforces the locally distinctive character and respects the vernacular. The use of traditional building materials including limestone are important in this area.

- Discourage development in the rural hinterland.

### Key views management strategy

4.130 Much of the area is remote and is crossed by few main roads. However, the openness of the views where there is little woodland cover, and the broad shallow hills, offer wide views from many locations. The M4 crosses the area and is afforded broad views as is the A429 north of Malmesbury.

4.131 Indicators of change from chosen viewpoints within this character area might include:

- Loss of hedgerows and mature oak trees.
- Loss of or deterioration of dry stone walls.
- Use of traditional stone materials and detailing in new built form.

### Landscape sensitivity

4.132 The area is within the Cotswold AONB which is an indication of its value. It has a distinctive character at the edge of the Cotswolds, with its gently rolling hills and remoteness, matched by mature landscape features such as veteran trees and old dry stone walls. Although settlement is dispersed, there are some fine stone villages and intimate valley landscapes associated with the upper reaches of tributaries of the Avon.

4.133 The area is generally tranquil and has little through traffic. In this sense there may be relatively few members of the public regularly viewing the area, but these may include visitors and local people for whom the unspoilt nature of the landscape is an important resource and of national significance as part of the AONB.

4.134 The sensitivity of the landscape to change is predominantly an issue of agricultural management. The use of the area for sheep grazing in particular may be uncertain. This affects the pasture and on-going management of hedgerows and dry stone walls for stock control.

4.135 The remoteness and openness of much of this area means that only small-scale, sensitively designed development, appropriately associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts.

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- Avon valley lowland
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## Character Area 8

# Hullavington Rolling Lowland

### General description

4.136 This large area lies between Malmesbury in the north and Chippenham in the south. It is a rural area of gently rolling hills and shallow valleys, based on a number of geological formations, predominantly Forest Marble limestone, Oxford Clay and Cornbrash. The landform rises from approximately 60mAOD in the east of the area close to the Avon valley, to over 120m with some localised high points of up to 139m AOD.



4.137 This diverse geology gives rise to an area of mixed soil conditions, from predominantly pasture on the clay, to arable on the better soils of the Cornbrash. Field patterns are a mix of medium to large sizes, with a pattern of irregular medieval boundary shapes to more regular shapes from later enclosures. There are a number of villages within the area, but few other settlements and a dispersed pattern of farms. Woodlands and generally intact hedgerows with mature trees further contribute to the patchwork of fields in this gentle landscape.

4.138 The area has evidence of a succession of occupation with evidence of prehistoric settlement in the area such as the Neolithic chambered long barrow at Lanhill and an early Bronze Age bowl barrow at Barrow Farm. This part of Wiltshire is likely to have been Romanized from the latter part of the 1st century A.D. with the large Roman settlement at Easton Grey to the north, and a number of villas in the vicinity. Although the first recorded settlement in the locality of Kington St Michael is in the 10th century, it is likely that there was earlier Saxon settlement in this area.

4.139 The Domesday Book records that considerable lands in the area were owned by the bishop of Glastonbury, and included much woodland, which was much reduced shortly afterwards. The bounds of the royal forests of Chippenham and Melksham were declared in 1228, lying to the west of Chippenham, but the woodlands were largely felled and enclosed in the early 17th century. A number of small and medium

sized woodlands remain, however, both to the north of the M4 and west of Chippenham. Corsham Court provides a significant large scale parkland landscape at the southern tip of the area. The seat was first kept by King Aethelred in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century and was passed to various noblemen subsequently. Capability Brown prepared plans to enlarge the park in 1760 which was finished by Repton in 1799.

4.140 A major early road ran from London, through Hungerford, Marlborough and Chippenham to Bristol – now the route of the A420. This was part of a highly developed national road system by the mid-fourteenth century and would have been of particular importance to the locally important cloth trade.

4.141 Limestone from the Cotswolds is the predominant building material, for both houses and the stone walls which are common in villages. Dry stone walls are also evident but not common as field boundaries. The villages of Kington Langley and Kington St Michael are notable for their fine stone buildings, many dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and include the use of undressed stone to walls, ashlar quoins, lintels and mullions, and stone slates. This extensive use of weathered stone creates a landscape of muted colours.

4.142 The M4 motorway now carves a major swathe through the centre of the area, connecting with the A429 running north south, and the A420 running west from Chippenham. The edge of Chippenham is in the character area where it rises onto higher land bordering the Avon valley. Just south of Malmesbury there is a former airfield at Hullavington with large hangars and associated buildings.

4.143 In many places there are wide views over the area, where agriculture is the dominant and shaping force in the landscape, which in places has been to the detriment of local distinctiveness, for example in the loss of distinctive features of habitats associated with waterside environments.



### Main characteristics

4.144 The main characteristics of the area can be defined as follows:

- Rolling or lowland hills between 60-120m AOD, on Forest Marble limestone, Oxford Clay and Cornbrash.

- Patchwork of irregular, medium sized fields, mainly pasture, and larger more recent enclosures used for arable, especially in on the richer soils.
- Continuous hedges with many mature oaks.
- Medium sized woodlands and deciduous copses.
- Fine stone villages with muted colours and dispersed farms.
- Historic Corsham Park.
- Use of undressed limestone to walls, ashlar quoins, lintels and mullions, and stone slates.
- Detractors of the M4, the edge of Chippenham and Hullavington airfield.

## Management guidelines

4.145 The overall objectives for the area are to conserve and enhance its pastoral character, and to ensure that any new development respects the grain of the dispersed settlement in the area and the vernacular building materials.

4.146 The continuity of hedgerows is important in shaping the character of the area, and should encourage through appropriate land management programmes.

4.147 River valleys should be enhanced by encouraging habitat creation and planting of riverside trees.

4.148 The use of limestone in buildings and free standing walls should be supported, both in helping conserve existing features, and in the appropriate use of materials in new construction.

4.149 Protect the setting and intrinsic character of Corsham Park.

4.150 Minimise the landscape and visual effects of the expansion of Chippenham.

## Management strategy: actions

4.151 The following actions are recommended to help realise the overall objectives for the area:

### Short term

- Conserve hedgerows and mature trees, including planting new trees in existing hedges and planting specimen trees in field corners.
- Encourage woodland management to provide continuity of cover while optimising ecological value.
- Enhance the wetland character in riverside locations by planting willows along water courses in informal groups and broken lines, and by encouraging landowners to help in the creation of more diverse waterside habitats.
- Ensure development reinforces the locally distinctive character and respects the vernacular. The use of traditional building materials including limestone are important in this area.

- Discourage development in the rural hinterland.
- Conserve the setting of Corsham Park.

### Long term

- Consider where development related to Chippenham is most appropriate in terms of landscape and visual effects.

## Key views management strategy

4.152 Many wide views are possible over this broad, rolling landscape. Within the rural hinterland, the key visual elements are the mature trees and the patchwork of small irregular fields. A number of major roads cross the area, including the M4 motorway and the A429 and A420. Views from these roads, and the connecting B roads, are important for the perceptions of many local people. Much of the rural hinterland, however, is relatively remote and tranquil.

4.153 Indicators of change from chosen viewpoints within this character area might include:

- Loss of hedgerows and mature oak trees.
- Landscape elements associated with riverside environments – in particular wet meadows, waterside trees, and reed beds or other wetland species.
- Built form using traditional stone materials and detailing.

## Landscape sensitivity

4.154 Corsham Park is designated as an Historic park and garden and forms part of a small Special Landscape Area which is an indication of its perceived high value. The broader area is typified by a gently undulating patchwork of arable and pasture with mature hedgerows, some woodlands and nucleated settlement in the form of fine stone villages. In some areas the distinctive features of the landscape have been lost, such as the relative lack of diversity in river corridors.

4.155 The landscape retains many features which are of local value, especially the woodlands, mature trees and continuous hedgerows. These could be lost through intention or neglect, especially if agricultural futures for pastureland in particular become more uncertain. The riverside and wetland areas, however, have lost much of their visual and ecological diversity.

4.156 The whole area has an essentially tranquil and pastoral character within which only small-scale, sensitively designed development, appropriately associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts.

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## VOLUME 2

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Cover photographs from top to bottom:

- Avon valley lowland
- Colerne from the south
- Cherhill Hill with monument and White Horse



## Character Area 10 Corsham Rolling Lowland

### General Description of Character

4.182 This area of landscape rises up to a gentle rolling sloped east west ridge to the south, ranging from approximately 60m AOD near the Avon Valley to approximately 170m to the west of the area. It extends beyond the county borough to the south, which at this point follows a Roman Road, running east to west. To the north and east the area is defined by break in topography. The area is a catchment for both the Avon to the east and By Brook to the west.



4.183 The character area lies on a bed of Forest Marble to the west, which gradually gives way to Cornbrash to the east. The latter gives rise to higher quality, better drained agricultural land.

4.184 There is evidence of human habitation since prehistoric times such as Bronze Age barrow above Box. Influence from the Roman period is evident from the Roman Road to the south, along with other sites throughout the area. The history of the settlement of Corsham extends to before 1001AD when the area belonged to the king in Saxon times and the crown retained possession through Norman times. The area's economy originally developed on agriculture and the cloth industry. The area then gained in prosperity from quarrying and mining, prior to the development of Corsham as a military depot, shortly after the First World War.

4.185 The northern extent of this character area is dominated by the settlements of Corsham, Rudloe and military and commercial developments. Corsham is historically linked to Corsham Court, with older dwellings and civic buildings constructed either in the vernacular style of the area or with stylistic links to the estate. This is only really evident within the core of the settlement. The fringes consist of 20<sup>th</sup> century development with military structures and industrial areas mixed with a mosaic of housing, small fields and woodlands. The military compounds of RAF Rudloe Manor include a variety of utilitarian structures including offices, sheds, barracks and masts with high security fencing a feature along roadsides. Some roads have been clearly built to

accommodate military traffic and are urban in character with lighting. Country lanes show signs of frequent use by traffic.

4.186 The area is enclosed on the southern edge of the town around Westwells and Potley Farm which are associated with the valley and more open to the north along the A4. Some parkland appears to remain with mixed planting. Hedgerows are overgrown in places or are replaced with fences. Structures such as equestrian sheds associated with small fields are common.

4.187 The Avon Valley to the east contains roads, railways and electricity transmission lines visible from the area. Smaller settlements including individual dwellings and hamlets lie on the gentle ridge to the south, accessible along minor roads. As with the older buildings of Corsham these are predominantly built with local stone with stone slate roofing tiles and occasionally thatch.

4.188 The agricultural landscape is mixed, arable and livestock, with the quieter areas having a strong rural character. This is enhanced by an intact and tree'd hedge pattern, providing a sense of enclosure and an element of intimacy to some areas. Elsewhere large panoramic views to the north and Bowden to the east often dominate. Small woodland blocks and parkland trees also enhance the settled nature of this area.

4.189 The area is crossed to the north by the A4, while through the more rural hinterland to the south smaller settlements are connected by a series of quiet, often single track roads. These are bounded by walls of local stone, frequently deteriorating, gappy and grown through with hedge species. A comprehensive network of paths and recreation routes run through the area linking the settlements with the surrounding countryside.



Houses at Gastard

### Main characteristics

- Gently sloping topography with a small steep valley.
- Traditional core of Corsham.
- Urban fringe character of areas at periphery with Corsham including mosaic housing, military infrastructure, industrial areas, communication corridors, small fields and woodlands.
- Rural character in the southern part of the area with traditional rural settlements.

- Panoramic views out towards north and east in parts.
- Visual influence of electricity transmission lines.

### Management Guidelines

4.190 The overall objective for this area is to control the pattern of new development and restore the rural character of the urban fringe area, while retaining the rural character to the south.

4.191 There will need to be protection of the remaining fields, woodland and parkland to maintain separation of the built form around Corsham. Enhancement of the landscape structure through boundary improvements and new woodlands is required to help screen elements of the existing built form. New development should be restricted to existing brownfield sites and the opportunity taken to significantly improve the layout creating settlements set in and responding to the landscape.

4.192 It is important to maintain and conserve the rural character away from the urban edge, managing and repairing field and road boundaries, maintaining diversity of agricultural practices and discouraging further development.

### Management Strategy Actions

4.193 Conserve and enhance the Character Area through carrying out the following actions:

#### Short Term

- Maintain existing woodland cover and hedge trees,
- Restore field boundaries around settlements and other areas where gappy or degraded.
- Conserve the rural character to the south of the area.
- Encourage less intensive agricultural practices around settlements to retain and expand semi-improved grassland.
- Consider where development related to Corsham is most appropriate in terms of landscape and visual effects.
- Discourage new development in rural area.

#### Long Term

- Create new woodland cover to mitigate the landscape or visual impact of new development.
- Maintain and use footpath network to offer local people recreational opportunities in terms of countryside access routes and cycleways.

### Key Views management strategy

4.194 The gently sloping topography of this area offers expansive views of both urban areas and the rural landscape. Views from key footpaths could be developed. Views from the A4 are important and clear separation between settlements needs to be maintained eg between Corsham and Rudloe.

4.195 Indicators of change from chosen viewpoints within this character area should include:

- Loss of mature trees in the landscape.
- Loss of or deteriorating condition of field and roadside boundaries.
- Outward development of the built form.

### Landscape Sensitivity

4.196 The intact rural character, sparse settlement pattern and prominent and slightly exposed elevation, make the south of the area sensitive to development. Only limited small-scale, sensitively designed development, appropriately associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts. Where the openness is mitigated to some extent by localised woodland clumps, providing some sense of enclosure essential development, in keeping with the rural character of the area, may be acceptable provided landscape and visual impacts can be minimised.

4.197 Around Corsham and associated settlements, the lower elevation and disrupted skyline is less sensitive to development although particular care is needed on the rising land around the A4 which is exposed to wider views. Any development within this area should be considered not within the countryside but on brownfield sites. The countryside is sensitive to development and urban fringe pressures. Development should be considered in conjunction with the development of a strong landscape structure which should screen and separate from other settlement.

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Cover photographs from top to bottom:

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- Colerne from the south
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## Character Area 11

# Avon Valley

### General Description of Character

4.198 This large character area is focused around the River Avon, its tributaries, Brinkworth Brook and Marston River and the surrounding low-lying landscape. The Avon meanders from Malmesbury to the north, through Chippenham, to leave the district below Lacock Abbey in the south. Brinkworth Brook runs from below Wootton Bassett to join the River Avon in the west; and River Marston runs west from Calne. The area is hemmed in by elevated ground surrounding the area and sits below 70m AOD, and at its lowest point is 36m AOD below Lacock.



The River Avon

4.199 The topography is characterised by a predominantly level landscape with only minor undulations at its fringes as the land runs to higher ground. This produces a wide flat valley with areas of openness and vast skies. Towards the south the surrounding topography of adjacent character areas provides more enclosure. The geology underlying this landscape varies, from alluvium and river terrace gravel adjacent to the watercourses, to the dominance of Oxford and Kellaway Clays on the adjacent land. There are large tracts of Kellaway sand which provides pockets of free draining high-grade agricultural land, throughout the valley.

4.200 The landscape is managed through mixed agricultural practices, with arable dominating the freer draining higher-grade agricultural land, and the damper land adjacent to the watercourses consisting almost entirely of wet grassland, including areas of meadow which are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Through much of area the integrity of the hedges and hedgerow trees provides a sense of enclosure. Below Chippenham, to the south, hazel hedges are evident, providing a variety to the character of the area. On tracts of intensively farmed arable land hedges are gappy and lacking trees, and the area has an exposed character. This is especially prevalent on the fringes of development and communication corridors. The character on the urban fringes of Chippenham, is further influenced by the built form and roads which are particularly prominent to the south west of the town.

4.201 The area has limited tree cover which is restricted to shelterbelts, hedgerow trees and small clumps of woodland. The latter are infrequent throughout the area but are slightly more evident to the south, below and around Chippenham, reducing the effect of the urban fringe. Poplar windbreaks are frequent across the whole area, breaking up views and acting as significant landscape features. The presence of watercourses through the area is marked by riparian vegetation dominated by willow, frequently pollarded, which enhances the damp, low lying character of these areas.

4.202 The water related character is further developed by the open ditches system which is prominent along low lying roadsides. The watercourses themselves are attractive and interesting features, meandering through landscape. Bridges across the river and causeways across wetter areas are significant elements relating to the watercourses. Maud Heath Causeway, north east of Chippenham, is one of the most well known. It was created circa 1458 as an investment by an individual for the public good.

4.203 With the exception of Chippenham, settlements are generally small, with a vernacular core, constructed of a mixture of Oolitic limestone and local brick, with varying degrees of 20<sup>th</sup> century development. Church towers are local landmarks within the settlements and their immediate environs but are less significant features in the wider landscape.

4.204 Chippenham's early development was linked to its importance as a Saxon administrative centre, the old core of the town sited as today within a loop of the Avon. The town sat on the Bristol-London road, part of a national road system, highly developed by the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century. However, significant expansion of the town began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with further development of communication links. Both the Wiltshire & Berkshire Canal and then the GWR London to Bristol line allowed the existing cloth industry of the town and surrounding area to flourish and other industries to develop. Extensive late 20<sup>th</sup> century development once more expanded the town, probably as a result of the town's proximity to the M4. Large scale expansions associated with peripheral roads have occurred particularly to the west and north west, but also to the south east. The valley bottom of the Avon has generally been avoided and forms a green corridor into and through the town part of which is used for recreational purposes. Development is particularly prominent on the rising land to the north.

4.205 The village of Lacock sits to the south of the area- a settlement dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century which gained prosperity through the wool industry. The village remains largely unchanged, an eclectic mix of built styles and materials, maintained by the National Trust. The village, adjacent settlement and surrounding settled landscape make this area a popular visitor destination.

4.206 There is evidence of habitation from prehistoric times, with numerous crop marks visible. These are more obvious north of Chippenham, along the Avon. Discoveries denoting man's intervention within this landscape continue through Roman times, with the presence of settlement remains. Through both the Avon valley & Brinkworth Vale a wealth of medieval settlement existed. Many of these villages were lost through the Black Death and resulting changes in agricultural systems.

4.207 The A4 and A350 are significant roads in the southern part of the area. The A4 east west through Chippenham and the A340 runs along the south western fringes. The only road of significance to the north is the M4 motorway. This creates a major feature, source of noise and barrier in the landscape as it cuts through the valley. Away from the main roads traffic is very light, the scattering of small hamlets serviced by minor, often single-track roads, which enhance the rural character.

4.208 Two railways traverse the area. The main line London to Cardiff runs east west from Wootton Bassett through Brinkworth Brook valley and London to Exeter one runs south west through Chippenham. These are heavily vegetated with hedgerow species, reducing their effect on the landscape. The airfield at RAF Lyneham lies on high ground to the east, beyond the character area boundary. The heavy use of the airfield by cargo aircraft disturbs the inherent tranquillity of the surrounding area. Additionally, electricity transmission lines form dominant structures in this flat landscape.

4.209 There is a comprehensive network of footpath and recreation routes throughout the area, although few have any direct relation to the watercourses. The line of the Wiltshire & Berkshire Canal runs along the eastern edge of the area providing a distinct feature in the landscape.



### Main characteristics

4.210 The main characteristics of the area can be defined as follows:

- Low-lying river landscape, between 70m and 30m AOD on river terrace and alluvial geology with heavy soils, interspersed with light sands.
- Dominant presence of water in the form of ditches, streams and river with related riparian vegetation and structures.

- Damp meadow and pasture along watercourses/valley floor.
- Intact and predominantly well managed hedgerows frequently with hedgerow trees.
- Areas of high quality arable agricultural land located through out the area, on areas of Kellways Sand.
- Shelterbelts of poplar act as significant vertical elements in the horizontal landscape.
- Rural and somewhat isolated feel to remoter parts of character area.
- Scattered settlements and dwellings.
- Strong rural sense of place, which begins to break down around Chippenham and communication corridor.
- Green valley floor through Chippenham.
- Broad expansive skyline, frequently unbroken by development.
- Significance of electricity transmission lines.



### Management Guidelines

4.211 The overall objectives for the area are to conserve the rural character, and ensure development of the urban fringe and communication corridors does not compromise the nature of the area.

4.212 Individual elements within the landscape which make up the character should be maintained, conserved and when necessary replenished. This should include the retention of the ditch system which runs through the area, maintenance and replacement of hedges.

4.213 Conserve and where possible enhance the biodiversity of the watercourse, its environs and adjacent habitats.

4.214 Features of historical and archaeological interest relating to man's use of this wet landscape and early settlement features will also require care and protection.

4.215 Minimise the landscape and visual effects of the expansion of Chippenham.

### Management Strategy Actions

4.216 Conserve and enhance the Character Area through carrying out the following actions:



## Short Term

- Conserve valley bottoms including wetland features, open ditches, meadows and riparian vegetation, especially willows.
- Conserve hedgerows and mature trees, including allowing new trees to emerge in existing hedges, and discourage field amalgamation.
- Consider where development related to Chippenham is most appropriate in terms of landscape and visual effects.
- Enhance the sense of place through use of appropriate building materials in respect of new development, extensions or other built features - especially through the use of materials used in vernacular buildings.
- Conserve the alignment and features of the Wiltshire & Berkshire Canal

## Long Term

- Encourage the creation of public access along waterways, where consistent with nature conservation objectives.

## Key Views management strategy

4.217 The area is primarily viewed from the M4, A350 and from the edges of Chippenham. Elsewhere, the large scale of the character area, views reduced by level topography and vegetation and the sparse settlement pattern make view points scarce. Watercourses are important so views from bridges over the Avon should be monitored.

4.218 Indicators for change within this area should include:

- Change to watercourses.
- Loss of riparian vegetation
- Loss of grassland through the area particularly adjacent to watercourses.
- Amalgamation of fields
- Loss of mature hedgerow trees
- Expansion of Chippenham
- Establishment of screening around Chippenham

## Landscape Sensitivity

4.219 Away from the influence of Chippenham, much of the area has an essentially rural character with small, scattered settlements and individual dwellings. The landscape is predominantly gently undulating with vegetation preventing extensive views. Only small-scale, sensitively designed development, appropriately associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts.

4.220 Around Chippenham, the original settlement in the valley bottom has expanded up the valley sides. These areas are exposed to wider views and are sensitive to further development. Care is required in further expansion of the town to

minimise the effect on landscape and visual receptors. Development should be carried in conjunction with the development of a strong landscape structure to repair urban fringe landscapes.

4.221 Where the traditional settlement form meets the landscape in river corridors or other green wedges, these areas should be kept free of new development to protect the relationship between built form and landscape. The valley floor overall is a sensitive landscape with some of the most attractive landscapes of the area focussed on the watercourses and riparian vegetation.



## West Wiltshire District Council

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### WEST WILTSHIRE DISTRICT LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT



**Draft Final Report**

**December 2006**

***CHRIS BLANDFORD ASSOCIATES***

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*Environment   Landscape   Planning*

## 4.2 Limestone Lowland (Type A)

### *Key Characteristics*

- Gently undulating lowland landscape which rises gradually from east to west across the type.
- A mixture of arable farmland and permanent pasture underlain by geology of predominantly mudstone and limestone with some pockets of clay.
- Numerous small rivers and stream corridors crossing the landscape.
- Field boundaries delineated by a strong network of hedgerows, often containing hedgerow trees.
- Scattered settlement pattern, consisting predominantly of villages and isolated farmsteads.
- Predominantly rural landscape with subtle variations in character relating to the varied geology, topography and watercourses.
- Large-scale, predominantly geometric field pattern, typical of eighteenth and nineteenth century enclosure with small-scale irregular fields of medieval pattern close to small settlements.
- Landscape scattered with traditional buildings, of local limestone, which provide a key distinguishing characteristic.

### *Summary of Visual Character*

The limestone lowlands are underlain by geology of the Great Oolite Groups, formed in the Mid Jurassic Period. The landform undulates, rising from 35m AOD adjacent to the Limestone River Floodplain Landscape Type in the southeast to higher land in the northwest (200m). Numerous small rivers and stream corridors cross the type. There is a strong network of hedgerows, with frequent hedgerow trees and field trees visible. Settlement pattern consists of scattered villages and isolated farmsteads, which are connected by a series of minor rural roads. Villages are peaceful and rural, often centred on a village green, pond or area of common land. Buildings are traditional in style, with many dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, built from local limestone. Away from the main A363 and A365 road corridors, there is a relatively strong sense of tranquillity.

### *Character Areas*

- A1 South Cotswolds Limestone Lowland
- A2 South Wraxall Limestone Lowland
- A3 Broughton Gifford Limestone Lowland
- A4 Cleeve Limestone Lowland

### A3 : BROUGHTON GIFFORD LIMESTONE LOWLAND



#### Location and Boundaries

The area encompasses the villages of Atworth, Whitley, Shaw, Broughton Gifford and Holt. The northern edge is formed by the district boundary whilst the floodplain of the river Avon restricts the area in the east and west. The A365 and the B3107 run along the northern and southern edge of the area respectively, and meet in Melksham in the east.

#### Key Characteristics

- Gently undulating limestone lowland.
- Predominantly rural character with several linear villages and scattered farm buildings connected by a dense network of rural roads and footpaths.
- Distinct pattern of small sized mainly irregular fields enclosed by in places fragmentary hedgerows with mature trees.
- Generally extensive views.
- Pylons as a conspicuous vertical element.



#### Summary of Visual Character

The area has a strong rural character with a mixture of pasture and arable farmland. The small sized, mainly irregular fields are enclosed by generally mature and intact but in places gappy, hedgerows with trees. Views tend to be open with the main notable vertical elements being pylons and hedgerow trees. A few small woodland blocks are scattered in the area, including the more expansive ancient Great Bradford Wood, in the south, cupped in one of the coils of the River Avon. The villages of Atworth and Shaw in the north of the area are situated linearly along the A365 whilst Whitley, Broughton Gifford and Holt are, also linearly, situated along secondary and more rural roads, with the exception of the higher part of Broughton Gifford, which is centred round a village green or Common. A large number of footpaths cut across the area, linking the villages and many scattered farms.

#### Historic Environment

- Several manor and country houses of note in the area, including Great Chelfield Manor and The Courts at Holt, both classified as Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest.<sup>32</sup>
- Presence of historic parkland and estates marked by stone estate walls, grand entrances and parkland trees and avenues.

<sup>32</sup> Pevsner N & Cherry B, 1975. The Buildings of England Wiltshire. Yale University Press: London.

- Daniel's Wood is an ancient and semi-natural woodland.<sup>33</sup>
- Traditional buildings are of local limestone and are an outstanding feature.

### **Biodiversity**

This largely rural area is scattered with several woodland clumps, some of which is ancient – including Great Bradford Wood. Other interesting ecological features are rough grass margins on the edge of paths and the historic parkland with its single mature trees and tree avenues. The network of brooks and ponds and the hedgerow field boundaries with mature trees serve a corridor function. No statutory nature conservation designations cover the area. Apart from Daniel's Wood and Great Barford Wood, Norrington Common, Broughton Gifford Meadow and Lady's Coppice are locally designated as Sites of Nature Conservation Interest.

### **Evaluation**

#### ***Current Condition***

The condition of the hedgerows varies from generally intact to fragmentary in places. The remaining ancient woodland and historic parkland appear to be well managed and mostly in good condition. Much of the traditional field pattern remains today. Villages are traditional with vernacular limestone buildings.

#### ***Inherent Landscape Sensitivities***

- Peaceful, rural nature of the area.
- The extensive views.
- Landscape setting, vernacular character and small scale of the villages.
- Areas of ecological value including ancient woodland copses.
- The remaining traditional field pattern.
- Historic parkland.

#### ***Key Landscape Changes***

- Agricultural intensification could threaten to damage the historic network of small fields and hedgerows.
- Increasing visual intrusion and noise pollution associated with the A365 and the B3107.
- Pressure for new – linear - developments in and around villages could cause the villages to lose their distinctiveness and threaten the traditional form of the Broughton Gifford Common.

#### ***Management Strategy and Objectives***

The management strategy for this area is to maintain and conserve the peaceful rural nature of the area with the small villages set in their surroundings of arable and pastoral farmland, including the hedgerows enclosing the fields, the coppices, the network of footpaths and rural roads connecting the villages and the scattering of farms in the area. Specific management objectives are to:

- Conserve and maintain the traditional pattern of hedgerows enclosing arable and pastoral fields by encouraging planting to restore any gaps in the hedges and by promoting ecological management.
- Encourage new developments in and around the villages to be in line with the traditional vernacular character of the villages and – where possible – the traditional form around the Broughton Gifford Common.

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.magic.gov.uk/website/magic/>



- Conserve the extensive views by avoiding any planting or developments that would have an adverse affect on those.
- Conserve the remaining areas of ecological value such as the woodland (some of which ancient) and hedgerow network with mature trees by promoting appropriate management – consider restoring traditional practices, such as coppicing, where possible in the woodland.