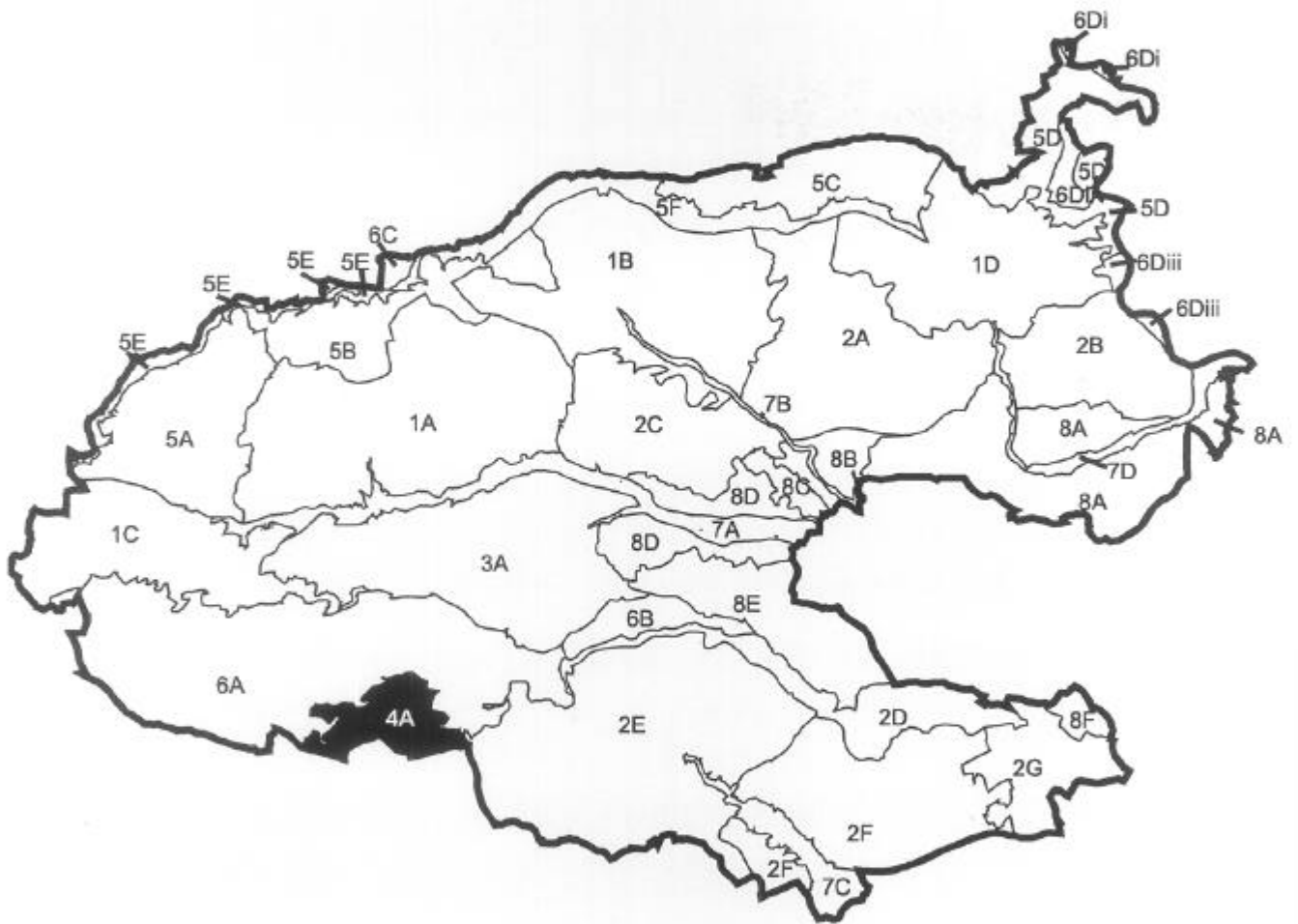


## Landscape Type 4 - High Chalk Plain



## 11. LANDSCAPE TYPE 4: HIGH CHALK PLAIN

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### Location and Boundaries

- 11.1. The High Chalk Plain landscape type occurs in one location, and is represented by the single character area of Salisbury Plain, of which only the northern-most tip is within the North Wessex Downs, with the main part of the Plain extending southwards. The following description refers only to the small area in the AONB. The boundary of the landscape type is clearly defined by the base of the steep scarp slope (contour 135 - 155m AOD), which rises dramatically from the lower lying Vale of Pewsey to the north.

### Overview

*The high Chalk Plain landscape type is represented by the single character area of Salisbury Plain, of which only the northern-most tip is within the North Wessex Downs. The landscape description refers to this small area only.*

*The open, rolling landform of the Upper Chalk creates a bleak, spacious landscape with long views and a strong sense of remoteness and isolation. A dramatic escarpment forms the northern boundary, as at Pewsey Hill and Fyfield Down, and provides panoramic views across the adjacent lowland Vale of Pewsey. The Pewsey White Horse carved into the scarp slope is a distinctive landmark in views from the Vale. Unlike other parts of Salisbury Plain, the downland has been intensively cultivated and does not retain the ecological diversity of the wilder unimproved grasslands of the military training areas, although important bird species such as the stone curlew and skylark have a visible and audible presence. The land is almost wholly under arable cultivation within large, regular fields. The virtual absence of tree cover and sparse hedgerow enclosure, contributes to the sense of openness and remoteness.*

*The area includes a large number of archaeological sites. Several earthworks are visible on ridges and hilltops and stand out as prominent features on the skyline when viewed from below. These include Giant's Grave Neolithic long barrow and several Bronze Age round barrows. Contemporary settlement is limited to a very small number of isolated farms.*

#### Key Characteristics

- expansive chalk upland landscape forming the northern edge of the vast rolling landscape of Salisbury Plain (beyond the AONB);
- absence of the Clay-with-Flint resulting in a bleaker, more open, landscape;
- pronounced scarp along the northern boundary forming a dominant feature from the lower lying Vale of Pewsey, providing outstanding views across the Vale;
- land cover dominated by arable farmland set within a large-scale irregular field pattern. Isolated fragments of chalk grassland survive and there are occasional woodlands and scrub areas;
- important habitat for declining farmland bird species, including stone curlew and skylark;
- numerous Bronze Age round barrows sited on prominent ridges and hill tops plus Giant's Grave - a Neolithic long mound;

- field pattern of large regular and straight edged fields resulting from formal 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Parliamentary enclosures, with more recent boundary removal to create a very open, large scale landscape;
- settlements confined to a small number of isolated farms;
- well served by a number of footpaths, bridleways and byways allowing a good recreational access to the area and its visible archaeological features;
- a large scale, open and remote character.

## Physical Influences

- 11.2. **Geology and Soils:** The geology of the area consists largely of Upper Chalk, which forms the main upland areas of the Plain. The Upper Chalk gives way to Middle Chalk along the steep scarp to the north, and the Lower Chalk also outcrops in places along the scarp. An important difference in geology is the virtual absence of the Clay-with-Flint capping, creating a bleaker more open landscape. Well-drained calcareous soils dominate the area.
- 11.3. **Landform:** Landform is typical of the upland chalk, with an open, rolling topography sloping gently to the south. The pronounced scarp, which defines the northern boundary, as at Pewsey Hill and Fyfield Down is a visible and dominant feature from the lower lying Vale. There are outstanding views across the Vale of Pewsey from the scarp.

## Biodiversity

- 11.4. Within the AONB there are some scattered fragments of chalk grassland that remain within the agricultural matrix, 11 of these fragments are of nature conservation interest and have non-statutory designation. To the south of the AONB boundary there are large areas of unimproved grassland, notably Salisbury Plain which is an important SSSI and military training area.
- 11.5. Unlike other areas south of the AONB boundary, the downland has been relatively unaffected by military activity, and has been intensively cultivated. The dominant habitat is therefore arable farmland with occasional woodland and scrub. This means that it has not retained the ecological diversity of the wilder unimproved grasslands of the Military training areas. Nevertheless the remote upland areas are of considerable biodiversity interest, with Salisbury Plain forming an important refuge for otherwise declining bird species including stone curlew and skylark, the latter being a particularly audible feature of this area.

## Historic Environment

- 11.6. **Prehistoric Monuments:** Several earthworks visible on ridges and hilltops stand out as prominent features on the skyline when viewed from below. These include Giant's Grave Neolithic long mound and Bronze Age round barrows at Everleigh, Down Farm and Milton Hill Farm. Late Bronze Age or Iron Age field systems visible as slight linear earthworks occur across the area, at Easton Clump, Pewsey Down and on Aughton Down. Large circular enclosures, which may date to the prehistoric period, tend to be located on prominent hilltops, such as Godsbury.

- 11.7. **Medieval Land Use:** A series of prominent parallel terraces, or strip lynchets, cut into the scarp edge are probably the remains of medieval ploughing, although dating these features is difficult. Running approximately parallel to the contours, these were an extension of medieval open fields onto steep ground, at a time when flatter, more easily worked ground was in short supply.
- 11.8. **Field Patterns:** The area is now predominantly open country with a very few scattered farms. Much of the area was probably open downland grazing until the post-medieval period and the modern field pattern is the largely the result of formal, eighteenth and nineteenth century Parliamentary enclosure. Many of these large, regular and straight-sided fields have had boundaries removed to form very large, 'prairie' fields.
- 11.9. **Military Activity:** Some modern trackways and earthworks are the result of military activity following the First and Second World Wars. However, this northernmost part of the Salisbury Plain Training Area has not been as heavily disturbed as some of the more southerly areas.

### Settlement and Building Character

- 11.10. There are no settlements, other than a small number of isolated farms. The remote, and even bleak, nature of this area is a special feature.

### Recreation Character

- 11.11. This part of Salisbury Plain is well served by a number of footpaths, bridleways and byways allowing good recreational access to the area and its visible archaeological features such as strip lynchets and tumuli. The Pewsey White Horse is carved into the north facing scarp, and included on the Wiltshire White Horse Trail.

### Social and Economic Character

- 11.12. Salisbury Plain is a remote area with a tiny population, containing only a few isolated farm buildings. No parishes were identified within the landscape type and there are, therefore, no statistics available to derive social and economic characteristics. There are no services or facilities and the only source of local employment is in the intensive arable farming operations. The farms units are largely managed under contract labour as opposed to small family farms.

### Key Issues

- in the past, intensification in farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland) archaeological features and landscape character with creation of large 'prairie' fields;
- **unsympathetic tree and woodland planting** in the form of irregular blocks and linear plantations of ornamental species;
- **climate change** - potential impacts on chalk grassland habitats and requirement for irrigation of arable land - including potential future demand for construction of reservoirs and infrastructure;
- **vulnerability to development**, particularly large scale or tall structures and potential impact in views to the scarp top from the Vale of Pewsey.

## Key Management Requirements

11.13. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the expansive character of the High Chalk Plain with its openness, isolation, remoteness and absence of settlement. Key features to be conserved and enhanced include:

- isolated fragments of chalk grasslands with opportunities for restoration to extend and link habitats;
- the field pattern, with opportunities to restore hedgerows;
- importance as a habitat for declining farmland bird species – with a mosaic of arable land and chalk grassland;
- the unsettled character, clear ridgelines and horizons and absence of development, particularly along the open scarp above the Vale of Pewsey.

## Character Areas

11.14. The Chalk Plain forms a single character area: 4A: Salisbury Plain, which itself is part of a much wider area extending south of the AONB boundary.

