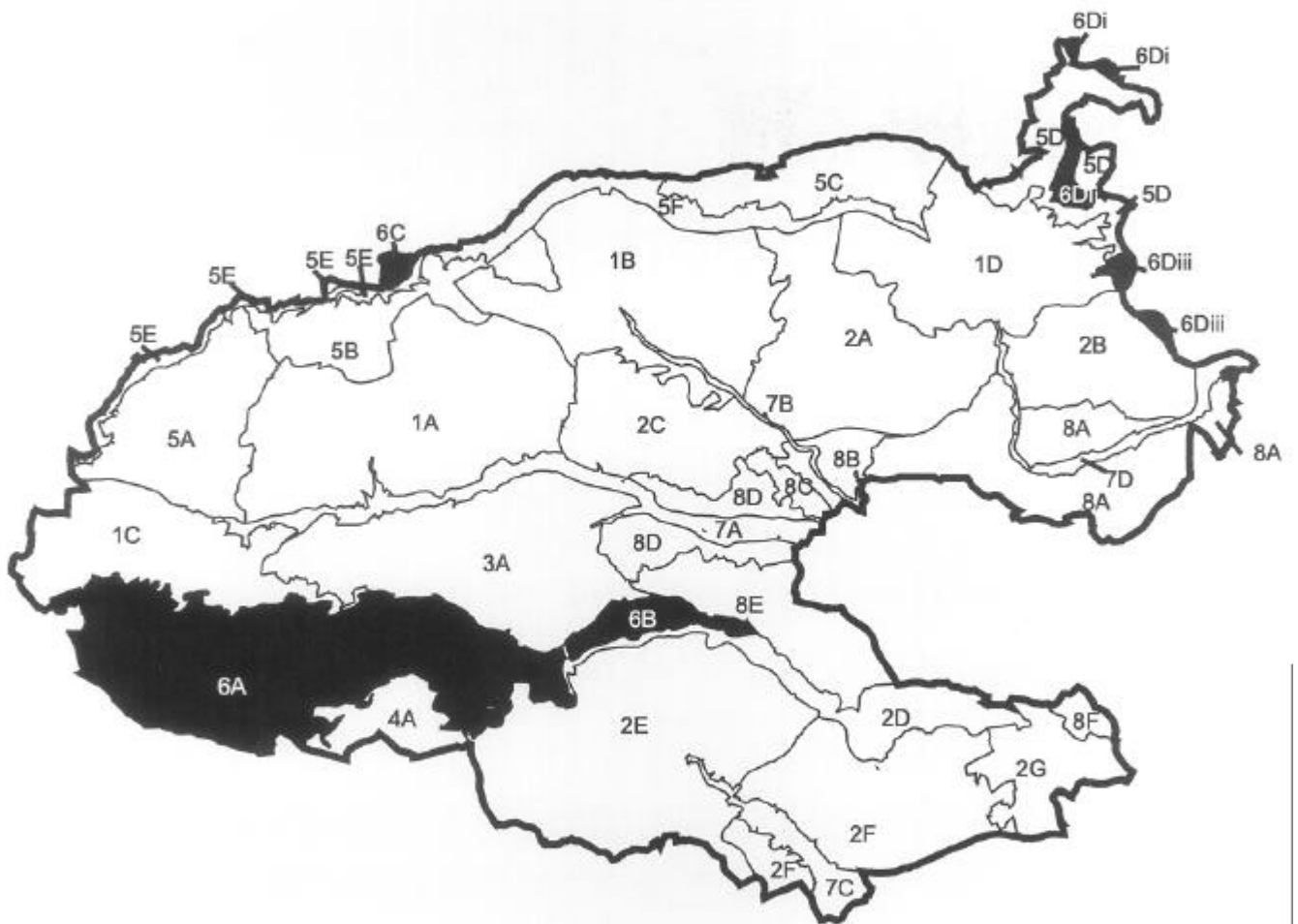


Landscape Type 6 - Vales



13. LANDSCAPE TYPE 6: VALES

Location and Boundaries

- 13.1. The Vales are defined topographically, and are distinct areas of lowland, almost always below 130m AOD. The transition to these low lying landscapes is often dramatic, marked by a steep scarp slope. The Vale of Pewsey, including its narrow eastern extension towards Shalbourne, separates the two main chalk upland blocks of the Downs. In addition a number of smaller areas of low lying vale landscape occur along the northern and eastern edge of the North Wessex Downs and relate to the adjacent Countryside Character area 108: Upper Thames Clay Vales.

Overview

The chalk downs form an imposing backdrop to the flat low lying Vales – an example of the dramatic contrast and juxtaposition of landscape character within the North Wessex Downs. The towering slopes of the adjacent chalk scarps forming a dominant 'borrowed' landscape setting that contains and enclosing the Vales.

Underlain by Greensand, these lowland landscapes are well-watered, with numerous streams issuing at the junction of the chalk and the less permeable underlying rocks and characterised by watercourses meandering across the flat vale floor. Rich loamy and alluvial soils create a productive agricultural landscape, with a mix of both arable and pasture in fields bound by thick, tall hedgerows. Views are constrained and framed by the topography, rising scarp slopes of the downs and low hedgerows, producing a strong sense of enclosure. Woodland cover is sparse, except where linear belts of willow, alder and scrub accentuate the line of the watercourses that thread across the Vales. The streams, remnant waterside pastures and riparian woodlands form a lush 'wetland' landscape of considerable ecological value.

The concentration of settlement is one of the defining features of the vale landscapes. Settlement includes compact nucleated villages and hamlets, with widespread scattered farmsteads, using characteristic materials of timber frame, brick and flints, sometimes with thatched roofs. The flatter land has also been exploited for main communication routes including road, rail and canal. The Vales are consequently landscapes of movement and activity in contrast to the remote 'empty' downlands.

Key Characteristics

- underlain by Upper Greensand, Lower Greensand and Clays, with Lower Chalk flanking the Vale sides. Soils vary according to geology, with alluvial deposits lining the watercourses;
- distinctive low lying landform, with a level surface in strong contrast with the adjacent higher downs;
- dominant 'borrowed' landscape of the adjacent high downs;
- threaded by numerous minor streams draining to the headwaters of the River Avon in Pewsey Vale and River Thames along the northern and eastern edge of the AONB;
- a rich, well watered, agricultural landscape comprising fields under both arable and pastoral production;
- streams, remnant waterside pastures and riparian woodlands provide variety and ecological interest;

- a settled landscape with a concentration of compact small towns, clustered villages, hamlets and many dispersed residential and farm buildings;
- villages are comparatively well served by local services and have retained their small village schools.

Physical Influences

- 13.2. **Geology and Soils:** The edges of the Vales are generally formed by the Lower Chalk, which gives way to underlying Upper Greensand, Lower Greensand and Clays. Soils are variable with those on the Greensand tending to be better drained than those on clay. Alluvial deposits line the watercourses that thread through the Vale landscapes.
- 13.3. **Landform:** The Vales have a distinctive low-lying landform, with a flat level land surface, contrasting strongly with the adjacent higher downs. Occasionally the edges of the Vales are formed by foothills of the Lower Chalk, which create a more subtle transition. At the junction of the porous chalk and impermeable greensand/clays numerous springs issue, which collect within the Vales forming minor streams draining to the headwaters of the Salisbury Avon in Pewsey Vale and River Thames, along the northern and eastern edge of the AONB.

Biodiversity

- 13.4. The loamy and alluvial soils create a rich agricultural landscape, with a mix of both arable and pasture, often surrounded by thick hedgerows, through which small streams run - draining the higher chalk and collecting to form tributaries of larger rivers such as the Salisbury Avon (Pewsey Vale) and the River Thames. The damp clay pastures, streamside woodland and the hedgerow network are principal habitats of nature conservation interest. The upper part of the River Avon and its tributaries where they thread through the Vale of Pewsey include a number of SSSIs and represent a classic chalk river.

Historic Environment

- 13.5. **Landscape Development:** The character of the Vales is quite different to that of the downlands. This is rich, well-watered pasture land and which was famous for dairy farming. The main aim of most Vale farmers was the production of milk to be turned into butter and cheese, and the rearing of cattle and pigs. The importance of cows goes back to the Domesday Survey (1086) which refers to specialised dairy farms (vaccaria) and cheese making at three places in the Vale of the White Horse. Historically, arable and sheep farming played a much less crucial role in these areas.
- 13.6. **Medieval Settlement:** The Vales had already been enclosed into small farms before 1500 or by piecemeal arrangements between tenants during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Settlement today, as then, is characterised by compact nucleated villages, and scattered and isolated farmsteads and hamlets.
- 13.7. **Field Patterns:** Evidence of land hunger is seen in assarts or clearance of forest or waste to create small enclosed arable fields, many of which still survive today. However, it is the large-scale straight-sided fields dominating the Vales today, which were typically formed as a result of the Parliamentary Enclosure Acts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Settlement and Building Character

- 13.8. The Vales are the most settled landscape type with a settlement pattern comprising small towns, clustered villages, hamlets and many dispersed residential and farm buildings.

Recreation Character

- 13.9. The landscape type contains a number of well promoted recreational routes including the Severn and Thames National Cycle Route, and the Wiltshire Whitehorse Trail. These and a large number of other Public Rights of Way connect a series of picturesque towns and villages. The Kennet and Avon Canal provides opportunities for cycling, fishing, camping, canoeing and boat trips, while the towpath provides a recreational route between Reading and Bath.

Social and Economic Character

- 13.10. The Vales are well settled landscapes, with numerous villages, with population levels that have remained fairly static over the past 20 years. Burbage, in the Vale of Pewsey is the exception and has accommodated considerable new development and a significant growth in population. The villages are comparatively well served by local services and the increase in population in Burbage has been met by the provision of services to meet the growing needs of the developing community. Unlike villages in other landscape types, parishes within the Vale areas have retained their small village schools, although generally inhabitants must travel to access basic services. Dependency upon the private car is therefore likely to be significant within this area with a large number of car journeys expected. The large number of settlements, comparatively high population and an extensive and well-used road network mean that the Vales generally appear as a busy and active landscape. The larger villages such as Pewsey serve a large population and heavy traffic levels and congestion are a particular concern.

Key Issues

- in the past, intensification in farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** particularly biodiversity with drainage and cultivation of the Vale floor pasture and widespread loss of hedgerows and archaeological features;
- potential changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some remaining Vale pastures no longer being grazed with **scrub encroachment**;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- **climate change** - potential impacts including drying out of wetland habitats, requirement for irrigation of arable land - including construction of reservoirs and intrusive infrastructure. Impact on woodland and parkland with potential increase in non native species and tree loss (drought/windthrow);
- localised intrusion of **roads, overhead power lines and pylons** all of which are highly visible in the context of this flat low lying landscape;

- **increased traffic on the rural lane network**, plus road improvements including kerbing, widening, signing and visibility splays which, in places creates a more urban landscape;
- intense **development pressures**, particularly for new housing affect the character of the villages and their edges so that settlements are less assimilated into the landscape;
- impact of development of the **edge of the AONB**, for example at Devizes and Swindon - visual impact plus increased pressures on housing, roads etc.;
- **vulnerability** to impact of development (e.g. skyline structures) within the adjacent 'borrowed' landscape of the downland scarps which form prominent boundaries to the Vales.

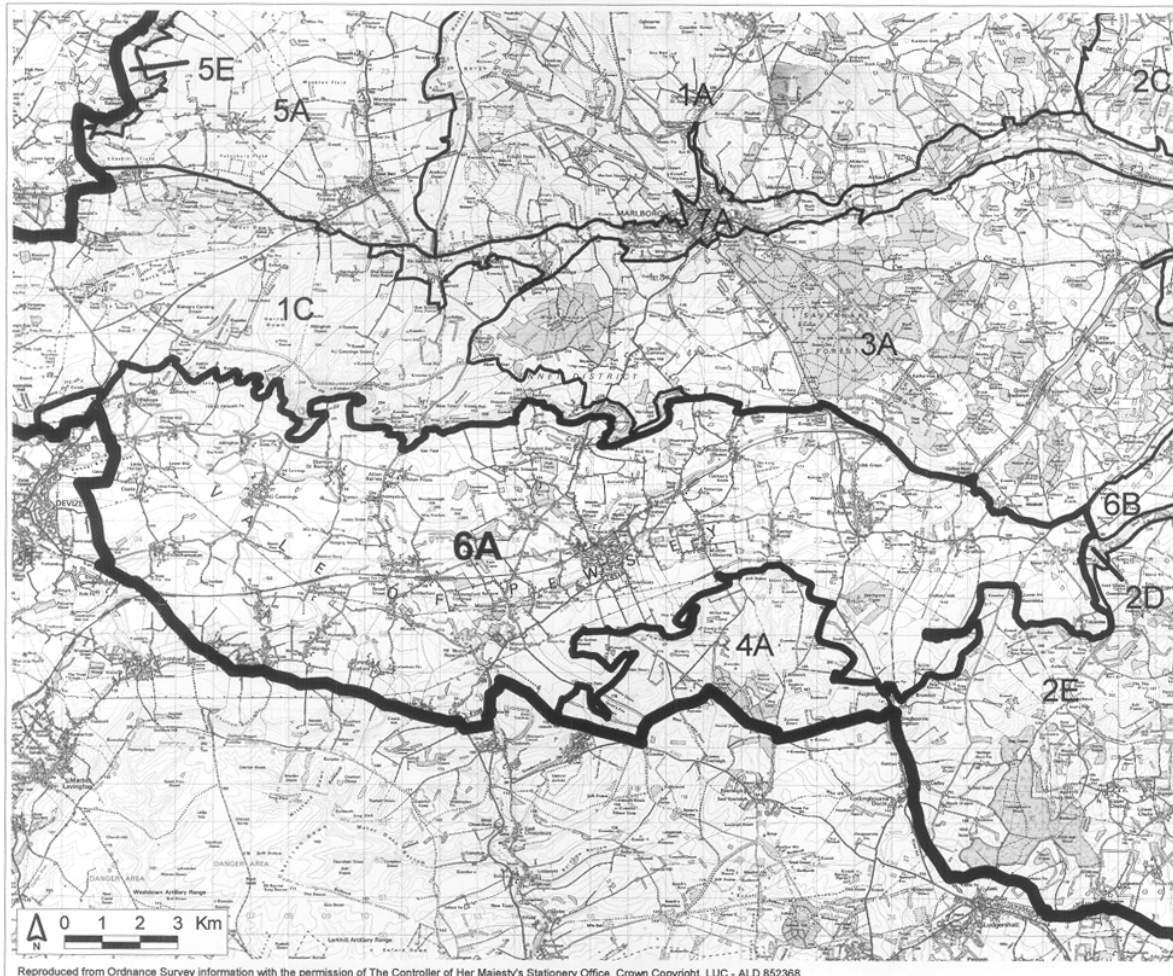
Key Management Requirements

- 13.11. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the distinctive character of the Vales with their rural, agricultural character. This includes the pattern of hedgerows, streams and remnant waterside pastures, wet meadows and woodlands and concentration of small compact settlements. There are opportunities for hedgerow restoration and re-creation of pasture and riparian woodlands alongside watercourses. The objective should be to maintain the pattern of discrete villages set within a quiet rural landscape, with opportunities for management of traffic on the rural lanes that connect the settlements. The views to the clear skylines of the surrounding downland slopes should be conserved.

Character Areas

- 13.12. The Vales landscape type is divided into two main character areas. These comprise.
- 6A: Vale of Pewsey
- 6B: Shalbourne Vale, which extends to the east of the Vale of Pewsey
- 13.13. In addition, along the north and eastern edge of the North Wessex Downs, the AONB boundary has been drawn so that it incorporates very small areas that are part of the wider surrounding landscape (character area 108: Upper Thames Clay Vales) that extends out beyond the AONB. These have been separately identified and named.
- 6C: Wanborough Vale
- 6D: Thames Valley Flood Plain which incorporates the geographically separate sub-areas of i) Benson, ii) Moreton and iii) Streatley and Basildon.

CHARACTER AREA 6A: VALE OF PEWSEY



- 2.14. **Location and Boundaries:** The character area is a clearly defined topographic unit forming a low lying landscape separating the two chalk upland blocks of Horton Downs (1C) and Savernake Plateau (3A) to the north and Salisbury Plain (4A) to the south. Boundaries are defined topographically and follow contours along the foothills at the base of the steep scarps that rise to the north and south. The western edge is formed by the AONB boundary and the eastern boundary at the point where the Vale narrows near Marten forming the separate character area of Shalbourne Vale (6B).

Landscape Character Description

- 13.15. The Vale of Pewsey forms a broad low lying landscape within the two main chalk upland blocks. It is contained and enclosed by dramatic stark scarp slopes to either side, which juxtaposed with the low almost flat Plain, have an exaggerated elevation creating a very distinctive skyline particularly along the northern edge. Landcover varies considerably with the low undulating foothills typically under arable cultivation. Large fields with limited enclosure create a very open landscape reminiscent of the chalk uplands. Towards the core of the Vale the farmland is a rich mix of pasture along tributaries with arable fields enclosed by hedgerows and woodlands characteristically surrounding the settlements. A network of water channels weave across the flat Vale floor and are lined by riparian vegetation with linear strips of alder and willow, creating a distinct and attractive local landscape character. The Kennet and Avon Canal is also an important water corridor, in the Vale, with its own distinct character. Throughout much of the area the hedgerow structure is weak with boundaries largely replaced by fencing and there are few hedgerow trees, which has resulted in the opening up of some long views. In this context tall features, such as the pylons in the south of the Vale can be visually intrusive.
- 13.16. Woodland cover is generally sparse, apart from the deciduous woods that line the River Avon and its tributaries around Manningford creating a more enclosed intimate character along this part of the river. The River Avon system is by far the most important feature of this area in terms of ecological value. The high quality of its clear, fast flowing water has resulted in extremely rich plant and animal communities. The river and its associated wetland habitats, including calcareous valley mire, contain two SSSIs (Avon River systems SSSI and Jones's Mill SSSI). These together with two further SSSIs outside the AONB are part of the River Avon candidate SAC.
- 13.17. The Vale is the most densely settled character area within the AONB, with a great variety of settlements. Pewsey, a large village on the River Avon, commands the central part of the Vale and is the focus for a confluence of road, rail and water routes. Burbage is a smaller compact settlement on the Vale floor to the east and All Cannings, a large village to the west. There are numerous small nucleated villages and hamlets scattered at a high density through the Vale including the spring line settlement on the northern foothills of Bishops Canning, Allington, Stanton St. Bernard and Alton Barnes. To the south the foothill villages of Wedhampton, Wilsford, Patney Chirton, Marden and Charlton have a looser linear character. Other notable settlements include those that have developed alongside the canal such as at Honeystreet and Wootton Rivers and the chain of attractive villages, the Manningfords along the River Avon. Dominant building materials are soft red brick and flint, often used in decorative styles, with other materials including limestone, sarsen, cob and timber frame, with roofs of straw thatch or clay tile.
- 13.18. The settlements are linked by a network of minor roads, including main north - south links between Marlborough and Salisbury via Pewsey and Burbage. On the Vale floor vast tracts of flat farmland remain undisturbed between the roads and these areas consequently have a strong sense of remoteness. The railway runs east-west through

the Vale, as does the Kennet and Avon canal, both introducing corridors of movement and forming dominant features within the landscape.

Key Characteristics

- Upper Greensand forms the flat base of the Vale, with small areas of Gault Clay revealed on the western edge. On the flanks of the Vale are a series of low undulating foothills of Lower Chalk;
- broad low lying almost flat Vale - forming a vast, level open space contained and enclosed by the dramatic stark escarpments of the chalk upland to either side;
- varied land cover, with pasture along tributaries and arable fields enclosed by hedgerows and woodlands. The low undulating foothills are typically under cultivation with very open large scale fields;
- a weak hedgerow structure through much of the area with few hedgerow trees and boundaries replaced by fencing - opening up some long views;
- a network of water channels weave across the flat Vale floor, lined by riparian vegetation with strips of alder and willow;
- historic continuity in settlements with Pewsey being Saxon in origin, Wootton Rivers once being the centre of a Saxon royal estate, and villages such as Coate and All Cannings on a typical medieval layout;
- the Kennet and Avon Canal, with its traditional structures including bridges and locks, and the Crofton Pumping Station, plus a diverse range of recreational opportunities;
- the Salisbury Avon is an important chalk river. The river and its associated wetland habitats are a candidate Special Area of Conservation (SAC);
- densely settled with a great variety of settlement including the compact town of Pewsey on the River Avon, numerous small villages and hamlets on the foothills of the downs, plus settlement along the canal and the River Avon;
- built form includes soft red brick and flint, often used in decorative styles, limestone, sarsen, cob and timber frame, with roofs of straw thatch or clay tile.

Physical Influences

13.19. Upper Greensand forms the flat base of the Vale, with small areas of Gault Clay revealed on the western edge. The meandering tributaries and headwaters of the Avon have deposited bands of alluvium, producing rich soils in the eastern part of the character area, with the remainder of the floor covered by deep well drained loamy soils. On the flanks of the Vale the landform rises as a series of low undulating foothills of Lower Chalk, such as at Woodborough Hill, and the Knoll near Allington. These gradually grade down to the flatter floor of the central part of the Vale, although isolated outliers of the Lower Chalk form distinctive 'stranded' hills. The Salisbury Avon and its network of shallow tributaries drain the whole Vale. Further south at Upavon, the valley of the Avon forms a distinct character area in its own right, but within the AONB its headwaters are assimilated within the wider low-lying Vale landscape. Throughout the whole area the 'borrowed' landscape of the surrounding scarps, which tower to either side create a dominant backdrop.

Historic Environment

- 13.20. **Landscape Development:** Generally, the intensive land use within the Vale means that archaeological evidence is limited compared to the chalk uplands that lie to either side. Evidence of late Neolithic and early Bronze Age activity includes the henge at Marden. There are some Bronze Age round barrows within the area, mostly isolated examples on ridges and hilltops, such as Swanborough Tump. Near Alton Barnes, a roughly north-south stretch of the Ridgeway survives passing up the scarp edge between Walkers Hill and Knap Hill. The line of the Romano-British road from *Cunetio* (Mildenhall) to *Leucomagus* (Andover), which crosses the Vale just to the east of the village of Wilton, is preserved in the present-day road pattern.
- 13.21. **Medieval Settlement and Land Use:** Medieval landscape features include a moated site at Marten, lynchets and field systems, such as those on Woodborough Hill. Villages such as Coate and All Cannings are laid out in a typical medieval manner, with plot boundaries arranged on either side of central streets. Some of the few more sinuous field boundaries may have medieval origins. The woods around Manningford Bruce and Manningford Abbots show some signs of assarting, perhaps in the late medieval or early post-medieval periods.
- 13.22. **Field Pattern:** Most of the field boundaries in the area are straight and regular, and probably reflect formal Parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.
- 13.23. **Modern Landscape:** Early modern features include the Kennet and Avon Canal and associated industrial archaeology including Crofton pumping station. Settlements such as Pewsey Wharf also contain buildings associated with the canal. The main rail line to the west of England crosses the area.

Biodiversity

- 13.24. The Vale of Pewsey supports a good variety habitat types, including wetlands, grasslands, woodland and heathland. Of these habitats perhaps the most important and characteristic are the wetlands, for example Jone's Mill (SSSI) and The River Avon System (SSSI). There are also a significant number of non-statutory sites, with around 40 grassland, 16 woodland, 3 heathland and 8 wetland mosaic sites.
- 13.25. Jone's Mill (SSSI) provides the best example of calcareous valley mire in Wiltshire, and supports a good range of wetland plants. Many of these wetland species are rare in the county including bottle sedge (*Carex rostrata*), bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and bog pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*).

Key Issues

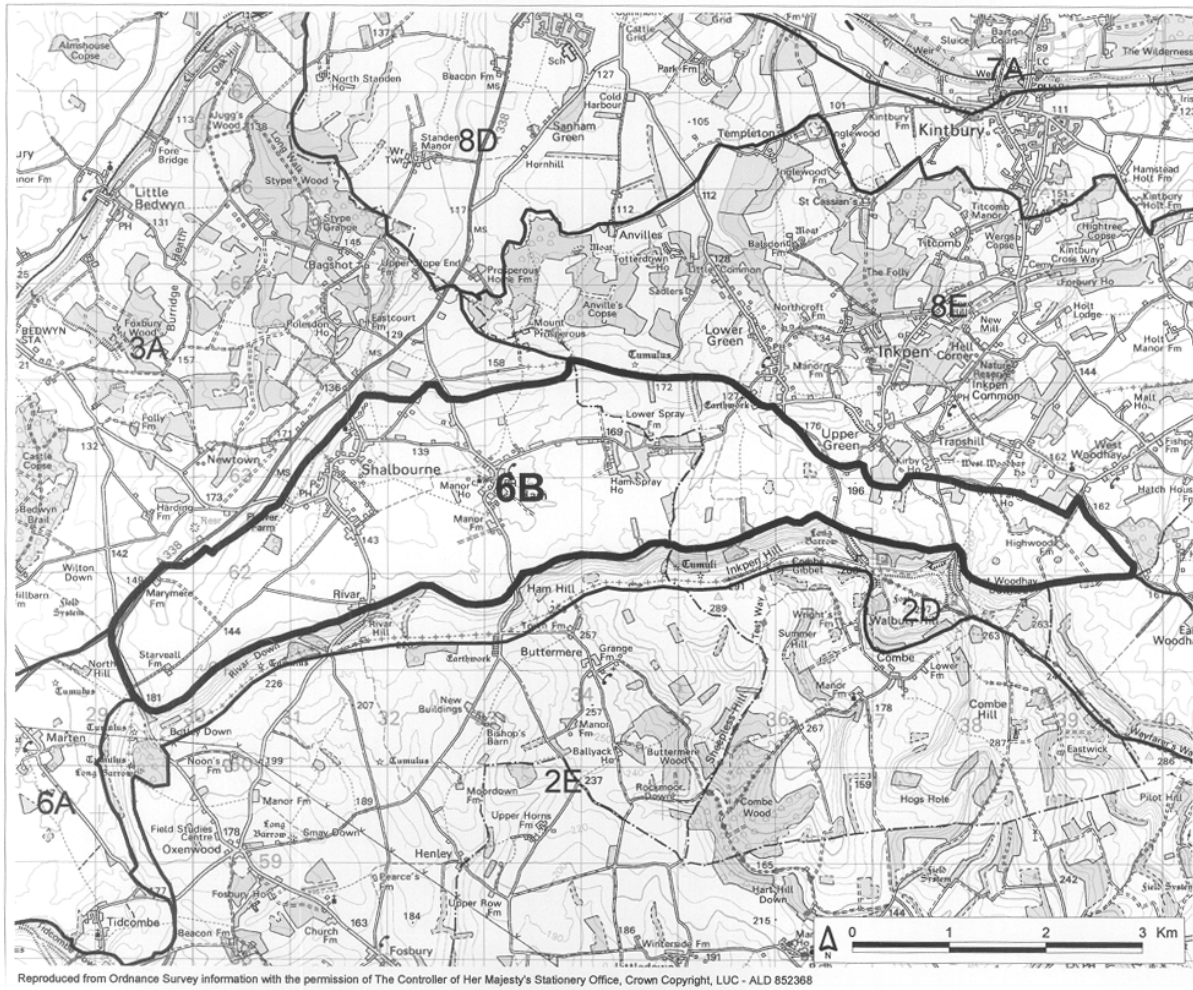
- intensive arable farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** particularly biodiversity by drainage and cultivation of permanent pasture, widespread loss of riparian vegetation plus nutrient run off to chalk rivers;

- potential changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some remaining Vale pastures no longer being grazed and **scrub encroachment or management as horse paddocks**;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- localised intrusion of **roads, overhead power lines and pylons** all of which are highly visible in the context of this flat low lying landscape;
- **increased traffic on the rural lane network**, plus road improvements including kerbing, widening, signing and visibility splays which, in places creates a more urban landscape;
- need for appropriate management and enhancement of **woodlands, parklands and estate landscapes**;
- intense **development pressures**, particularly for new housing - impact on the character of the villages and their edges - so that settlements are less assimilated into the landscape;
- vulnerability to the impact development on the '**borrowed**' landscape of the scarps that tower to either side of the Vale.

Key Management Requirements

- 13.26. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the rural, agricultural character of the Vale of Pewsey with its vast open spaces enclosed by dramatic scarp slopes to either side. This includes the pattern of hedgerows, streams and remnant waterside pastures, wet meadows and woodlands and the traditional features associated with the Kennet and Avon canal corridor. There are opportunities for creation of new riparian woodlands, hedgerow planting and restoration of waterside pasture. The area is particularly vulnerable to change with significant pressures for new development. The objective should be to maintain the pattern of discrete small villages set within a quiet rural landscape.

CHARACTER AREA 6B: SHALBOURNE VALE



2.27. **Location and Boundaries:** Shalbourne Vale is the eastern extension of the wider Vale of Pewsey (6A), forming a narrow undulating belt of land, underlain by Greensand. It is contained between the two chalk upland belts of Savernake Plateau (3A) to the north and the Walbury Hill - Watership Down (2D) scarp slope to the south. It extends westward to the lowland landscapes of Highclere Lowlands and Heath (8E), with the boundary formed at the point where the geology changes and the landscape becomes more densely wooded around Inkpen.

Landscape Character Description

- 13.28. Shalbourne Vale forms an eastward extension of the Vale of Pewsey. It has a distinct character as a result of its narrow linear form, being more enclosed and contained and lacking the vast open level spaces of the area to the west. The Vale floor is predominantly under pasture, with some arable cultivation in medium to large fields, divided by mature hedgerows. Field boundaries vary from intact to those with a weaker structure. Woodland cover is very sparse apart from some small mixed copses east of Ham and a distinctive area of parkland with mature parkland trees set in pasture around Ham Spray House. However, the hedgerows and abundance of mature hedgerow trees which line the lanes and roads help create a more wooded character, as do the views to the surrounding wooded scarp slopes for example at Ham Hill and Inkpen Hill. Tree species including oak and birch indicate the lighter sandy soils present within this character area. The streams that drain the Vale, are very small scale and not generally important features of the landscape, although watercress beds are present at Shalbourne. Shalbourne and Ham are both loose linear settlements situated along roads running north-south across the Vale, elsewhere settlement is very limited, with just a handful of farms present.
- 13.29. The area is located at the junction of Wiltshire, Berkshire and Hampshire and similarly forms a transition between three joint character areas as shown on the Countryside Agency's Character of England Map, namely the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs (116), the Hampshire Downs (130) and the Thames Basin Heaths (129). Characteristics of each of these distinct areas are present to a greater or lesser degree within Shalbourne Vale.

Key Characteristics

- thin, eastern extension of the Vale of Pewsey, underlain by the Upper Greensand with light sandy soils;
- the narrow, undulating Vale is enclosed by the steep wooded scarp of River Down and Inkpen Hill to the south and a gentler slope rising to Savernake Plateau in the north;
- Vale floor predominantly under pasture, with some arable cultivation in medium to large fields divided by hedgerows, plus an abundance of mature hedgerow trees;
- some Bronze Age round barrows can be found on the ridges and hilltops which rise either side of the Vale;
- sparse woodland cover with the exception of small mixed copses east of Ham and an area of parkland around Ham Spray House;
- Shalbourne and Ham are both loose linear settlements based on a medieval layout. Elsewhere settlement is limited to a small number of farms;
- enclosed, contained and secluded character distinguishing it from the vast open level spaces of Pewsey Vale to the west.

Physical Influences

- 13.30. Geologically the area is very similar to the Vale of Pewsey, with Upper Greensand forming an undulating base to the Vale, with a thin band of Lower Clay extending around

the edge of the Vale, as the boundary with the higher chalk uplands. The clays and alluvium, however, are absent creating lighter sandy soils. The landform is much more enclosed than the Vale of Pewsey with a narrow, undulating floor enclosed by the steep scarp of Rivar Down and Inkpen Hill to the south and a gentler slope rising to Savernake Plateau in the north. The contours rise gradually to the west, with the Vale drained by small streams running to the north into the River Kennet, whereas the Vale of Pewsey drains to the Salisbury Avon system. The western part of the Vale is therefore the catchment divide. To the south east the rising undulating topography merges with the Lower Chalk foothills forming the escarpment below Walbury Hill.

Historic Environment

- 13.31. **Prehistoric earthworks:** Prominent prehistoric earthworks on the scarp edge to the south are visible from the Vale. These include a long barrow and Walbury Hill fort on Inkpen Hill and several isolated Bronze Age round barrows.
- 13.32. **Medieval Settlement and Land Use:** Villages such as Shalbourne and Ham are laid out in a typical medieval manner, with plot boundaries arranged on either side of central streets. Some of the few more sinuous field boundaries may have medieval origins.

Biodiversity

- 13.33. This Landscape Character Area includes 3 grassland and 5 woodland sites with non-statutory designation within its boundaries. Examples of the woodland sites are Ham spray copse and Inwood copse. There are no SSSIs within this character area.

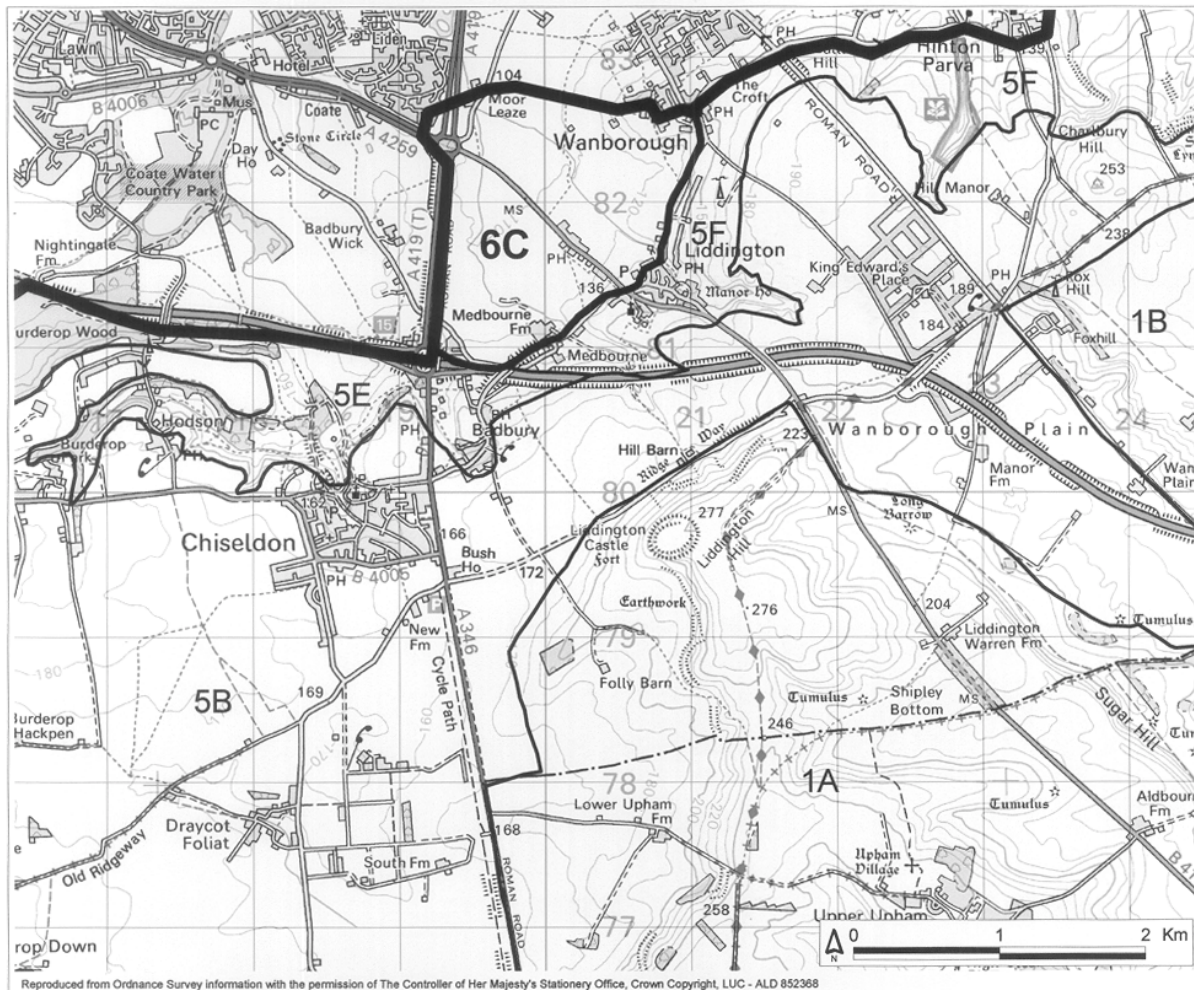
Key Issues

- in the past intensive farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** particularly biodiversity by drainage and cultivation of permanent pasture;
- future changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some remaining Vale pastures no longer being grazed resulting in **scrub encroachment** or pressure for alternative land uses;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- **localised intrusion** of the A338, which runs along a slope above the Vale floor;
- need for appropriate management and enhancement of **woodlands, parklands and estate landscapes** e.g. Ham Spray House;
- the area is particularly vulnerable to the impact of **changes on the surrounding steep scarp slopes** of adjacent character areas, e.g. road improvements or tall structures on the scarp top.

Key Management Requirements

- 13.34. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the quiet, rural character of the Vale at Shalbourne. This includes the pattern of hedgerows, small-scale woodlands and historic features including parkland and watercress beds. There are opportunities to create a more intact hedgerow structure by new planting and restoration of pasture along the streamsides. The sparse settlement pattern should be maintained. The clear skylines and backdrop of the surrounding downland slopes should be maintained.

CHARACTER AREA 6C: WANBOROUGH VALE



2.35. **Location and Boundaries:** At Wanborough, the AONB boundary includes a very small part of the wider lower lying Vale landscape that continues to the north of the AONB and east of Swindon as the Vale of White Horse. In this area the AONB boundary extends to the edge of the Swindon urban area at Coate. The character area therefore forms a very important area of open land between the base of the scarp (5E & 5F) at Liddington and the urban edge.

Landscape Character Description

- 13.36. Wanborough Vale forms part of the much wider lower lying Vale landscape that extends to the north of the AONB. Here, the AONB boundary encompasses an important open area that abuts the development edge of Swindon. The area possesses many of the characteristics of the wider Vale with tree and shrub-lined streams and ditches draining to the River Cole through a mixed pasture and arable landscape. Fields are medium scale and bounded by a network of hedgerows, with abundant hedgerow trees. This area, however, has a distinct 'urban fringe' character, with the surrounding road network being a dominant influence. The main M4 Swindon junction forms the south-west corner, and the straight A346, following the route of a Roman road cuts the western edge. The area is wholly visible from the surrounding road network. Other urban influences include recent development on the edge of Wanborough (main part of the settlement outside the AONB boundary) plus views to the edge of Swindon.

Key Characteristics

- almost entirely level, flat Plain forming part of a much wider Vale landscape that extends beyond the boundary of the AONB. The rising scarp to the south is a dominant feature;
- drained by the streams rising on the scarp which flow north to form the headwaters of the River Cole;
- a mixed pasture and arable landscape with fields being medium scale and bounded by a network of hedgerows with abundant hedgerow trees;
- field pattern dominated by Parliamentary enclosure with more recent boundary removal to create a very open landscape;
- distinct 'urban fringe' character due to the presence of the M4 and A346 and recent development on the edge of Wanborough plus views to the edge of Swindon.

Physical Influences

- 13.37. Gault Clay, producing heavy clay soils, underlies the main part of the Vale, with Lower Greensand occurring at the base of the scarp. Topographically, the area is almost entirely level, but is dominated by the backdrop of the rising scarp slope to the south (5F: Liddington- Letcombe Open Scarp). It is drained by streams rising on the scarp and draining northwards forming the headwaters of the River Cole.

Historic Environment

- 13.38. **Landscape Development:** Intensive arable land use means that there is little extant archaeology. The villages of Liddington and Wanborough date to at least the medieval period. Otherwise, this area is dominated by the pattern of Parliamentary enclosure fields dating from the late eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

Biodiversity

- 13.39. There are no statutory or non-statutory sites in this small character area.

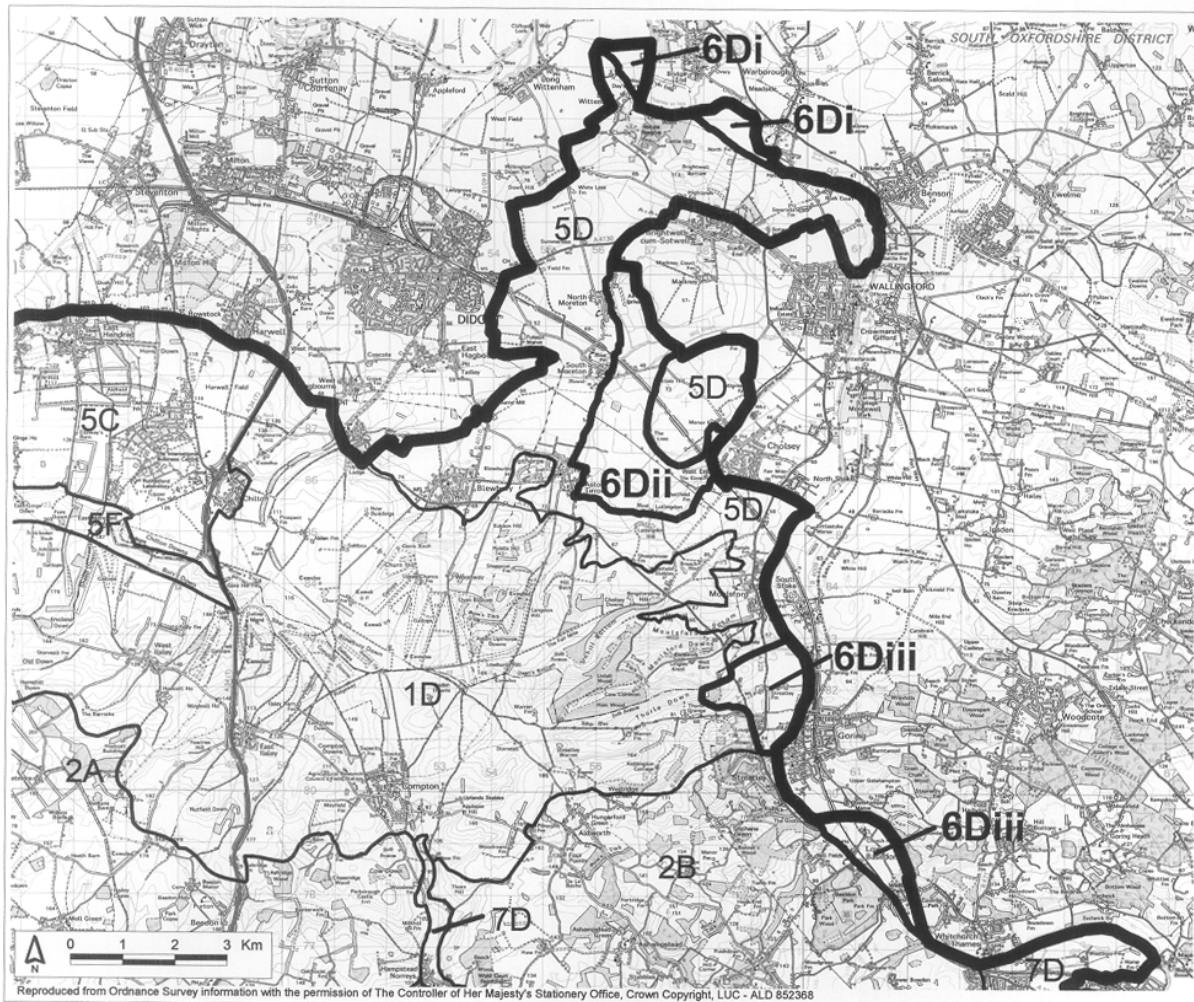
Key Issues

- urban fringe character - dominant **influence of the road network** - M4, A419 (T);
- recent **residential development** at Wanborough and views to the edge of Swindon;
- in the past intensive farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** particularly biodiversity by drainage and cultivation of permanent pasture;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and some mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- vulnerable to the impact of development on the steep scarp slope to the south (borrowed landscape dominant in view).

Key Management Requirements

- 13.40. The overall management objective is to maintain this as an open agricultural landscape to provide a buffer between the urban expansion of Swindon and the scarp slope of the downs.

CHARACTER AREA 6D: THAMES VALLEY FLOODPLAIN



2.41. **Location and Boundaries:** The eastern boundary of the AONB takes in a number of small low lying Vale landscapes that form part of the Thames Valley Floodplain, with the river roughly following the eastern edge of the AONB between Benson and Pangbourne. The Thames Valley, itself is a major physical feature separating the chalk landscape of the North Wessex Downs AONB to the west from the Chilterns AONB to the east. There are four geographically separate areas of the low lying Vale landscape within the AONB:

- i) Benson in the north-west corner of the AONB;
- ii) Moreton on the floodplain to the west of Wallingford;
- iii) Streatley and Basildon on the eastern edge;

A smaller area of the Thames valley around Pangbourne, is included in the Pang Valley character area (7D).

- 13.42. Individually, these comprise very small areas, with a landscape character that has much in common with the wider character areas of the Upper Thames Clay Vales (108) that extends beyond the AONB.

Landscape Character Description

- 13.43. **6D (i): Benson:** In the north-west corner of the AONB, the River Thames meanders within a wide floodplain contained by chalk escarpments. The AONB includes the course of the river and its adjacent floodplain to the south, from which the land rises steeply to the Sinodun Hills. The settlements of Dorchester and Warborough lie on the north bank of the Thames outside the AONB. The area within the AONB comprises large regular mixed arable/pasture fields, bounded by hedges and ditches lined with willow, alder and poplar. The bank of the river contains sinuous belts of broadleaved woodland that curve inside the meanders. The Thames Path National Trail runs along the northern side of the river, with recreational facilities and boat hire at Benson. To the south the floodplain and river are less accessible. This together with large fields and an absence of settlement creates a more remote and isolated landscape. Excellent views across this area can be obtained from Wittenham Clumps on the Sinodun Hills.
- 13.44. **6D (ii): Moreton:** The Moreton area forms part of the wider Thames floodplain which extends west from Wallingford (outside the AONB). It does not include the course of the river itself. This is a distinct, flat, low-lying area between the smoothly rounded hills of the higher chalk landscapes, with the Sinodun Hills to the north and the edge of the main chalk upland of the Blewbury Downs (1D) to the south. It is crossed by numerous watercourses with streams, such as Mill Brook, flowing to the Thames. A network of water-filled drainage ditches, subdivide the landscape in a regular rectilinear pattern. The thin lines of trees and shrubs along the ditches provide some landscape structure. Drainage has allowed the majority of fields to be put under arable cultivation, with little pasture remaining. Hedgerows bounding the fields are sparse and generally weak in structure with few hedgerow trees creating a very open landscape with expansive views. In this context the power lines which cross the area from Didcot are highly visible and intrusive. The villages of North and South Moreton are located on isolated pockets of higher ground (adjacent character area 5D), and the Vale itself is unsettled. The railway crosses east-west through the area, although despite this, or perhaps because of the severance by the rail line and comparative inaccessibility, the area has a remote, isolated character.
- 13.45. **6D (iii): Streatley and Basildon:** The River Thames meanders through a confined floodplain on the eastern edge of the AONB. In places where the river runs against the escarpment formed by the Chilterns, the floodplain contained within the meander to the

west is included in the North Wessex Downs AONB. This occurs in two locations, to the north of Goring and Streatley and to the east of Lower Basildon. These are small flat areas little more than a few fields wide located on river gravel terrace deposits, with the higher land of the chalk down rising to the west. These are large scale open pasture dominated areas contained by the higher land on either side. At Basildon, a more enclosed character is created by a parkland landscape with mature trees around Church Farm and the steep wooded cliffs on the west bank of the Thames.

Key Characteristics

- a number of small areas of 'Vale' landscapes on the eastern edge of the AONB form part of the larger floodplain of the Thames;
- a flat low-lying landscape generally below a height of 50m, with long views and comparative sense of remoteness and isolation;
- linear water-filled drainage ditches and other small watercourses flowing to the Thames are a defining feature;
- generally large scale fields with a mixture of arable and pasture with hedgerows of varying condition in addition to the ditch boundaries;
- tree and shrub lined streams and ditches provide landscape structure;
- numerous traces of pre-historic occupation in the area in the form of crop marks on the well drained gravels of the Thames floodplain including evidence for Palaeolithic activity;
- floodplain generally characterised by a lack of settlement with the exception of occasional farms.

Physical Influences

- 13.46. The Thames Valley is a major physical feature separating the two chalk upland blocks of the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns. The river runs within a level floodplain, which narrows between steep wooded slopes at Goring Gap on the eastern edge of the AONB. The valley floor, which cuts into the chalk is overlain by gravel deposits and alluvium, with clays underlying the wider floodplain around North and South Moreton. It is a flat low lying landscape generally below the 50m contour.

Historic Environment

- 13.47. **Landscape Development:** There are numerous traces of prehistoric occupation in the area, but these take the form of cropmarks that form readily on the well-drained gravels of the Thames floodplain. The gravels themselves have produced evidence for Palaeolithic occupation in the area, including stone tools and animal remains of now extinct species. They also include evidence for late prehistoric (late Neolithic cursus and round barrows) and Romano-British features - today these can only be discerned on air photographs.
- 13.48. Large-scale regular fields, characteristic of formal eighteenth and nineteenth century enclosure, are the predominant field pattern.

Biodiversity

- 13.49 **6D (i): Benson:** The Thames floodplain – Benson Character Area contains 2 non-statutory wetland sites, namely Shillingford Hotel Meadow and Rush Court. There are no sites with statutory designation in this Character Area.
- 13.50 **6D (ii): Moreton:** There are no statutory or non-statutory sites in this small character area.
- 13.51 **6D (iii): Streatley and Basildon:** The Thames floodplain – Streatley and Basildon Character Area, contains 2 non-statutory wetland nature conservation sites, these are Child Beale and Streatley Meadows. There are no sites with statutory designation in this Character Area.

Key Issues

- in the past intensive farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** particularly biodiversity by drainage and cultivation of waterside pasture;
- future **changes in farming practices** - including loss of livestock with some remaining pastures no longer being grazed;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly riparian features including wet woodland and pollarded willows, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows and woodlands;
- **localised intrusion** of the pylons and overhead power lines;
- the area is particularly vulnerable to the impact of **changes on the surrounding steep slopes** of adjacent character areas.

Key Management Requirements

- 13.52 The overall management objective is to maintain the character of these floodplain landscapes on the edge of the AONB, with their comparative remoteness, and to enhance their ecological character through restoration of waterside pasture and riparian vegetation.