

Chapter 2 Theme 1: Landscape

Please note, this chapter is subject to amendment in May/June in light of the Landscape Character Assessment review which is currently underway

“The slopes of the downs, if they have general form, are continually changing and interchanging in localities, assuming new and strange shapes, charming and surprising with their grace and exquisiteness, forever reflecting the mood of the heavens”

Alfred Williams (1877–1930)

3.1 The North Wessex Downs is a visibly ancient landscape of great beauty, diversity and size. It embraces the high, open arable sweeps of the chalk downs and dramatic scarp slopes with their prehistoric monuments and beech knolls, the moulded dip slopes, sheltered chalk river valleys; intimate and secluded wooded areas and low-lying heaths with a rich mosaic of woodland, pasture, heath and commons. The North Wessex Downs form a surprisingly remote, expansive and tranquil landscape in the heart of southern England.

3.2 The depth of history can still be seen in these landscapes, including the World Heritage Site of prehistoric Avebury; the royal hunting forest of Savernake, the Uffington White Horse, and the Ridgeway – the oldest road in England. The built environment makes a strong contribution to the beauty of the landscape, with historic towns and villages, churches, spectacular barns, manor houses with their parks and gardens, and the industrial heritage of the Kennet and Avon Canal. The Saxon name of Wessex reveals the area’s literary connections, revived by Thomas Hardy and used as the setting for many of his novels. Around a century later, Richard Adams provided a vivid evocation of this area in *Watership Down*.

Geology, Landform and Land Use

3.3 Geology, landform and the uses that humans have made of the land have together created the distinctive and beautiful landscapes of the area. The chalk forms an arc of high ground – the northern, western and southern parts of the National Landscape, cut through by the Vale of Pewsey to the west, and including, at Walbury Hill, the highest chalk hill in southern England. From this great rim, the land generally falls down the dipslope of the chalk, to the central basin of the east-flowing Rivers Kennet, Lambourn and Pang.

3.4 The greater part of the area is underlain by chalk, resulting in the dramatic scarps and beautiful gentle rolling topography so characteristic of the North Wessex Downs. The steep scarp slopes of the chalk and Upper Greensand, with their expansive viewpoints, and the gentle rolling open chalk plateau are very obviously influenced by the underlying geology. These chalk landscapes were traditionally in sheep grazing – the wool being the source of much of England’s historic wealth. However, much of the chalk grassland has since been ploughed, and the resulting extensive, open arable land is now the most frequent land use and landscape of the chalk downs. Herb-rich chalk grassland remains in fragments on the steeper scarps.

3.5 Where the chalk has a thick capping of clay-with-flints, the topography is softer, with smaller hedged fields and much greater woodland cover – a very different, enclosed and intimate, landscape from the open sweep of the downs. Overlying the chalk are patches of more recent sediments, particularly in the lower part of the basin. These contrast with the chalk scenery by producing more acidic soils, with their associated heathland landscapes.

3.6 Some of the more impressive features of the landscape are the dry valleys or coombes, found across the chalk plateau and often forming deep rounded valleys. They are the result of torrents of water flowing over the surface of the chalk during cold periods when permafrost (frozen ground) made the chalk impermeable. The coombes are often associated with terrace features along the valleys, such as those at White Horse Hill in Oxfordshire. These result from the movement downhill of frost-shattered chalk during times of partial thaw. Large amounts of material moving down the slope of the

valley can accumulate in the valley bottom, forming a deposit known as head. Sarsen stones are one of the most identifiable and well-known features of the North Wessex Downs, forming the great stone circle and avenues at Avebury and the fields of 'grey wethers' (because they look like sheep) at Fyfield Down. Sarsens are silica-cemented sand or pebble deposits, often moved by natural processes a considerable way from their source.

3.7 Whilst many of the chalk valleys are dry, some have characteristic 'bournes', generally dry, but flowing when the ground water is high. England has 85% of the world's chalk streams and a large proportion of this resource is located within or near the North Wessex Downs. These have a rich and highly characteristic ecology, and frequently support rich biodiversity.

3.8 Settlement is also strongly related to the underlying physical setting. The high, dry chalklands have no water to support settlement, so have remained open, remote, and tranquil, with farmsteads and villages on the spring lines and in the more sheltered and fertile valleys. Traditional building materials include bricks from local clays, flints, Melbourn Rock, Chalk Rock (not the soft chalk), cob, sarsens, thatch, and timber from the forests.

3.9 Designation as a National Landscape recognises the character, value and quality of the North Wessex Downs. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), updated in December 2024, gives the highest status of protection to the overall diversity of landscape and scenic beauty of the area.¹ This means that these areas are given special consideration in planning decisions. The North Wessex Downs are of high scenic quality and with their wildlife and cultural heritage an integral part of their character and value. Although almost entirely a chalk landscape, the character differs markedly across the National Landscape, depending on local surface geology, soils, landform, land use, vegetation and settlement patterns. The greatest contrast, for example, is between the open arable chalk downs and the acid heathlands of the lower river valleys. Natural England has set out a 'landscape character assessment' (LCA) methodology to formally identify what it is that makes one landscape different from another. The landscape character assessment for the North Wessex Downs identifies the overall diversity of the landscape, recognising eight 'Landscape Types' across the National Landscape, each with its own distinct sense of place. These eight Landscape Types can be further subdivided into 'Landscape Character Areas; there are a total of 33 Character Areas across the National Landscape. Landscape character assessment draws out the valued qualities of the landscape, traces its evolution over the centuries and identifies the main issues that will need to be addressed to conserve its special character and outstanding qualities.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape Types

Landscape Type : 1. Open Downland

3.10 The Open Downland forms the backbone of the North Wessex Downs as an elevated plateau of the hard Middle and Upper Chalks. The landscape is of open, smoothly rounded downland dissected by dry valleys and long sinuous steep scarps, and is devoid of surface water. Tree cover is limited to distinctive Beech clumps crowning summits and occasional linear shelter belts.

3.11 This is a remote, tranquil landscape of panoramic views where the sky forms a key part of the landscape, including the effect of cloud shadows on the ground and the wind creating swells through the crops. The dominant land use is of vast sweeping arable fields with small remnant patches of chalk grassland on steeper slopes. Settlement is extremely sparse and limited to scattered farmsteads and racing stables.

Landscape Type : 2. Downland with Woodland

3.12 This landscape is distinctly different from the Open Downland. It is of lower elevation and has a thick capping of clay-with-flints over the chalk. It has softer contours and considerably greater woodland cover.

3.13 The scale is smaller, with field patterns a mixture of small irregular medieval enclosures and larger regular Parliamentary enclosures.

Landscape Type : 3. Wooded Plateau

3.14 Centred on the woodland tracts of Savernake Forest and West Woods, the extent of this largely wooded area reflects the bounds of the medieval royal hunting forest of Savernake, established by the time of the Domesday survey. Throughout this gently dipping plateau, a thick covering of clay-with-flints and Tertiary deposits mask the solid chalk and results in damp and heavy soils.

3.15 Today, the Forest consists of extensive tracts of semi-natural ancient woodland, wood pasture with majestic veteran trees, and 18th and 19th Century Beech plantations, as well as more recent coniferous plantations. Reflecting its origins as a royal hunting forest, the countryside remains undeveloped, with settlement limited to villages in the valley of the River Dun – Great and Little Bedwyn.

Landscape Type : 4. High Chalk Plain

3.16 This is the northernmost tip of Salisbury Plain. The open rolling landform of the Upper Chalk creates a bleak, spacious landscape under arable production and devoid of settlement, with long views and a strong sense of remoteness and isolation.

3.17 A dramatic escarpment forms the northern boundary, as at Pewsey Hill and Fyfield Down, and provides panoramic views across the Vale of Pewsey to the north.

Landscape Type : 5. Downs Plain and Scarp

3.18 The landscape of the Downs Plain and Scarp extends along the entire length of the northern boundary of the North Wessex Downs. The plain is formed by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, creating a low level surface extending as a wide ledge at the foot of the high Open Downland. The distinctive northern scarp plunges down from the chalk plain to the Vale of White Horse, creating a dramatic recognisable horizon when viewed from the north.

3.19 This area is characterised by some of the most emblematic features of the North Wessex Downs: The Ridgeway, the oldest road in England – running along the top of the scarp; the Uffington White Horse on the scarp face; and Avebury on the open Downs Plain, forming part of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site.

3.20 The Downs Plain is characterised by vast arable fields, lack of surface water and a general absence of settlement. Conversely the dramatic scarp slope, cut by springs, creates a convoluted edge alternately under woodland and pasture, including significant areas of remnant chalk grassland. This is a landscape that feels as though it has hardly changed over the centuries, although it is increasingly affected by development at its foot, outside the National Landscape boundary.

Landscape Type : 6. Vales

3.21 The Vale of Pewsey separates the two main upland chalk blocks that dominate the North Wessex Downs. The towering shapes of the adjacent chalk scarps contain and enclose this Greensand vale. Numerous springs issue from the chalk and Greensand boundary where the water table comes to the surface, their streams meandering across the Vale floor.

3.22 Rich loamy and alluvial soils create a productive agricultural landscape with a mix of arable, orchards and pasture now replacing a once predominantly pastoral scene important for dairying – hence the saying ‘chalk and cheese’, identifying the very different landscapes of the downs and the vale. The concentration of settlements is a defining feature of the Vale, including compact nucleated villages and hamlets, with widespread scattered farmsteads. The Vales character type also occurs at the north-eastern edge of the North Wessex Downs, with the sections of the Thames valley floor that lie within this National Landscape. The eastern part of the Thames valley floor here lies within the adjoining Chilterns National Landscape.

Landscape Type : 7. River Valleys

3.23 The chalk rivers that cut through the chalk uplands form very distinct linear landscapes, characterised by a rich mix of grazed pastures, water meadows, wetland and woodland. The valleys are enclosed by steeply rising slopes, limiting views and creating an intimate and enclosed character.

3.24 Historically, the main settlements of the chalk were concentrated in these river valleys, as the only source of accessible water in an otherwise dry downland landscape. These settlements took a long linear form, following the bottom of the valley, and this remains the dominant pattern to this day. The chalk uplands (in other character areas) are also cut by numerous dry valleys, which sometimes contain ephemeral 'winterbournes' only flowing when the chalk water table rises to the surface during the winter and early spring.

Landscape Type : 8. Lowland Mosaic

3.25 This is the lowest part of the 'bowl', curving around Newbury and the lower Kennet valley. This landscape, of largely Medieval origins has a varied geology of clays, silts and sands giving rise to a diverse mix of soils and, in turn, a mosaic of ancient semi-natural woodlands, plantations, remnant heathland and more open farmland areas.

3.26 This is a small-scale and intimate landscape, where lanes are frequently overhung by deep grassy and wooded banks, heightening the sense of seclusion. There are some limited longer views, as at Bucklebury Upper Common. The network of ancient semi-natural woodland, connecting hedgerows, areas of parkland, including wood pasture and veteran trees, create considerable ecological interest.

3.27 Former Medieval deer parks are a particular feature, as at Englefield, Highclere and Hampstead, with a number of these having been re-fashioned in the 18th Century as formal designed landscapes. This is one of the most densely inhabited areas of the North Wessex Downs, with large manor houses, a network of hamlets, and lines of houses and villages that have grown along the network of lanes.

National Landscape Valued Qualities: **The Landscape**

3.28 **Open Downland** extending from Roundway Down near Devizes to Lardon Chase overlooking the Thames at Streatley is dissected by dry valleys and long steep scarps, with limited tree cover and sense of remoteness and tranquillity.

3.29 **Downland with Woodland** on the dip slope descending to Kennet Valley and south across the Hampshire Downs; offering softer contours, woodland cover and a mix of field patterns.

3.30 Centred on Savernake Forest and West Woods, the **Wooded Plateau** consists of extensive tracts of semi-natural ancient woodland, wood pasture with majestic veteran trees, and 18th and 19th Century Beech plantations, as well as more recent coniferous plantations.

3.31 At the northernmost tip of Salisbury Plain, the open rolling landform of the **High Chalk Plain** creates a bleak, spacious landscape under arable production and devoid of settlement, with long views and a strong sense of remoteness and isolation.

3.32 The distinctive northern **Downs Plain and Scarp** plunges down from the chalk plain to the Vale of White Horse, creating a dramatic recognisable horizon.

3.33 The **Vales** of Pewsey and sections of the Thames Valley floor adjoining the Chilterns National Landscape offer productive loamy and alluvial soils where springs issue from the chalk and compact settlements contrast with scattered farmsteads.

3.34 The **River Valleys** of the Kennet, Lambourn, Pang and Bourne form very distinct linear landscapes, characterised by a rich mix of grazed pastures, water meadows, wetland and woodland. Steeply rising slopes create an intimate and enclosed character.

3.35 The **Lowland Mosaic**, curving around Newbury and the lower Kennet valley has a varied geology of clays, silts and sands giving rise to a diverse mix of soils and, in turn, a mosaic of ancient semi-natural woodlands, plantations, remnant heathland and more open farmland areas where sunken lanes heighten the sense of seclusion.

The Landscape: Key Issues, Principles and Policies

3.38 **Key issues** with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Landscape Valued Qualities:

- a) The potential for development beyond the National Landscape boundary to visually damage or undermine the scale and critical qualities of landscape character areas.
- b) Managing the Ridgeway National Trail and other rights of way to maximise enjoyment by responsible users protect wildlife and cultural heritage and minimise conflicts.
- c) The need to maintain and, where possible, extend chalk grassland habitat.
- d) The need to conserve and enhance the remoteness and expansive open scale of the downland landscape.
- e) The need for viable agriculture and forestry to continue to contribute to National Landscape purposes.
- f) Availability of sufficient resources for management and understanding of archaeological sites.
- g) The need to conserve and enhance the remote, secluded and relatively undeveloped character of more enclosed and intimate landscapes, including the character of the lanes.
- h) The need for appropriate woodland management, including the viable use of timber products, particularly for fuel.
- i) Encouraging restoration of wood pasture landscapes, husbandry and ecology and ensuring future veteran tree succession.
- j) The dominance of roads, in particular the impact of traffic noise, external lighting, road signs, insensitive materials and clutter on landscape character and people's experience of the landscape as they travel through it.
- k) The need to maintain the pattern of discrete villages set within a quiet rural landscape and ensuring that the views to the surrounding dramatic scarps are undamaged.
- l) The need to ensure continued improvement of water quality and water resources in rivers, supporting river managers and riparian landowners in river restoration and enhancement projects for fisheries and wildlife.
- m) The need to maintain and enhance adjacent seasonal flood meadows, grazed pastures, fen, damp woodlands and historic parkland.
- n) The need to conserve and enhance the small-scale, secluded and rural character of the lowland mosaic, including the fragile lowland heaths.
- o) Intense pressure for development throughout the National Landscape and its setting that threatens the character and quality of its landscape and risks merging of small settlements, encroachment by larger settlements and changes to the scale and nature of development boundaries.

- p) The need to protect and enhance historic sites, buildings and landscapes and their setting.
- q) The significant impact on the characteristic habitats in the National Landscape resulting from climate change, including increased extreme weather events and a potential increase in pests and diseases.

3.39 Principles

- S.01** Maintain and enhance the tranquillity and distinctive landscape character of the North Wessex Downs and its setting with a focus on the contribution from agriculture and forestry, development and infrastructure.
- S.02** Promote understanding, appreciation and participation in the AONB by local communities, visitors and those making decisions affecting its distinctive character.

3.40 Policies

- LA 01** Encourage all partners and other stakeholders to have regard for AONB purposes across all relevant policies, programmes and activities.
- LA 02** Seek to identify and address the main factors that threaten the valued qualities of the AONB landscape: e.g. water abstraction, agricultural practices including diffuse pollution of watercourses; lack of woodland management; damage to historic sites, built development.
- LA 03** Use the North Wessex Downs Integrated Landscape Character Assessment to inform policy and decision making across the AONB and its setting.
- LA 04** Support and promote good practice across all sectors that conserves and enhances the character and qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape.
- LA 05** Support and encourage efforts to conserve and explain the rich heritage of the North Wessex Downs, including archaeological sites.
- LA 06** Ensure that all development in or affecting the setting of the AONB conserves and enhances the character, qualities and heritage of the North Wessex Downs landscape.
- LA 07** Raise the policy profile of the North Wessex Downs locally, regionally and nationally to secure the co-ordination and resourcing of policies and programmes for the benefit of the AONB.

ⁱ (10) Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2018) National Planning Policy Framework; paragraph 172.