



NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

Historic Landscape Character Areas and their special qualities and features of significance



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Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy





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Summary

The North Wessex Downs AONB is one of the most attractive and fascinating landscapes of England and Wales. Its beauty is the result of many centuries of human influence on the countryside and the daily interaction of people with nature. The history of these outstanding landscapes is fundamental to its present-day appearance and to the importance which society accords it. If these essential qualities are to be retained in the future, as the countryside continues to evolve, it is vital that the heritage of the AONB is understood and valued by those charged with its care and management, and is enjoyed and celebrated by local communities.

The North Wessex Downs is an ancient landscape. The archaeology is immensely rich, with many of its monuments ranking among the most impressive in Europe. However, the past is etched in every facet of the landscape – in the fields and woods, tracks and lanes, villages and hamlets – and plays a major part in defining its present-day character. Despite the importance of individual archaeological and historic sites, the complex story of the North Wessex Downs cannot be fully appreciated without a complementary awareness of the character of the wider historic landscape, its time depth and settlement evolution.

This wider character can be broken down into its constituent parts. This process called ‘Characterisation’ is the process of identifying areas of similar character, classifying and mapping them and describing their character.

The North Wessex Downs AONB has an existing landscape character assessment (Land Use Consultants 2002) which identifies unique single areas of particular landscape types within the AONB such as chalk river valleys such as the Kennet. It also has a complementary Historic Landscape Characterisation (Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy, 2012; Conway 2007) which characterises the distinctive historic dimension of today’s landscape. This is a complex and multifaceted database concerned with time depth in the landscape as well as present day character comprised of recurrent but not necessarily geographically discrete Historic Landscape Types.

*This database has therefore been used as a basis for the identification of more strategic **Historic Landscape Character Areas**, which are akin to Landscape Character Areas in that they identify geographically discrete areas, with distinctive historic environment characteristics. These highlight surviving time-depth and the legibility and the enjoyment of the past in the present landscape. They identify the North Wessex Downs landscape’s cultural, historic and archaeological attributes and the importance of change through time as a primary characteristic. They provide a systematic overview of the characteristics of the historic landscape in the AONB and in this revised edition includes **their special qualities and features of significance** which can be used as a basis for the identification of management priorities and issues and actions.*

Section 1: Introducing the North Wessex Downs AONB Historic Landscape Character Areas

Twenty Eight distinct Historic Landscape Character Areas have been identified in the North Wessex AONB. The attributes used to identify the Historic Landscape Character Areas were based on information in the AONB Historic Landscape Characterisation. The HLC provided two key pieces of information:-

1. The present day historic landscape character present in the AONB.
2. The surviving evidence of the historical development of the area.

The following descriptions aim to provide an overview of each area which encapsulate the main features of the Historic Environment present and include both the archaeological and historical, the very old and the more recent.

The process by which the Historic Landscape Character Areas were identified, and mapped, and the sources of information used to create these descriptions is documented in Section 3: Methodology.

Introducing Historic Landscape Character Areas

The creation of Historic Character Areas provides a method of consolidating historic characterisation data, and other sources such as Historic Environment Records into a more generalised dataset based on geographically specific areas.

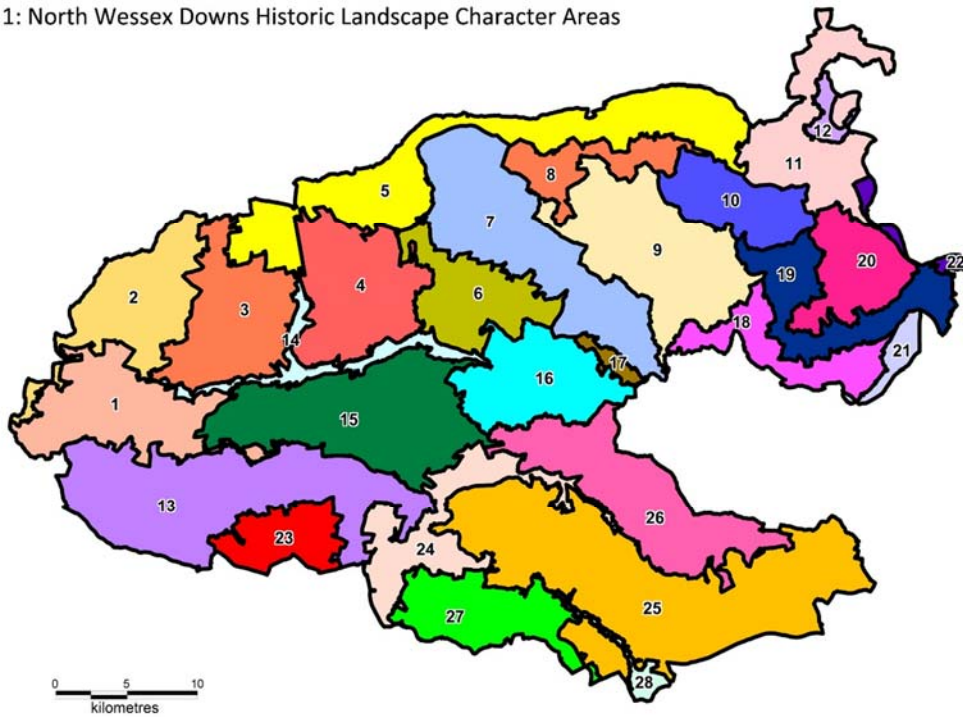
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

1. The characterisation dataset is often formed of many thousands of individual parcels of land each associated with a large amount of data.
2. The primary unit of these characterisations often called the Historic Character Type is usually not geographically specific. They often occur across the full geographical range of any given landscape. This forms a complex spatial pattern of interrelated types.
3. More recent characterisations record information on previous as well as present character

It is sometimes desirable to rework the datasets to provide a synthesis of the complex characterisation based on discrete geographical areas. This can be undertaken for three main reasons:

1. To allow the broad assessment of the historic and archaeological dimensions of the landscape.
2. To create areas that can be more easily engaged with and recognised by local people.
3. To aid in the creation of Historic Environment Action Plans and other management tools.

Figure 1: North Wessex Downs Historic Landscape Character Areas



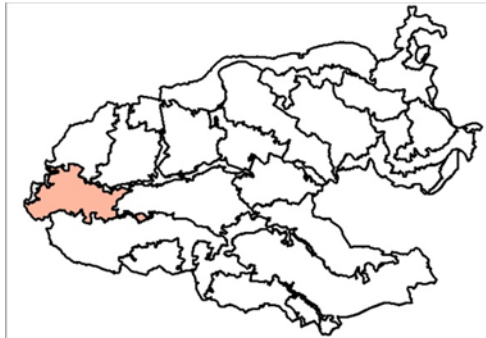
Map Produced by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy 2012. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2012.

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|-----|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|
| 1. | Pewsey Downs | 16. | Middle Kennet Valley |
| 2. | Avebury Plain | 17. | Stockcross-Wickham Heath |
| 3. | Barbury Downs | 18. | Snelmore and Bucklebury Commons |
| 4. | Aldbourn Downs | 19. | Pang Valley and Sulham Gap |
| 5. | Northern Chalk Escarpment | 20. | Pang-Thames Plateaux |
| 6. | Lambourn Wooded Plateau | 21. | Kennet Valley East |
| 7. | Lambourn Valley | 22. | Thames Valley South |
| 8. | West Ilsley and Downland | 23. | Milton Hill and Down |
| 9. | Winterbourne Valley and Downs | 24. | Shalbourne Vale and Wick Down |
| 10. | Upper Pang Valley | 25. | Linkenholt, Litchfield and Hannington |
| 11. | Greenhill and Thurle Downlands | 26. | Highclere and Inkpen Common |
| 12. | Thames Valley North | 27. | Chute Forest - Faccombe |
| 13. | Pewsey Vale | 28. | Bourne Valley and Hurstbourne Park |
| 14. | Upper Kennet Valley | | |
| 15. | Savernake Forest and West Woods | | |

See Volume 2 Figure 1 for an A3 version of this map and for A3 Maps showing the individual location of these areas in relationship to Ordnance Survey 1:25000 mapping.

Area 1: Pewsey Downs

An archaeologically exceptional landscape relating to the prehistoric period with Neolithic and Early Bronze Age evidence being particularly rich. Significant areas of open downland survive. These are an important historical survival representing a fraction of the former extent of pre 20th century open grazed chalk downland. The area is partly within the landscape of the Avebury World Heritage Site.



Location – This area is the western most extent of the high chalk downlands of Wiltshire and Berkshire, with the AONB boundary wrapping around the base of the steep slopes at Heddington and Roundway forming a clear landscape divide with the adjacent low lying Avon Vales. The area extends along the chalk escarpment to the South of the Savernake Plateau as far East as Lockeridge.

Geology and Topography – The geology is dominated by Upper Chalk, with Middle Chalk in the dry valleys. The

landform is of open rolling downland dissected by dry valleys and hills.

Landscape Character – This is a large scale landscape of extreme openness with strong ridgelines and wide expansive areas. Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 1A: Horton Downs.

Archaeological Character – The archaeological record is dominated by prehistoric archaeology. This includes evidence for intense Mesolithic exploitation of the area recorded as flint scatters, including the large scatter excavated at Golden Ball Hill. The Neolithic evidence is particularly rich; this includes sites within the boundary of the Avebury World Heritage Site which overlaps in part with the far North East of the area and includes the iconic site of the long barrow at West Kennet and the less well known example at East Kennet; part of the West Kennet Palisade complex; as well as numerous Bronze Age round barrows including the cemetery at Fox Covert.

However, nationally important Neolithic and early Bronze Age monuments also extend across the rest of the area and in some instances are in a good state of preservation. These include the Knap Hill Causewayed Enclosure; Adams Grave long barrow and other examples including at Oldbury and Hill Farm; as well as numerous extant Bronze Age round barrows. The Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites under plough are of equal importance including prehistoric flint scatters, ploughed out round barrows and enclosures.

There is significant cropmark evidence of later prehistoric field systems (later Bronze Age and Iron Age) and farming across the areas. These have generally been ascribed a later prehistoric/Romano-British date. Extensive areas of these field systems survived until recently as earthworks but have been levelled due to increased intensity of ploughing. Early, Middle and Later Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements have also been recorded. There are a notable concentration of Iron Age hillforts along the edge of the chalk escarpment including Cherhill, Rybury Camp and Oliver's Castle.

Roman evidence includes field systems, finds of coins and metal work, a Roman road which survives as an earthwork as well as enclosures.



Cherhill White Horse, Wiltshire - Open areas of close-cropped chalk grassland formerly dominated this area. These were used as part of the common grazing regime that operated in many Downs parishes in the Medieval period. White Horses on the edge of chalk escarpment form an iconic Post Medieval characteristic of the area. The ramparts of an Iron Age hillfort are also visible.

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Roundway Down, looking towards Furze Knoll – The present day historic landscape character is dominated by 20th century enclosure. This is divided roughly into two types: to the East new fields created by the ploughing up of open chalk downland and to the West fields created in the 20th century by modifying earlier 17th to 19th century enclosure. Woodland is limited to small post 1800 plantations. Roundway Down is the site of a Civil War battlefield.

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The Wansdyke on Tan Hill – An early Medieval linear boundary. This forms a major earthwork running across the area. Extant major monuments are an important and characteristic feature of the area dating from the Neolithic to the Early Medieval period.

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Early Medieval archaeology is dominated by the Wansdyke which runs along the Southern escarpment marking the Southern boundary of the area. It dates to the 5th/6th century AD. It consists of a ditch and a running embankment from the ditch spoil, with the ditching facing North. It runs between Savernake Forest and Morgan's Hill. Some evidence for Medieval exploitation of the downland has also been recorded including possible Medieval lynchets, and sheep enclosures.

Post Medieval archaeology recorded includes a network of dewponds, and several chalk cut figures of horses including at Cherhill and above Honeystreet. These are iconic features of the AONB. Cherhill is also associated with the Lansdowne Monument erected in 1845. The Civil War battlefield at Roundway Down is another important feature. Traces of World War Two defensive structures have also been recorded across the area.

Archaeological potential is extremely high across this area. There is potential for buried deposits from the Neolithic to the Roman period. Many field systems, linear banks and ditches and enclosures remain undated. Additional information on the early and later Medieval exploitation of this area could also be gathered.

Historic Landscape Trajectory – Open areas of close-cropped chalk grassland formerly dominated this area. This was used as grazing for animals. The land was also associated with small patches of scrub and gorse, which were used as fuel, and meandering open chalk trackways, used to cross this area. These open areas used as part of the common grazing regime that operated in many downland parishes in the Medieval period. Large swathes of common downland were enclosed during parliamentary enclosure in the 18th and 19th century. This trend is especially notable along the Southern chalk escarpment above the Vale of Pewsey as far North as Morgans Hill and along the Northern edge of the area below Cherhill Hill.

However, significant reserves remained as a major part of the sheep/corn system of agriculture until the early 20th century. This was a system of grain production made possible by the large sheep flocks, supported by early crops of grass produced by the water meadows in the Kennet Valley, which fed all day on the high open chalk downland and by night were folded on arable lands to enrich the soils. With the collapse of this system in the 20th century further enclosure and ploughing up of chalk grassland occurred.

Today areas of open downland survive located especially on steep slopes including Cherhill Hill and Morgans Down and along the tops of the Southern chalk escarpment in areas where arable agriculture is impractical or uneconomic. This is however a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland.

Ancient woodland is absent from this area.

Only one area of pre 1700 regular enclosure is found in the area to the South of Kings Play Hill; this probably represents early enclosure of downland by agreement in this area.

One historic park was created around Rainscombe House in the early 19th century beneath the chalk escarpment to the South of the Savernake Plateau.

Present Day Historic Landscape Character – The present day historic landscape character is dominated by 20th century enclosure. This is divided roughly into two types.

In the East new fields were created by ploughing up of open chalk downland. These fields are usually regular in shape and have straight boundaries. The majority of these fields have been created due to the expansion of agriculture onto downland areas, traditionally used as grazing, that had escaped historic enclosure.

In the West fields were created in the 20th century by modifying earlier 17th to 19th century enclosure. This type is usually created through a mixture of boundary removal and realignment of existing fields. The commonest origin of this type is where irregular boundaries of historic fields are straightened and more regularly-shaped fields are created in their place. There is usually some trace of the prior field-system visible in these modernised fields. These fields are located along the Southern chalk escarpment above the Vale of Pewsey as far North as Morgans Hill and along the Northern edge of the areas below Cherhill Hill and further South.

New Woodland creation occurred in the form of the development of secondary deciduous woodlands dating from 1600 to 1800 on Kings Play Hill and post 1800 regular plantations of woodland. These are small and scattered across the landscape especially on areas surviving as chalk downland. But they are much less common and much less characteristic compared to downland areas to the East.

Another trend is the creation of gallops for racehorse training to the South and East of Beckhampton. These are characterised by long, often sinuous, strips of grass which are sometimes demarked by white rails. They are not as common as on downland areas to the East.

Historic Settlement Character – Historically the area was devoid of settlement in the Medieval and Post Medieval period. Isolated agricultural cottages were created as arable farming spread into the area. Settlement development in the 20th century has likewise been negligible.

Historic Farmstead Character – Historically the area was devoid of farm buildings in the Medieval and Post Medieval period. Post 1800 isolated field barns were created as arable farming spread into the area but compared to other areas the historic farmstead legacy is less significant.

Special Qualities and features of Significance

Historic Interest

Many nationally important Prehistoric and Roman archaeological sites survive as earthworks. These have a strong illustrative interest as they can be used to communicate how past human activity shaped the landscape.

Surviving areas of open chalk downland can be used to illustrate early pre modern land use as they provide an impression of the landscape prior to enclosure in the 18th and 19th century.

Sites investigated by antiquarians have a strong associative value including those associated with William Stukeley (1687-1785), and Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758-1838).

Archaeological Interest

- Prehistoric activity in the landscape including Neolithic and early Bronze Age monuments, flint scatters and ploughed out round barrows and enclosures.
- There is significant cropmark evidence of later prehistoric field systems (later Bronze Age and Iron Age) and farming across the areas.
- There is a notable concentration of Iron Age hillforts.
- Roman evidence including field systems and a Roman road.
- Early Medieval boundary of the Wansdyke.
- Chalk cut figures of horses.

Architectural Interest

Historically the area was devoid of settlement; therefore any isolated agricultural cottages or buildings dating to before 1900 are important. Buildings associated with the historic park of Rainscombe have particular architectural interest.

Aesthetic and artistic interest

Rainscombe Park has aesthetic value as a historic designed landscape.

The chalk downlands in general have a strong artistic interest being the focus of interest of numerous artists including Paul Nash (1889-1946).

Coherence, Rarity and Time depth

The historic landscape of this area is extremely coherent, dominated by 20th century enclosure, although showing a clear split between East and West in the origin of these fields.

Significant areas of open downland survive located especially on steep slopes including Cherhill Hill and Morgans Down and along the tops of the Southern chalk escarpment in areas where arable agriculture is impractical or uneconomic. These are an important historical survival representing a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland.

There is strong time depth relating to the prehistoric period with Neolithic and Early Bronze Age evidence being particular rich.

Designated Heritage - Scheduled Monuments (157) are dominated by prehistoric monuments. These include the Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure at Knapp Hill, Neolithic long barrows, henges and stone circles, numerous Bronze Age round barrows; Iron Age hillforts including Oliver's Camp and Oldbury; Iron Age Settlements. They also include multiple sections of the Wansdyke, other linear boundaries and the Roman Road which crosses the area.

The Listed Buildings (9) are related to Rainscombe House, The Lacket a small 18th century cottage, The Landsdowne Monument and a series of milestones relating to the old carriage road and turnpike from London to Bath via Beckhampton and Cherhill and a Southern turnpike running South from Avebury to Devizes .

There is 1 battlefield on the national register of battlefields. Roundway Down is the site of a Civil War battle which took place on 13 July 1643. The King had despatched Lord Wilmot and Sir John Byron to relieve Devizes with 12,000 cavalry. As Wilmot approached Devizes, they found the Parliamentarians arrayed on the Southern slopes of Roundway Down. The Royalists defeated the Parliamentarians and in the hard fought action that followed their remaining cavalry were put to flight. Many fled West unaware of the dangerous 300 foot drop ahead, where Roundway Down ends abruptly at Oliver's Castle. Galloping for their lives many ploughed straight over into what is now known as Bloody Ditch.

There are no Listed Historic Parks and Gardens.

The North Eastern edge of the area is within the Avebury World Heritage Site and the area beyond that within the setting of the World Heritage Site.