



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.

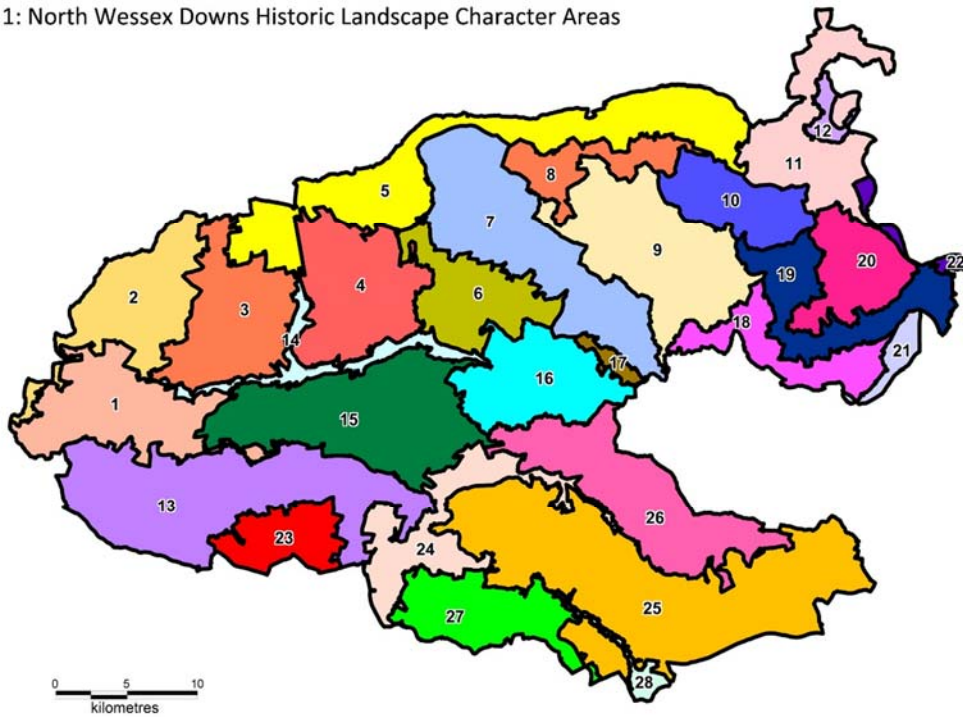
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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



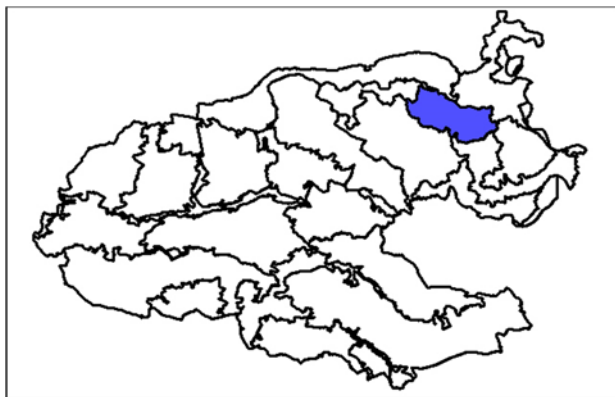
Map Produced by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy 2012. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2012.

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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 10: Upper Pang Valley

Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread many existing only as ring ditches, with Grim's Ditch representing a probable Bronze Age territorial boundary. Later prehistoric activity is widespread across the higher downland areas. There is significant cropmark evidence of Romano-British activity and excavated sites including a villa site, and two Romano-British pottery kilns of the fourth century AD. Evidence for Medieval activity including lynchets and settlements is visually dominant. Significant areas of surviving ancient woodland preserve evidence of the Post-Medieval exploitation of Woodlands in the AONB and protect earlier archaeological sites and evidence.



Location – This is the upper end of the Pang Valley and neighbouring areas of the high-downs. It includes a major dry valley that joins the Pang Valley from the North at Compton.

Geology and Topography – The geology is almost entirely chalk, although a small outcrop of Reading Beds exists at Aldworth, and is overlain on the valley floor by gravels. Rolling downland with gently rounded of flat-topped hills, intersected by dry valleys

Landscape Character – Rolling downland with gently rounded of flat-topped hills, intersected by dry valleys surrounding the upper reaches of the Pang consisting of arable fields. *Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 1D: Blewbury Downs.*

Archaeological Character – Earlier prehistoric archaeology is scarce with the one notable known monument being the Sheep Down Neolithic long barrow. Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread many existing only as ring ditches. Later prehistoric activity is widespread across the higher downland areas, for example, in the parish of East Ilsey Bronze Age earthworks perhaps denoting settlement exist within extensive field systems. In fact field systems are widespread across the area mapped from aerial photographs these fields have generally been ascribed a later Iron Age/Romano-British date. Elements of these field systems survived until recently as earthworks but have been levelled due to increased intensity of ploughing. An Iron Age hill fort has been identified at Perborough Castle.

There is significant cropmark evidence of Romano-British activity and excavated sites including a villa site, and two Romano-British pottery kilns of fourth century AD date in the parish of Compton. Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets which have been given a Medieval and Post Medieval date and the site of windmill mounds, and windmills dating from the Medieval period until 1920.



Farmland near Compton - The mechanisation of agriculture in the later 20th century has led to an almost total re-organisation of these fieldscapes and few historic enclosures remain unaltered.

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Farmland above West Ilsley – Some plantations have been created in the area: mostly shelter belts and long, thin plantations.

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Compton Village – The historic settlement pattern was dominated by nucleated villages sited on the valley floor, such as West Ilsley, East Ilsley, West Compton and Compton.

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In the valley bottom of the Pang evidence tends to relate to the Medieval settlements of West Ilsley, East Ilsley, West Compton and Compton, including pits and settlement features uncovered during settlement development, areas of ridge and furrow are also known as well as deserted Medieval settlements and Medieval fish ponds. Post Medieval archaeology includes military archaeology relating to World War Two including a Royal Observer Corps monitoring post and industrial archaeology including the former site of the Compton Railway station.

There is potential for deposits of Bronze Age to Romano-British date across the area but preservation may be varied. Deep ploughing is likely to have caused significant truncation of many features. The extent of survival of the cropmark features is unclear as few have been excavated. The origin of present day settlements is poorly understood. Deposits of occupation from the early Medieval onwards are likely in historic settlement nuclei as well as deposits outside settlements which are crucial to understanding the development of settlement in the area.

Historic Landscape Trajectory since 1700 – Like adjacent downland areas the Medieval landscape was based around nucleated settlements set amongst open fields on the lower valley sides and utilising common grazing on adjacent or nearby downs. Most of the boundary of this area coincides with parish boundaries. Some open field between Compton and Aldworth had been enclosed by the 18th century. This process is far less widespread than in adjacent areas and most of the open field and downland were enclosed through Act of Parliament in the early 19th century. East Ilsley is the exception to this pattern and remained an unenclosed parish throughout the great phase of Parliamentary enclosures. It was one of the latest parishes to be enclosed, the open field finally being divided into private fields by agreement in the late 19th century whilst its downs remained unenclosed into the 20th century. Many field barns existed within the open fields.

This was a relatively unwooded area although some areas of woodland did exist. South of West Ilsley and Compton sizeable blocks of ancient woodland existed near the edge of the area and small isolated blocks of other old woodland were scattered across the area.

Present Day Historic Landscape Character - The mechanisation of agriculture in the later 20th century has led to an almost total re-organisation of these fieldscapes and few historic enclosures remain unaltered. The East Ilsley downs have also now been enclosed into fields and only small strips of downland grassland remain within the area. These changes have created a landscape typified by very large arable fields with few obvious boundaries in the place of extensive downlands. The growth of the racehorse industry has also had an effect on the area; extensive gallops exist amongst the modern fields on former downs and areas of studs and paddocks are developing around West Ilsley and Compton. The loss of downland is significant as it is now recognised as a significant and threatened habitat; the AONB as a whole has lost around 95% of recorded downland.

Some sizeable areas of ancient woodland have been lost through clearance to create farmland but most of this was carried out in the late 19th century. The remaining areas of ancient woodland have fared better than in many other areas, and only small sections have been subject to clearance and replanting. Some plantations have been created in the area: mostly shelter belts and long, thin plantations. They do not gel with the grain of the landscape but since they are not common and mostly small-scale they have not had much of an impact on the overall character of the area.

Historic Settlement Character – The historic settlement pattern was dominated by nucleated villages sited on the valley floor, such as West Compton and Compton. This trend was so strong across most of the area that other forms of settlement were almost totally absent. A slightly different pattern existed around the village of Aldworth. Aldworth was situated at the extreme

East of the area on the Pang–Thames watershed, and several farms existed in its immediate neighbourhood.

Modern settlement is concentrated on expansion around West Compton with little growth elsewhere in the area. The growth at Compton is typified by small housing estates which were probably constructed to house personnel at the local research establishment, now named the Institute for Animal Health, or possibly at the UK Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell, established North of the village in the 1950s. These residential developments also seem to coincide with creation of a single village, known simply as Compton, from the neighbouring villages of Compton and West Compton.

Historic Farmstead Character – There is a low concentration of pre-1750 farmstead buildings. These farmsteads are often large with loose courtyard plans or 19th century regular courtyard plans and are associated with the valley bottom. Large timber-frame barns, some of 15th century date but more often of 17th – 18th century date are known in this area.

Special Qualities and features of Significance

Archaeological Interest

- Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread, many existing only as ring ditches, with Grim's Ditch representing a probable Bronze Age territorial boundary.
- Later prehistoric activity is widespread across the higher downland areas .
- Iron Age hillfort at Perborough Castle.
- Significant cropmark evidence of Romano- British activity and excavated sites including a villa site, and two Romano-British pottery kilns of fourth century AD date in the parish of Compton
- Early Medieval boundary of the Grims Ditch.
- Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets
- Valley bottom Medieval settlement evidence

Historic Interest

Archaeological sites often do not survive as earthworks so have less illustrative interest than in other areas. Evidence for Medieval activity including lynchets and settlements is visually dominant and therefore has importance illustrative interest.

Areas of ancient woodland have strong illustrative interest

Architectural Interest

Buildings associated nucleated settlements on valley floor. Pre 1750- farm buildings including large timber-frame barns, some of 15th century date but more often of 17th – 18th century date.

Aesthetic and artistic interest

N/A

Coherence, Rarity and Time depth

The historic landscape of this area is extremely coherent dominated by 20th century enclosure, with an almost total re-organisation of these fieldscapes.

Significant areas of surviving ancient woodland. There is strong time depth relating to the Roman Period.

Designated Heritage - Scheduled Monuments (7) are related to the long barrow 1 km of East Illsey, and several round barrows, the Iron Age hillfort at Perborough Castle and the Deserted Medieval Village West of Compton Church. The Listed Buildings (69) are related nearly exclusively to the historic centres of the nucleated villages and include churches, manor houses and smaller vernacular dwellings. There are 0 parklands on the register of parks and gardens.