



# NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

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



**Volume 1 EXTRACT**

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Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy





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## Summary

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*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

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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.**

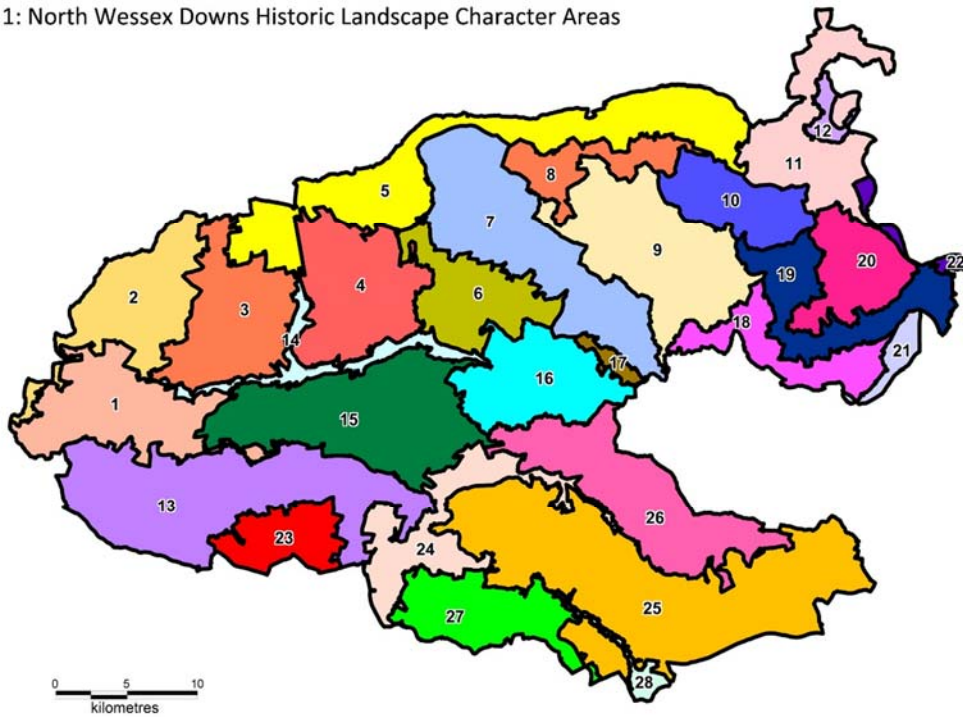
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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



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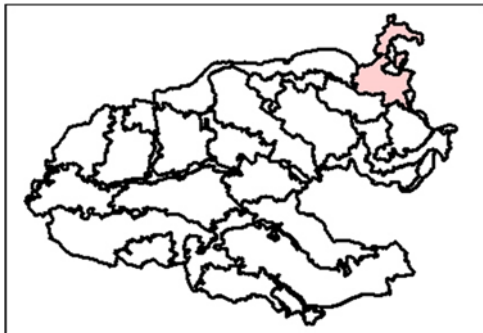
- |     |                                 |     |                                       |
|-----|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Pewsey Downs                    | 16. | Middle Kennet Valley                  |
| 2.  | Avebury Plain                   | 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 11: Greenhill and Thurle downlands

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In the lower and middle valley Neolithic material is common. Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread. The Late Bronze Age linear earthwork Grim's Ditch is visible as earthworks and cropmarks. There is significant cropmark evidence of Iron Age and Romano-British activity including potential Roman settlements and industrial sites. Field systems of late Iron Age/Romano-British date survive as earthworks at Streatley Warren and Hollies Wood. Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets. Large areas of unmodified 1700 to 1900 enclosure survive across the centre of the area below the downland.



**Location** – downland on the North-Eastern edge of the AONB to the West and South of the Thames Flood Plain centred on Blewbury

**Geology and Topography** – The area has a varied geology and includes layers of Chalk, with Upper Greensand to the North. Landform is varied, with rolling uplands to the South and flatter areas to the North.

**Landscape Character** – A transitional landscape of large intensive arable farmland forming an open and expansive landscape. *Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 5D: Moreton Plain*

**Archaeological Character** – Earlier prehistoric archaeology relates to numerous flint scatters and findspots from both the Mesolithic and Neolithic period. Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread many existing only as ring ditches. Part of the Late Bronze Age linear earthwork Grim's Ditch is visible as earthworks and cropmarks on aerial photographs. The ditch and bank follow a sinuous and broken course. Later prehistoric activity is widespread across the downland areas, for example near to Aston Tirrold - cropmarks 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.

There is significant cropmark evidence of Iron Age and Romano-British activity including potential Roman settlements and industrial sites. An Iron Age settlement was excavated at Blewburton Hill and the settlement was found to be palisaded. There are Iron Age Hillforts, at Blewburton Hill, and Lowbury Hill.

Possible Medieval and/or Post Medieval ridge and furrow and headlands are visible as cropmarks on aerial photographs. Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets which have been given a Medieval and Post Medieval date, and pillow mounds. There is a possible Medieval moated site situated to the South of Blewbury Farmhouse.

Later Post Medieval archaeology includes the site of Second World War searchlight battery and a bombing decoy, and a 32-foot high galvanized iron 'Climax-type' tower wind pump of ca 1930 behind Thurle Grange.

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. Many enclosures and linear features remain undated.

**Historic Landscape Trajectory** – Historically this area marked the transition from open chalk downland in the South which provided grazing for Medieval settlements and open fields closer to the settlement utilising common grazing on adjacent or nearby downland. Historically parishes were linear encompassing a strip of downland, open fields and meadows.

This pattern of Medieval land use survived into the 1700s. Two exceptions to this pattern was the far North-West tip of the area where pre 1700 irregular fields were created and the South of the area in the parish of Ashton Tirrold where pre 1700 regular enclosure occurred. The former is characterised by fields created from pre 1700 chalk downland and open fields with the exception of the North East tip of the area and a small area on the South side which have been created by modifying pre 1700 enclosure. The former represents an early privatisation of the Medieval communal farming systems that had supported many parishes. They are typified by irregularly-shaped, small to medium sized fields with boundaries composed mainly of hedges. The latter, in contrast, are probably later in date and are the result of phases of planned, but undocumented, enclosure. They are typified by regularly-shaped, small to medium sized fields with boundaries composed mainly of hedges.

In the South of the area to the East of Mouslford Downs there was a sinuous blocks of ancient woodland following the edges of the steep sides of the downland.

Between 1700 to 1900 nearly the whole area was subject to parliamentary enclosure except in the parishes of Ashton Tirrold and Mouslford. These created regular uniform fields with new hedged boundaries.

A designed park was created at Rush Court adjacent to the Thames between 1700 and 1900.





**Ovenbottom** - Historically this area marked the transition from open chalk downland in the South which provided grazing for Medieval settlements and open fields closer to the settlement utilising common grazing on adjacent or nearby downland.

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**Blewbury** – Blewbury is a classic spring line settlement at the foot of the chalk escarpment. This has undergone post 1900 expansion but the historic plan remains. Building materials include thatch, red brick and weatherboard.

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**Castle Hill Iron Age Hillfort** – Later prehistoric activity is widespread across the downland area.

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**Present Day Historic Landscape Character** – Today, 20<sup>th</sup> century fields created by reorganising the parliamentary enclosures dominate. These are modern fields formed through the consolidation or amalgamation of existing, historic, enclosures into more regular holdings, usually to enable more efficient, mechanised arable agriculture. Traces of the earlier field patterns will remain fossilised in these alterations.



These are interspersed with large areas of unmodified 1700 to 1900 enclosure across the centre of the area below the downland.

South of Blewbury large areas of gallops interspersed with regular blocks of woodland plantation have been created. New plantations of sinuous blocks of woodland have also been created in the parishes of Mouslford, Ashton Tirrold and Ashton Upthorpe, and areas of ancient woodland replanted.

Small areas of open chalk downland survive associated with small areas of ancient woodland in the region of Mouslford Downs and areas to the East. The historic park at Rush Court survives, though in some areas its character has been eroded.

**Historic Settlement Character** – There is one nucleated villages in the centre of the area. Blewbury is a classic springline settlement at the foot of the chalk escarpment. This has undergone post 1900 expansion but the historic plan remains. Building materials include thatch, red brick and weatherboard. Other small patches of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century settlement expansion in the far North of the area relates to settlement which is outside of the AONB

**Historic Farmstead Character** – There are isolated farmsteads distributed across the southern half of the area. There is a low-medium concentration of pre-1750 farmstead buildings. These farmsteads are often large with loose courtyard plans or 19<sup>th</sup> century regular courtyard plans and are associated with the valley bottom. Large timber-frame barns, some of 15<sup>th</sup> century date but more often of 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century date may be typical of many farms.

## Special Qualities and features of Significance

### Archaeological Interest

- In the lower and middle valley Neolithic material is common.
- Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread.
- Late Bronze Age linear earthwork Grim's Ditch is visible as earthworks and cropmarks.
- Later prehistoric activity is widespread across the downland areas.
- There is significant cropmark evidence of Iron Age and Romano- British activity including potential Roman settlements and industrial sites. Field systems of late Iron Age/Romano-British date survive as earthworks at Streatley Warren and Hollies Wood.
- Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets.
- Medieval moated site.

## **Historic Interest**

Archaeological sites in this area have less illustrative value than other downland areas as the majority of sites are only known from cropmarks. There are Iron Age Hillforts, at Blewburton Hill, Lowbury Hill and Sinodun Hill which have a strong illustrative value.

Sites investigated by antiquarians have a strong associative value.

## **Architectural Interest**

Buildings associated with the village of Blewbury.

Buildings associated with historic park at Rush court

Buildings associated with pre-1750 farmstead buildings. Survival of Large timber-frame barns, some of 15th century date but more often of 17th – 18th century date of particular importance.

## **Aesthetic and artistic interest**

Aesthetic interest of surviving evidence for historic parks and garden at Rush Court.

The chalk downlands in general have a strong artistic interest being the focus of interest of numerous artists.

The Ridgeway runs through this area- the track is of possible prehistoric origin and has been formalised as a National Trail.

## **Coherence, Rarity and Time depth**

The historic landscape of this area is extremely coherent, dominated by 20<sup>th</sup> century fields created by reorganising the parliamentary enclosures. These are interspersed with large areas of unmodified 1700 to 1900 enclosure across the centre of the area below the downland. This has preserved some of the grain of the historic landscape

Small areas of open chalk downland survive associated with small areas of ancient woodland in the region of Mouslford Downs and areas to the East. These are an important survival.

There is strong time depth relating to the Iron Age and Medieval period.

**Designated Heritage** - Scheduled Monuments (12) are dominated by Bronze Age round barrows and Iron Age hillforts. The Listed Buildings (108) are related to the nuclei of the historic settlements. There are 0 parklands on the register of parks and gardens.