



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





Emma Rouse, Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy

www.wyvernheritage.co.uk – info@wyvernheritage.co.uk – 01747 870810

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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.

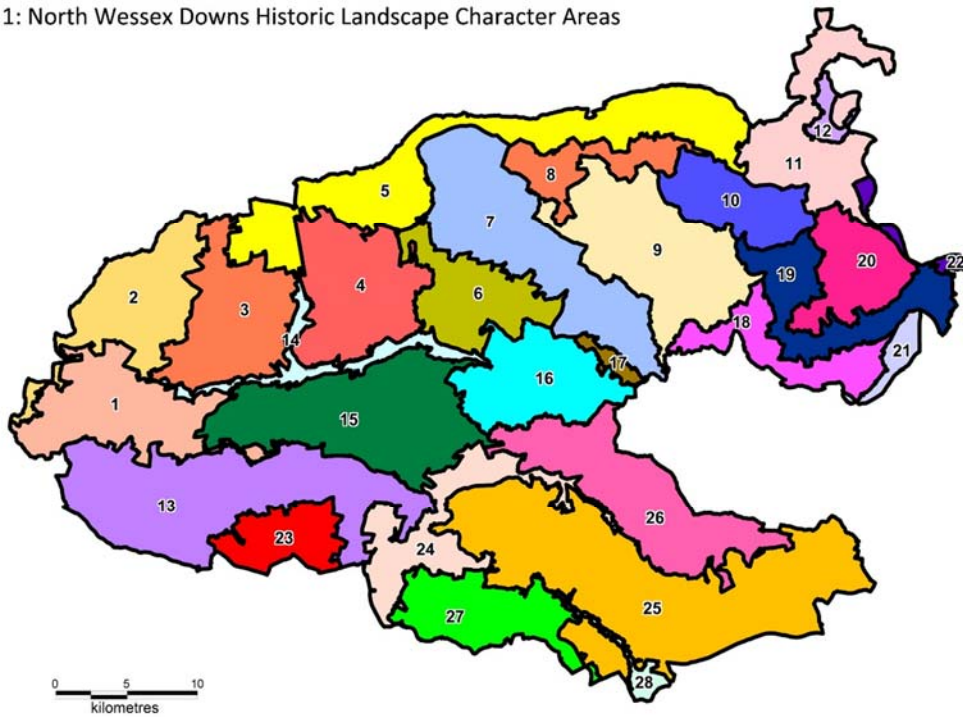
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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



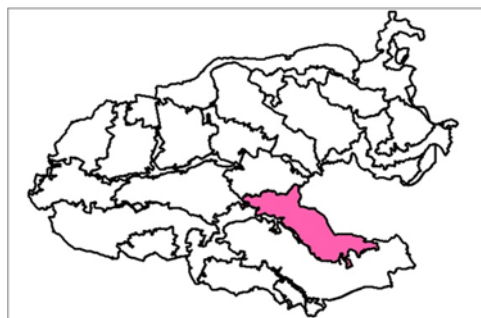
Map Produced by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy 2012. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2012.

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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 26: Highclere and Inkpen Common

Archaeological sites survive as earthworks on the chalk scarp, dating from the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British period. Although about half of the historic fields have been modified, large areas of earlier pre 1700 enclosures have been left largely unaltered and are important survivals of early Post-Medieval land use.



Location – Area South of Hungerford in the East of the AONB. It is bounded by chalk escarpment to the West as far South as Kingsclere. The North of the area is composed of a series of valleys of Kennet tributaries and the watershed plateaux between them. The eastern edge is formed by the AONB boundary. To the South the area includes the escarpment edge at Watership Down and the outlier of Beacon Hill.

Geology and Topography – In the North the majority of the area is composed of Reading Beds and overlain by London Clays. Some of the higher watershed ridges are capped by Bagshot Beds with localised deposits of plateau gravels. The South-East of the area rises to areas of lower, middle chalk with upper greensand. There is a complex micro topography.

Landscape Character – A lowland landscape with complex micro topography, extensive woodland cover, remnant heaths and parkland. *Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 8E: Highclere Lowlands and Heath.*

Archaeological Character – Limited evidence from the Mesolithic occurs above the streams and suggests at least some exploitation of this area, although it is peripheral to the rich Mesolithic of the Kennet valley. There is no evidence of Neolithic settlement, although some artefacts have been found and so for much of prehistory the area was extensively but not intensively exploited (e.g. hunting and herding). The limited archaeological evidence indicates suggests this continued through the Bronze Age and Iron Age. The dispersed settlement and the multiple tracks and paths which indicate an open landscape seems to suggest that the landscape has only recently evolved from the Medieval period. Indeed in the Roman period there is only one site recorded, at Horris Hill, and although this may have been a significant site, it perhaps represents a small encroachment onto unenclosed land, or perhaps it is a site associated with a hunting landscape. The Medieval evolution of the landscape, with enclosure of common land and woodland is apparent in the historic landscape character of the area. The presence of deer parks reflects the forest status of the area, and has connections to the Bishop of Winchester as a significant local landowner. Whilst this area does not have a rich archaeology, the archaeology of Medieval landscape features and glimpses of Medieval landscape are higher than in most places and include traces of ridge and furrow, moated manors and motte and bailey castles.

There is however a significant block of chalk ridge along the Southern edge which has a much more dramatic archaeology. There is some evidence of Neolithic occupation on the chalk dip slope to the South, but there is no direct evidence on the scarp to the West (although to the West and outside this area is a Neolithic long barrow at Coombe Gibbet overlooking the Kennet Valley).

In the Bronze Age there are burial mounds on the scarp and in the Iron Age there are two important hill fort sites on the scarp, overlooking the gap in the scarp where the A34 runs and which will have been an important route way. To the South of the scarp there is evidence of later prehistoric/Romano-British field systems and settlement. It seems likely that the small chalk area was exploited from the Neolithic as farmed and settled land, and that the scarp represents the edge between that and the adjacent less intensively exploited land that forms the bulk of this character area. This area has a richer archaeological potential, and may be associated with ritual and burial sites on the high dominant scarp.



Woodland, Inkpen Common - There are no conclusive traces of an open field system in the area to the North and East of Highclere and the Medieval landscape seems to have been characterised by small fields interspersed with commons and woods

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Parkland, Highclere – Several parklands were found in the area, most being small in size, but one very large park was established at Highclere Park. Highclere started as a deer park established by the early 12^h century. A mansion and formal gardens were constructed in the 17th century, and later its grounds were enlarged creating an early-mid 18th century landscape park.

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Watership Down – South and East of Highclere and Sidown Hill and on the far eastern edge of the area the historic grain of the landscape is different. The historic landscape character has more in common with neighbouring downland areas. The Medieval landscape was composed of communities exploiting common grazing on adjacent or nearby downland.

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Historic Landscape Trajectory – There are no conclusive traces of an open field system in the area to the North and East of Highclere, and the Medieval landscape seems to have been characterised by small fields interspersed with commons and woods. A dense network of roads and tracks ran through the area and these were heavily influenced by the complex micro topography within the area. The interplay of topography, roads, fields and woods gave a very irregular and small scale grain to the landscape. This suggests late enclosure in a landscape which had high levels of access which had to be retained during the enclosure process.

Most fields were small and irregularly-shaped suggesting that their enclosure was undertaken in a piecemeal manner by numerous farmers over a long period of time, but probably from the medieval period.

Their grain becomes finer as you move South towards Highclere Park and here in the area around Great Pen Wood the fields have been identified as assarts (or clearances) created from the ancient woodland. Several small-medium sized areas of heath, used for common grazing, were found amidst the intimate network of fields and roads; the largest was Inkpen Common, but also included Hatt Common and The Chase. Commons and woods were the only parts of the area that had not been enclosed into fields by the 18th century excepting the chalk downland to the South of Highclere. Much of the common heath was enclosed by Act of Parliament in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and only a stub of Inkpen Common remained after this process. This was a more wooded area prior to 1800 than adjacent parts of the AONB and much of it was formed of discrete irregular blocks of woodland. About half of the woodland was ancient (Medieval or earlier) and it was spread across the area in medium sized irregular blocks, much of which was coppice.

Other old woodlands were also widespread across the area and existed as small and large blocks. These were sited both adjacent to ancient woods and also as discrete woods, the larger examples creating wooded areas in their own right, such as Curr and Hightree Copses South-East of Kintbury.

Several parklands were found in the area, most being small in size, but one very large park was established at Highclere Park. The smaller parks were typified by large farmsteads, manor houses and minor gentry's homes set within a few acres of landscaped grounds. Highclere dominates the centre of the area. Highclere started as a deer park established by the early 12th century. A mansion and formal gardens were constructed in the 17th century, and later its grounds were enlarged creating an early-mid 18th century rococo pleasure grounds and landscape park, enlarged and remodelled during 1770s by Henry Herbert incorporating designs by Capability Brown. The area also

includes a small part of the Western extent of Hamstead Park which also started life as a Medieval deer park.

South and East of Highclere and Sidown Hill and on the far Eastern edge of the area the historic grain of the landscape is different, with landscape character which has more in common with neighbouring downland areas. The Medieval landscape was composed of communities exploited common grazing on adjacent or nearby downland. Early piecemeal enclosure were still common below the escarpment but were a lot less irregular than the fields to the East. They are Medieval or early Post Medieval in date and are likely to be the result of phases of planned, but undocumented, enclosure. Large areas of open land also survived to South and East of Highclere and Sidown Hill. These represent a pattern of open fields with common downland grazing on the escarpment above. Most of the open field and some downland had been enclosed into private fields by the start of the 18th century.

Present Day Historic Landscape Character - Agricultural changes have led to reorganisation of fieldscapes to create fields more suited to modern, mechanised farming. Although about half of the historic fields have been modified, large chunks of early enclosures have been left largely unaltered. Parliamentary enclosures do not survive as well and most have been reorganised or have come under different land-uses. A growing number of paddocks have been created in this area. Most have been created on an ad-hoc basis and cluster around settlements, such as at Inkpen. Paddocks are often for hobby/pet ponies and, as they are mostly associated with settlements, they can have the effect of suburbanising areas around villages.

A big increase in tree-cover has occurred despite some clearance of historic woodlands. Large plantations have been created and woodland regeneration and colonisation has led to the development of secondary woodlands. Several plantations were established on Parliamentary fields. This may have been because the fields that were created from heath were too poor to support long-term agriculture. Most plantations are rectilinear and sited next to ancient and old woodlands and fit into the grain of the landscape reasonably well. Some areas of ancient woodland have been cleared to create fields and housing. Much larger blocks of ancient woodland have been cleared of mature tree cover and replanted with other species losing historic features and much of their biodiversity value.

Some parks have barely been altered, such as Kirby House, whilst others have almost totally disappeared. Most parks have seen some degrees of contraction in area occupied and many former parkland areas are now fields and under arable cultivation.

Historic Settlement Character – Settlement was fairly dense and comprised dispersed settlements, small hamlets and poly-focal settlements. The majority of the dispersed settlements were common-edge settlements, such as Hell Green at Inkpen. These were irregular, unplanned, settlements that had grown-up on the fringes of the common and represent squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the common's resources. Such settlements were usually "unofficial" and often lacked a formal name. Many took the name of the common that they sat on the edge of, for instance, Crockham Heath. Poly-focal settlements are also a feature of this area and Inkpen and Hamstead