



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.

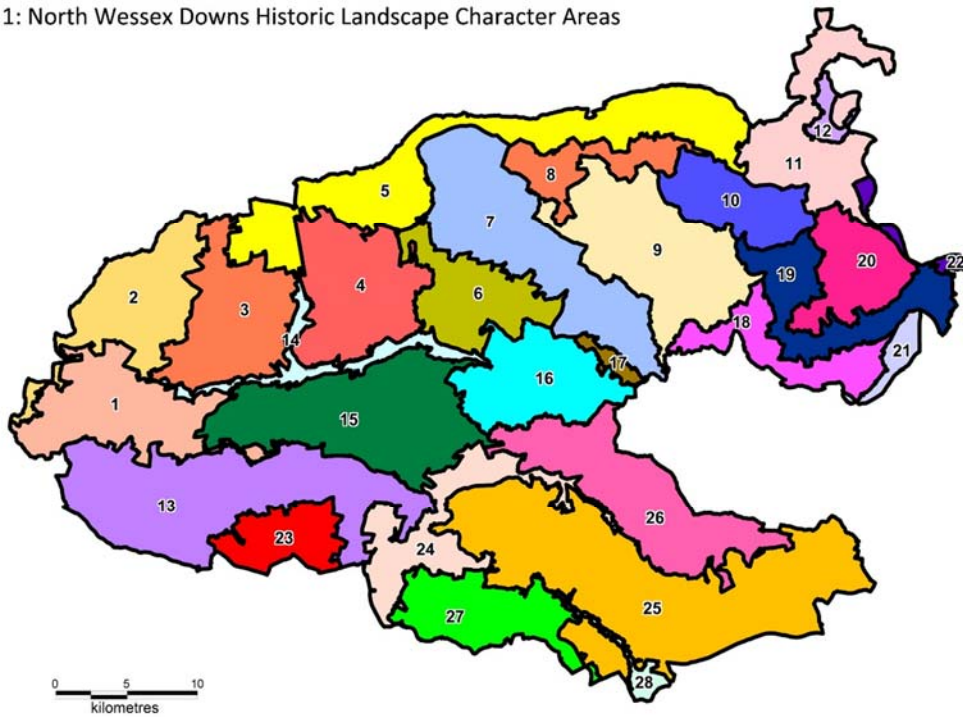
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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



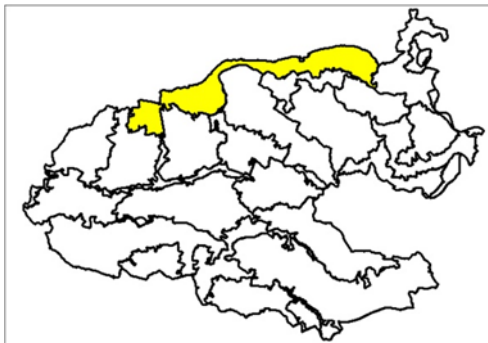
Map Produced by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy 2012. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2012.

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|
| 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 5: Northern Escarpment

There is strong association with the Prehistoric period, with Bronze Age and Iron Age evidence being particularly rich. This includes evocative sites such as the Bronze Age Uffington White Horse and Hillfort. Significant pockets of open downland survive on the steep sides of the escarpment slopes for example around Liddington hill. These are an important historical survival representing a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland. In addition pockets of pre 1700 regular enclosure survive in the West of the area and 1700 to 1900 enclosure in the East.



Location – Escarpment on northern side of the AONB between Chiseldon to the West and Chilton to the East, to the South of Wantage and Didcot.

Geology and Topography – The geology is mainly Lower Chalk which gives way to Gault Clay at the foot of the scarp. The topography is formed of a steep scarp face with deep combes becoming more undulating to the South.

Landscape Character – The defining edge of the AONB. It is a steep scarp slope formed of unimproved chalk grassland giving way to arable fields to the South. Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 5F: Liddington- Letcombe Open Scarp

Archaeological Character – The prominent position of the scarp edge and the survival of unimproved grassland means that this area is associated with a number of prominent, extant and nationally important earthworks. The earliest archaeological evidence is for stray Mesolithic finds and flint scatters. Neolithic archaeology includes flint scatters, finds and the excavated long barrow at Waylands Smithy and another example at Uffington.

There are considerable numbers of Bronze Age round barrows on higher downland areas including extant and ploughed out examples and complete barrow cemeteries. Some of the extensive field systems identified may date to the later Bronze Age and there is evidence for later Bronze Age settlement.

An iconic element is the Uffington White Horse situated below Uffington Castle hillfort. In 1995 Optical Stimulated Luminescence dating was used to date the figure to the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, and it was probably constructed between 1380 and 550 BC.

Iron Age archaeology is likewise extensive including a string of prominent Iron Age hillforts including Hardwell Camp, Uffington Castle, Alfred's Castle and other earthworks including cross dykes

There are substantial Iron Age/Romano British field systems and the area seems to have been well farmed at this time. There is some evidence for the location of Roman farmsteads which complements the evidence for nearby high status buildings such as the Roman Villa at Strevall Farm. Important early Medieval archaeology includes the Goldbury Hill Anglo-Saxon cemetery.



White Horse Hill Looking North-West- An iconic element is the Uffington White Horse situated below Uffington Castle hillfort. It was probably constructed between 1380 and 550 BC. Iron Age archaeology is likewise extensive including a string of prominent Iron Age hillforts and other earthworks including cross dykes

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Fields South of Lockinge— Parliamentary enclosure of the late 18th and early 19th century across the West of the area were created to the South of Sparsholt and in the vicinity of Lockinge.

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Chalbury Hill from Hinton Parva Combe – The prominent position of the scarp edge and the survival of unimproved grassland means that this area is associated with a number of prominent, extant and nationally important earthworks.

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The extent of Medieval archaeology is particularly noteworthy. There are a number of deserted or shrunken villages, such as at Overtown, these are surrounded by relict Medieval fields, ridge and furrow. Lynchets are a prominent feature on the scarp slope and other features including pillow mounds. Post Medieval archaeology is limited and relates to the Second World War including Chiseldon Camp and the relict Chiseldon to Marlborough Railway.

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 the relict field systems is not properly understood and many enclosures with a tentative prehistoric date remain undated. Deposits of occupation from the early Medieval onwards are likely in historic settlement nuclei as well as deposits outside of settlements which are crucial to understanding the development of settlement in the area. The 19th century farms are important features but little is known about the nature of their historic building stock.

Historic Trajectory - Like neighbouring downland areas, the Medieval landscape was composed of communities within open fields utilising common grazing on adjacent or nearby downland, for example at Lammy Down. In the East of the area this pattern survived into the 1700s. However in the West of the area around Chiseldon and Liddington the open fieldscapes were replaced by regular pre 1700 enclosure along the edge of the chalk escarpment which marks the northern edge of the area. This pre 1700 enclosure was in general regular in form. These were probably created following an agreement between local land-holders and farmers to rationalise and enclose holdings in the common fields.

Earlier irregular enclosure existed to the West of Chiseldon. These early enclosures were irregularly-shaped and slotted into the framework of the landscape that had been established by a dense network of deeply incised roads and tracks and open field boundaries. This suggests that they were enclosed on a gradual, piecemeal basis. Parliamentary enclosures of the late 18th and early 19th century across the West of the area were created to the South of Sparsholt and in the vicinity of Lockinge. The fields created by this process are usually regular in shape with straight boundaries and the boundaries are usually hedged and/or fenced. In some parts of the North of the area enclosure came later in the 19th century as part of post-parliamentary enclosure. The majority of fields of this type are morphologically similar to Parliamentary Enclosures; although some are more irregular in shape often reflecting the land that they have been enclosed from. Examples include South-East of Ashbury. These fields have been modified in the 20th century.

Despite this enclosure substantial areas of open land survived into the 20th century especially in the area of Bishopstone Down

Woodland was extremely scarce. However a string of small historic parks and gardens were created between 1700 and 1900, for example Ashdown Park, which started as a Medieval deer park; Arnhill Park - some of which was associated with small pockets of ancient woodland

Present Day Historic Landscape Character – Today open land only survives in pockets on the steep sides of the escarpment slopes, for example around Liddington hill. The historic landscape is dominated by 20th century fields including new fields which enclosed the last areas of open land, for example around Bishopstone Down and around Letcombe. Many fields have been reorganised in the 20th century. These are modern fields formed through the consolidation of existing, historic, enclosures into more regular holdings, usually to enable more efficient, mechanised arable agriculture. 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

In addition pockets of pre 1700 regular enclosure survive in the West of the area and 1700 to 1900 enclosure in the East. The historic parks also survived in today's landscape.

Small blocks of modern plantation have also been created across the area.

One area of major 20th century development is the Harwell Science and Innovation Campus and Rutherford Appleton Laboratory to the East of Chilton next to the A34 which crosses the area.

Historic Settlement Character – The historic settlement pattern is dominated by nucleated villages along the spring line at the base of the scarp slope or distributed along the combs and valleys which score into the chalk escarpment face such as at Letcombe Regis. The exception is Chiseldon which is located at the top of the chalk escarpment on a plateau before the downland rises further at another escarpment.

Chiseldon has seen significant settlement expansion in the 20th century and most other villages have seen some edge expansion but not to the detriment of the historic settlement character. Settlement creep can be seen on the bottom of the chalk scarp nearest to Wantage.

Historic Farmstead Character – There are only a few hamlet farm clusters on the eastern side of the area.

There is a low-medium 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 bottoms. Large timber-frame barns, some of 15th century date but more often of 17th – 18th century date may be typical of many farms.

Special Qualities and features of Significance

Archaeological Interest

- Neolithic long barrows included the excavated long barrow at Waylands Smithy and another example at Uffington.
- Extensive numbers of Bronze Age round barrows on higher downland areas including extant and ploughed out examples.
- Bronze Age Uffington White Horse.
- Iron Age archaeology is extensive including a string of prominent Iron Age hillforts including Hardwell Camp, Uffington Castle, Alfred's Castle and other earthworks including cross dykes
- Substantial Iron Age/Romano British field systems.
- Important early Medieval archaeology including an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Goldbury Hill.
- The extent of Medieval archaeology is particularly noteworthy.

Historic Interest

Archaeological sites surviving as earthworks relating from Prehistory through to the Medieval period survive as earthworks so 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 and pre 1800 enclosure can be used to illustrate early pre modern land use.

Architectural Interest

Historic buildings associated with nucleated villages along the spring line have architectural interest dating from the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods.

Surviving pre-1750 farmstead buildings including timber frame barns are particularly important as they provide key evidence as to the pre 1750 exploitation of the landscape

Buildings associated with Ashdown Park.

Aesthetic and artistic interest

Ashdown Park has aesthetic value as a designed landscape.

Coherence, Rarity and Time depth

The historic landscape of this area is extremely coherent, dominated by 20th century enclosure, relating to the reorganisation of later fieldscapes.

Significant pockets of open downland survive on the steep sides of the escarpment slopes, for example around Liddington hill. These are an important historical survival representing a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland. In addition pockets of pre 1700 regular enclosure survive in the West of the area and 1700 to 1900 enclosure in the East.

There is strong time depth relating to the prehistoric period with Bronze Age and Iron Age evidence being particularly rich.

Designated Heritage - Scheduled Monuments (24) are varied in type and include Waylands Smith Neolithic long barrow, Bronze Age Round Barrow, Iron Age Hill forts, and Letcombe Castle hillfort. Roman villas, Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and deserted Medieval villages, The Listed Buildings (287) are related to the historic settlements and historic farm buildings. There is 1 parkland on the register of parks and gardens at Ashdown House. The rides were laid out during the mid 17th century to accompany the house. During the 19th century the park was landscaped and formal gardens laid out.