



# 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

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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.**

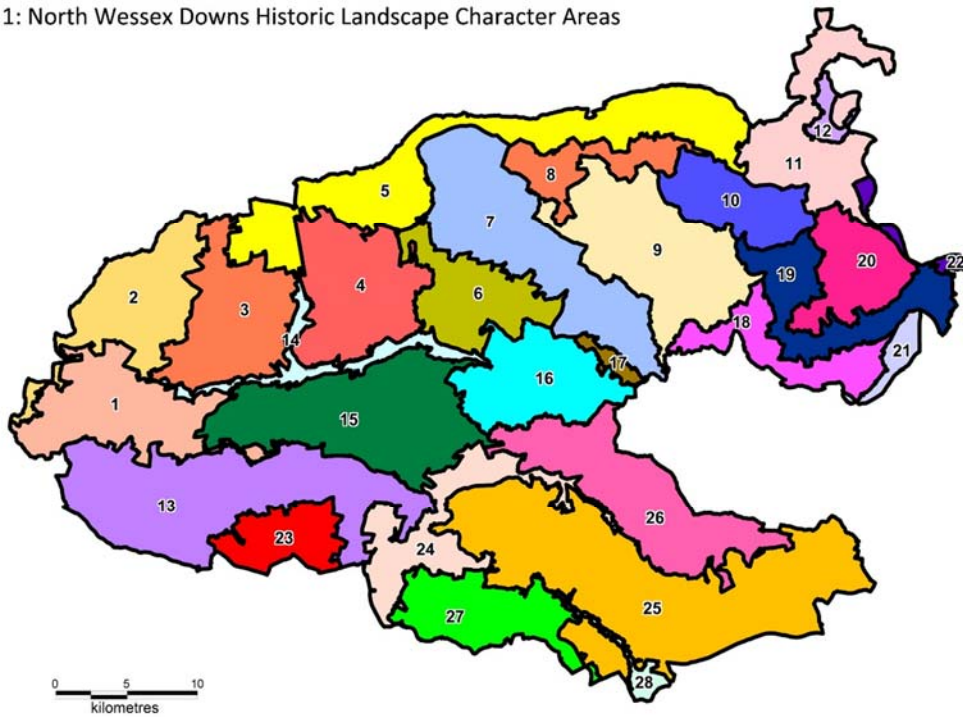
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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 20: Pang-Thames Plateaux

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Parts of the area especially in the North have extensive tracts of little-modified pre 1800 landscape and retain considerable historic character. Earthworks and cropmarks of probable later prehistoric/Romano-British field systems exist over much of the Northern part of the area. There is a concentration of Medieval sites relating to Ashampstead Common which includes kilns.



**Location** – This area contains a series of dry valleys and watersheds between the Pang and Thames valleys and the high downs around Aldworth. The major dry valley within the area runs from Aldworth through Ashampstead to the Pang at Maidenhatch Farm.

**Geology and Topography** – The geology over much of the area is chalk which is overlain by gravel at the

base of the major dry valley. The chalk is capped by Reading Beds around Hartridge Farm, Upper Basildon and by capped Reading Beds and London Clays on the watershed ridge East of Yattendon. Extensive deposits of plateau gravels exist around Upper Basildon. The landform forms part of a chalk dip slope with deeply incised valleys.

**Landscape Character** – Extensive wooded area forming a dense mosaic with arable farmland.

*Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 2B: Ashampton Downs.*

**Archaeological Character** – HER records exist across the whole area. Some parts of the area have been covered by the Middle Thames Valley Survey, the National Mapping Programme and the Berkshire Downs Survey

Evidence of prehistoric activity is not common and comes from finds. Palaeolithic handaxes have been found at Upper Basildon, Pangbourne Hill, Pennycroft Copse and at Lambden's Bottom. Neolithic flintwork, including a core, has been found around Upper Basildon, tools from two locations at Ashampstead Common and axes near Blandy's Farm. In the North of the area there are numerous earthwork and cropmarked features thought to be of prehistoric date. The most visible is Grim's Ditch, a probable Bronze Age territorial earthwork that runs between the Pang and Thames valleys. Grim's Ditch exists for significant sections as an earthwork at Foxborough Copse and Portobello Wood and Holies Shaw and can be partially traced as a cropmark in between. Earthworks and cropmarks of probable later prehistoric/Romano-British field systems exist over much of the Northern part of the area.

Other Romano-British features, in addition to the field systems, have been found in the area. A villa has been observed as cropmarks North of Southridge Farm, it has not been excavated but has been speculatively dated it to the 2nd century on morphological grounds. Kilns were found near Lynch's Copse during construction of the M4. Romano-British finds were made in Upper Basildon at Kiln

Ground and New Town. It has been suggested that the large quantities of Roman pottery found at Kiln Ground are indicative of a settlement or pottery manufacturing site.



**Descent towards Ashampstead** - This area seems to have had a Medieval landscape characterised by small fields inter-related with woods and some commons.

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**Farmland at Basildon** – Parts of the area have extensive tracts of little-modified landscape and retain considerable historic character, whereas substantial change has occurred over much of the area creating a landscape with a new and different character.

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**Houses, Ashhampton** – The historic settlement pattern was varied with dispersed settlements and farms across the southern part of the area and mostly farms and a few hamlets in the North.

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Medieval evidence is not widely distributed and this probably reflects the fact that most of the area was farmland, common and woodland during these periods. Bere Court was a residence of the Abbots of Reading established in the 13th century. It is now a house mostly dating from the 16th century and later, but incorporates some Medieval monastic elements. Yattendon Court deer park is thought to extend into this area at Old Park Woods, but it is unclear if any parkland features survive as the woods have been mechanically replanted. Many Medieval sites relate to Ashampstead Common and include finds and a kiln. A bank and ditch have been observed at several locations on the edges of Ashampstead and Burnthill Commons. It has been suggested that this is a previously unrecorded deer park, but it may be a boundary feature demarking the commons. Basildon Park contains remains of Medieval ridge and furrow and lynchets exist on the park's lawns. This suggests that much of the park was laid out over open fields.

Post Medieval records are composed of industrial sites and buildings. A chalk mine was discovered South of Yattendon and 19th century brickworks existed at Frilsham Common and Luck's Hall Farm. Ruins of the works and pits survive at both brickworks sites. During the Second World War Basildon park was requisitioned and served as a US army base and prisoner of war camp. A concrete hut, known as Ivy Cottage, is thought to be the only surviving hut from the WWII camp. Practice firing trenches were also constructed in this area and are still visible.

The archaeological potential of most of the area is unclear. It is possible that prehistoric and Romano-British deposits exist in the area but it is not possible to be more specific about the location, nature and quality of any below-ground archaeology. Deposits of early occupation may survive at historic settlement nuclei, and any such deposits could be crucial to understanding the development of settlement in this area. The historic building stock is fairly well-studied but it is possible that further significant buildings or structural elements may be identified, particularly at Frilsham Common.

**Historic Landscape Trajectory** – This area seems to have had a Medieval landscape characterised by small fields inter-related with woods and some commons. The combination of land-use and topography gave a very sinuous grain to the historic landscape of the area.

Most of the early enclosures were small irregularly-shaped fields, which suggest that they were created in an ad-hoc manner, perhaps over a long period of time. Many of the fields were probably created by Medieval assartment, or clearance of woodland. Burnthill and Ashampstead Commons, two areas of common heathland grazing, were located amidst the intimate network of fields and woods. Unlike many commons, these were not later enclosed. Ashampstead Common, however, had become substantially wooded-over by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was no longer an open heathland area.

This was a well-wooded area and most woods have been identified as ancient. Woods existed across the area but the highest concentration was in the South where a belt of several large woodlands existed. Large blocks of other old woods also existed in the middle of the area. Most woods had very irregular edges, as if they had had chunks taken out of them, and this was most visible between Yattendon and Bradfield. It is probable this is due to Medieval and later assartment. Some woodland clearance took place during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to create fields at Hewin's Wood, Bradfield and College Wood and Westridge Green.



**Present Day Historic Landscape Character** - Parts of the area have extensive tracts of little-modified landscape and retain considerable historic character, whereas substantial change has occurred over much of the area creating a landscape with a new and different character.

The reorganisation of historic enclosures into fields suited to modern agriculture and the creation of extensive woodland plantations have been the two most substantial changes to the area. The South of the area has seen considerable change with the majority of historic enclosures reorganised and very large areas of conifer plantations established. The plantations are mostly commercial forestry and many are on areas that were fields. Large plantations have also been created in areas that were ancient woodlands. These woods have been cleared of native tree cover and replanted as commercial plantations. A lack of grazing and some plantation led to dense tree-cover developing on all commons by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The character of the southern part of the area has now changed from a mix of open commons, fields and woods into an almost continuously wooded block.

Across the northern half of the area (North of Ashampstead) large areas of unmodified fieldscapes exist with only a small degree of field reorganisation and plantation. Changes in this part of the area have largely respected the grain of the landscape and much of the historic character remains intact.

Parks existed only in the East of the area and there were only two within the area by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A small park was present at Bere Park whilst a very large landscape park existed at Basildon around Basildon House. A large park was laid out over early enclosure fields at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century around Buckhold, a new country house. The designed landscape was very extensive and involved the creation of an ornamental woodland plantation, Great Bear, as well as avenues and a walled garden. The majority of parklands have experienced either a total change in use or a contraction in the area they cover. This change has been most marked at Buckhold, where much of the former parkland is now a stable and paddocks, the house is occupied by a school and the ornamental woodland has been replaced by a mix of conifer plantation, housing and paddocks. Basildon Park is in the ownership of the National Trust and has not been subject to large-scale alteration, but has transferred to operating as a visitor attraction for part of the year.

**Historic Settlement Character** – Settlement was less nucleated and more densely spread across the landscape than in adjacent areas. The historic settlement pattern was varied with dispersed settlements and farms across the South part of the area and mostly farms and a few hamlets in the North. Most settlement in the South was in hamlets, such as Upper Basildon, and common edge settlements around Burnthill and Ashampstead Commons. The common edge settlements have their roots in squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the resources of the common. They were in existence by the 18<sup>th</sup> century but probably date back further. Ashampstead was the largest settlement in the area and consisted of several separate nuclei. Farms had a mix of topographic and occupier names.

Settlement growth has been extensive across the centre of the area and has comprised infill around historic settlement nuclei and growth along the roads between them. New housing has focussed around historic settlement nuclei and has spread along roads that join them. It is a mixture of small estates and developments of a few large houses and much of the housing is affluent in nature with swimming pools and tennis courts being common features. Development has been so intense that it

is now hard to tell where one settlement finishes and the next starts. A band of settlement runs from Ashampstead to Upper Basildon and then North on to Basildon and East to Pangbourne. This has created an almost continuous belt of housing uniting several previously separate settlements.

**Historic Farmstead Character** – Farmsteads typically consist of loose courtyard plans with detached buildings arranged around a yard. Some 19<sup>th</sup> century farmsteads, built to house cattle for fattening or dairying are more likely to be of L-or U-plan. Historically, farms in this area were small and there is a high density of farmsteads in the landscape. Small farm size often meant that there was little capital to replace buildings so Medieval and 16th/17th century farm buildings often survive. Within the wood – pasture areas and areas of better soils farmsteads typically consist of loose courtyard arrangements, often including an aisled barn. This area has one of the main concentrations of timber-framed aisled barns in the country. Free-standing staddle granaries are also characteristic.

## Special Qualities and features of Significance

### Archaeological Interest

- Grim's Ditch (a possible Bronze Age territorial boundary) survives as an earthwork in several woods, and as a cropmark in between.
- Earthworks and cropmarks of probable later prehistoric/Romano-British field systems exist over much of the Northern part of the area.
- A villa has been observed as cropmarks North of Southridge Farm and kilns were found near Lynch's Copse and at Kiln Ground. The latter possibly represents a settlement or pottery manufacturing site.
- Many Medieval sites relate to Ashampstead Common and include finds and a kiln.

### Historic Interest

Archaeological sites surviving as earthworks, Roman period and later have a strong illustrative interest including sites relating to the Medieval exploitation of the common

Surviving areas of unaltered pre 1700 fields can be used to illustrate early pre modern land use.

Basildon park has associative interest being linked with Lancelot Brown

### Architectural Interest

Buildings associated with the dispersed settlement pattern including farmsteads with loose courtyard plans. Small farm size often meant that there was little capital to replace buildings so Medieval and 16th/17th century farm buildings often survive. Architectural interest of buildings associated with Basildon Park

### **Aesthetic and artistic interest**

Surviving parkland features have aesthetic interest.

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

Parts of the area especially in the North have extensive tracts of little-modified landscape and retain considerable historic character.

Parks are a common feature in the area, most being minor parklands that had been established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of parklands have experienced either a total change in use or a contraction in the area they cover.

There is strong time depth relating to the Roman Period.

**Designated Heritage** - Scheduled Monuments (2) relate to the Grim's Ditch, a late Bronze Age linear earthwork and ditch. The Listed buildings (89) are dispersed across the area and relate to manor houses, farmhouses, cottages and barns with some designed landscape elements. There is 1 parkland on the register of parks and gardens at Basildon House. This is a late 18<sup>th</sup> century country house surrounded by contemporary landscape park and woodland, elements having been designed by Lancelot Brown in 1778. Mid 19<sup>th</sup> century formal gardens lie adjacent to the house.