



NORTH WESSEX DOWNS

AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

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



Volume 1 EXTRACT

Third Edition March 2016

Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy





Emma Rouse, Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy

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

March 2016 – Third Edition



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.

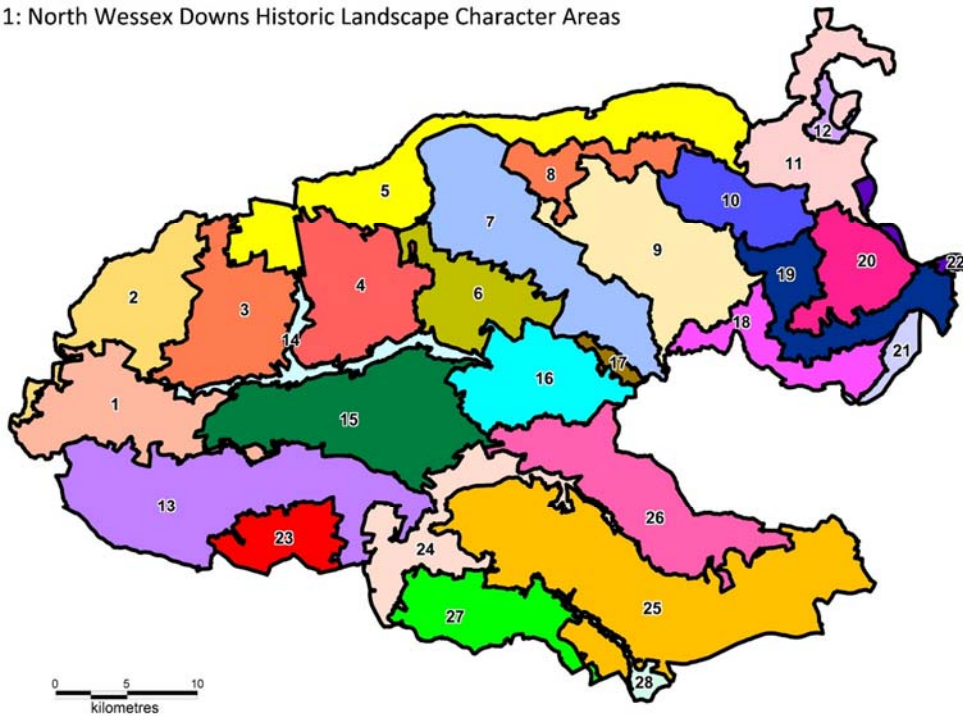
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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



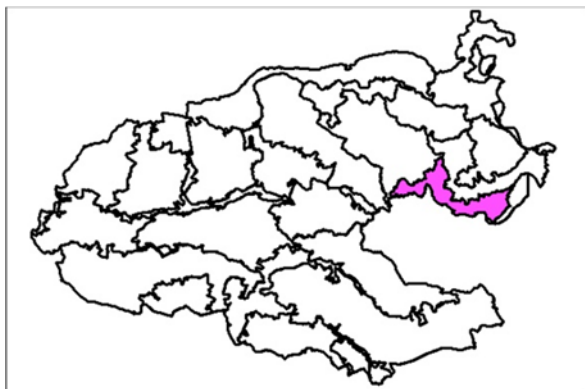
Map Produced by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy 2012. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2012.

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|
| 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 18: Snelsmore and Bucklebury Commons

Significant concentrations of Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork survive around Beenham. Evidence for Roman activity relates to a villa at Wellhouse and earthworks representing a probable religious complex in Box Wood. This is one of the most highly modified areas in the Eastern half of the AONB. However Snelsmore Common and Snelsmore East Common have their origins in the late Medieval period and survive as common land today. Parks are a common feature in the area, most being minor designed parklands that had been established in the 19th century.



Location – This is an area of high ground and dry valleys between the high Downs and the Pang and Kennet Valleys. Much of the area is composed of the watershed between the Pang and the Kennet-Lambourn-Winterbourne drainage network.

Geology and Topography – London Clays are found across most of the area and on the highest ground are overlain by Bagshot Beds capped by plateau gravels. Chalk outcrops in the valley bases and is overlain by Reading Beds. On high ground in the North and West Reading Beds are overlain by London Clays capped by plateau gravels. The landform forms a broad lowland plateau.

Landscape Character – Small irregular fields with a dispersed settlement and an intricate network of rural lanes. Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 8A: Hermitage Wooded Commons.

Archaeological Character – HER records are unevenly distributed across this area. Part of the area was covered by the Berkshire Downs Survey and the Lower Kennet Valley Survey. The West of the area has been covered by the National Mapping Programme.

Significant concentrations of Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork and some late Bronze Age pottery were found during fieldwalking around Beenham. Evidence for later prehistoric activity is dominated by the two hillforts in the area. Firstly Grimsbury Castle which survives as substantial earthworks within Grimsbury Wood and secondly Bussock Camp a substantial wooded earthworks within Bussock Wood. Two convergent linear earthworks, one known as the Black Ditch, run across the centre of Snelsmore Common. These are undated and may be prehistoric.

Evidence for Roman activity relates to a villa which was discovered during ploughing immediately East of Wellhouse in the early 19th century. The site was partially excavated and contained remains of walls and mosaics. A significant complex of earthworks and structures exist in Box Wood and Rook's Copse at the northern tip of the area.

The linear earthworks on Snelmore Common have also been interpreted as early Medieval boundary features and are superficially similar to Bury's Bank on Greenham Common. An earthwork enclosure, Cinges Haga, was mentioned in a charter of 951 and is thought to have run across Snelmore East Common.



Curridge - This is one of the most highly modified areas in the Eastern half of the AONB. Most historic enclosures have been rationalised into fields suited to modern mechanised agriculture through boundary removal and reorganisation.

© Copyright [Andrew Smith](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under a [Creative Commons Licence](#).



Pasture, Bucklebury – This area seems to have had a Medieval landscape characterised by small fields and dispersed small settlements and farms, inter-related with large commons and woods with a dense network of roads and tracks

© Copyright [Andrew Smith](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under a [Creative Commons Licence](#)



Bucklebury Common – A lack of grazing on remaining commons and some plantations led to many becoming substantially wooded over by the middle of the 20th century.

© Copyright [Sebastian Ballard](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under a [Creative Commons Licence](#).

Late Medieval material is mainly represented by features related to the use of Bucklebury and Snelsmore Common. An earthwork bank, thought to be late Medieval in date, can be traced forming the boundary of Snelsmore Common at several places on its western side. A Medieval pillow mound also exists as an earthwork at the common's Northern tip. A deer park, known from documentary references of 1509, is thought to have existed near Snelsmore Common and it has been suggested that the common boundary bank may have formed the pale of this park.

Post Medieval features are represented by standing buildings. Several records of 19th and 20th century industrial features exist in the North of the area. A large brickworks existed on the edge of the area by Little Hungerford, and part of its site was used in the mid-20th century as a military new housing development. Both commons were exploited during the Second World War. The railway line from Newbury to Oxford runs along the edge of the area it is now disused but survives as a tree-covered earthwork.

The location, nature and quality of any below-ground archaeology are unspecified. The origin and nature of the settlement within the area is also unclear. The historic building stock is not extensive and is poorly understood and poorly recorded.

Historic Landscape Trajectory – This area seems to have had a Medieval landscape characterised by small fields and dispersed small settlements and farms, inter-related with large commons and woods with a dense network of roads and tracks. The interplay of land-use, roads and the axes of the ridges and valleys created a very irregular grain to the landscape.

Much of the area was enclosed into small irregularly-shaped fields suggesting that they were created by numerous individual farmers, perhaps over a long period of time. Many assarts existed on the fringes of larger commons and some woods, and it is possible that some fields identified as early enclosures were assarts. Three blocks of regularly-shaped fields existed in the area: between Snelsmore Common and Bussock; around Bradfield South End; and between Oare and Eling. The regularity of the fields suggests that they were created in a planned fashion and may result from agreement between local land-holders, farmers and commoners to rationalise their holdings and rights in the common grazing into fields. Traces of open fields existed South of Curridge and these too, had been enclosed into fields by the 18th century. This area may have been part of the open field of Shaw and Thatcham and is probably a continuation of the Medieval landscape of the Kennet Valley that has been cut-off from similar landscapes by the development of Newbury and Thatcham.

Extensive commons covered much of the area; an almost continuous chain ran along the Pang watershed from Bradfield South End to Eling. Some were enclosed privately before the late 18th century but many were enclosed through Act of Parliament. Expanses of common land at Bucklebury and Snelsmore remained unenclosed into the 20th century.

The landscape was densely wooded; most woods were large and have been identified as ancient woodlands. The largest ancient woods were adjacent to or interleaved with commons (e.g. Carbins Wood, Fence Wood). Areas of other old woods existed across the area. These were generally small in size and located mostly on the edges of ancient woods. A very large area of this type of woodland was present on the East side of Snelsmore Common. Most woods in the area were coppiced

Present Day Historic Landscape Character - This is one of the most highly modified areas in the Eastern half of the AONB. Most historic enclosures have been rationalised into fields suited to modern mechanised agriculture through boundary removal and reorganisation. This has been intensified with the construction of the M4 and A34 through parts of the area. Large areas of paddocks have also been created from historic fields around settlements. Few historic enclosures are unaltered, large areas of historic fields do not survive and those fields that do remain exist as small, isolated groups amidst a modern farming landscape. These changes have created a much more regular landscape and have significantly broken up the historic character of the area. Parliamentary enclosures are almost entirely absent from the modern landscape and most have been used for housing and tree plantations. Many former parkland areas have been enclosed into arable fields and paddocks.

Significant changes have occurred in the tree-cover with many blocks of ancient woodland cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. This has impacted on the character of the area as many replanted woods are very large in size. Replanted woods often have dense single species tree-cover. Several areas of ancient and other old woods have been cleared over the course of the 20th century. Some clearance has been for farming or quarrying but most has been used for housing. A huge number of plantations, many very large, have been established within the area. Most were created on former common heathland, including areas enclosed to fields under Parliamentary enclosure. Some of the largest plantations were created in the later 19th century East of Hermitage. Plantations have greatly increased the wooded cover of the area and introduced very tightly packed woodland into areas that were very open. This has changed the character of the area and made large parts of it feel much more visually enclosed than previously.

A lack of grazing on remaining commons and some plantations led to many becoming substantially wooded over by the middle of the 20th century. This is being tackled by management and conservation work at Snelsmore Common. Bucklebury Common and Snelsmore East Common remain very wooded.

Parks are a common feature in the area, most being minor parklands that had been established in the 19th century. A large section of Dunston Park extended into this area.

Historic Settlement Character – The area was more densely settled than the neighbouring valleys, and small settlements were distributed thickly across the landscape. The historic settlement pattern was dispersed and dominated by common-edge settlements and farms. Largest concentrations of settlements were at Cold Ash, Hermitage, and on the North and East fringes of Bucklebury Common. The largest settlement around Bucklebury Common was Chapel Row but most had no formal name. These settlements have their roots in squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the resources of the common. Their development is poorly understood: they existed by the 18th century but may date back further. Some small-scale settlement growth occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries and this was mainly confined to infill around existing settlement or the construction of small numbers of large houses for the affluent classes.

Huge housing growth has occurred since the later 20th century and is ongoing as the area lies within easy reach of Newbury, Thatcham, the M4, A34 and A4. New housing has focused 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. Much of the housing is affluent in nature and swimming pools and tennis courts are common features. Development has been so intense that it can be hard to tell

where one settlement finishes and the next starts. This is true on the road between Thatcham and Hampstead Norreys where a band of settlement runs for about four miles from Cold Ash, taking in Longlane, Curridge and Hermitage, to Little Hungerford. A settlement consisting of several small estates has grown up at Upper Bucklebury; previously there was only a small common-edge settlement (Byles's Green) anywhere in this vicinity. The combination of large areas of housing and paddocks has given much of the central portion of the area a suburban feel.

Historic Farmstead Character – Numerous farms were scattered across the area, the majority named after topographic features and places. Farmsteads typically consist of loose courtyard plans with detached buildings arranged around a yard. Some 19th 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.

Special Qualities and features of Significance

Archaeological Interest

- Significant concentrations of Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork around Beenham.
- Earliest evidence for iron-working at late Bronze Age settlement in Hartshill
- Evidence for later prehistoric activity is dominated by the two hillforts in the area.
- Evidence for Roman activity relates to a villa at Wellhouse and earthworks representing a probable religious complex in Box Wood. Cropmark evidence of possible late prehistoric or Romano-British settlement exists North of the M4
- The linear earthworks on Snelsmore Common have also been interpreted as early Medieval boundary features.
- Earthworks on Oare Common may relate to Medieval activity, including a possible motte and tofts & crofts.
- Late Medieval material is mainly represented by features related to the use of Bucklebury and Snelsmore Common.

Historic Interest

Archaeological sites surviving as earthworks relating to Prehistory, Roman period and later have a strong illustrative interest. Surviving areas of unaltered pre 1700 fields can be used to illustrate early pre modern land use.

Architectural Interest

Buildings associated with the dispersed settlement pattern including farmsteads with loose courtyard plans.

Aesthetic and artistic interest

Surviving parkland features have aesthetic interest.

Coherence, Rarity and Time depth

This is one of the most highly modified areas in the Eastern half of the AONB. Few historic enclosures are unaltered, large areas of historic fields do not survive and those fields that do remain exist as small, isolated groups amidst a modern farming landscape. Significant changes have occurred in the tree-cover with many blocks of ancient woodland cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. However, Snelsmore Common and Snelsmore East Common have their origins in the late Medieval period and survive as common land today. Parks are a common feature in the area, most being minor parklands that had been established in the 19th century.

There is strong time depth relating to all archaeological periods from the Neolithic onwards.

Designated Heritage Assets

Scheduled Monuments (2) relate to Grimsbury Castle and Bussock Camp two Iron Age Hillforts. The Listed Buildings (77) are scattered across the area and relate to the cottages, farmhouses and farm buildings which comprised the bulk of the dispersed settlement pattern. There are 0 parklands on the register of parks and gardens.