



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.

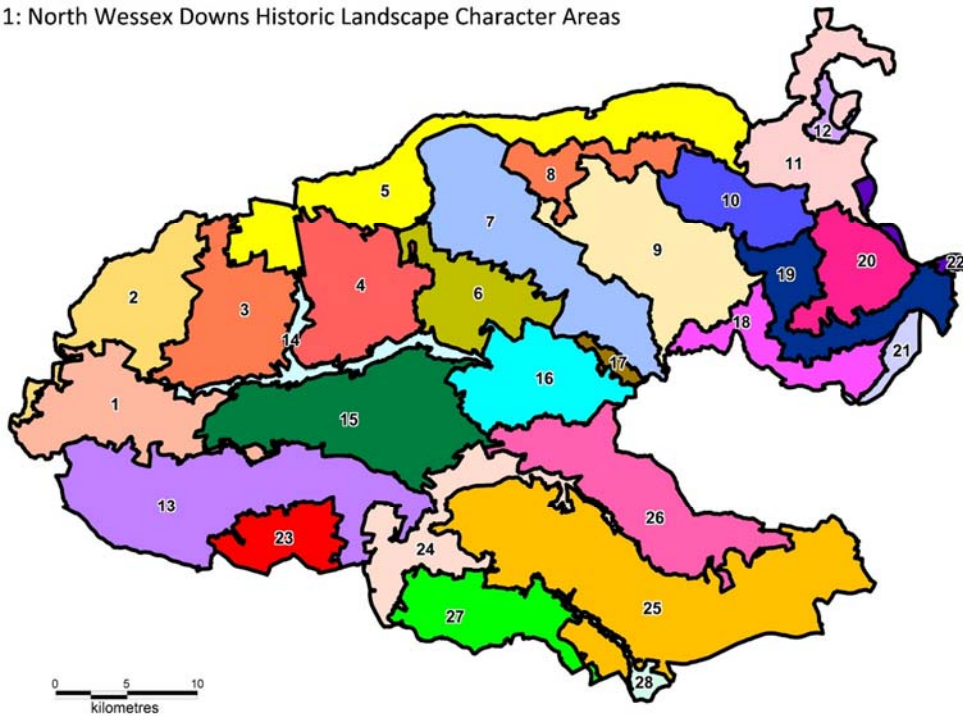
All historic characterisations (landscape, urban or seascape) form detailed, often complex, datasets which record the historic dimension of the present day. This complexity derives from the interrelation of several factors:

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



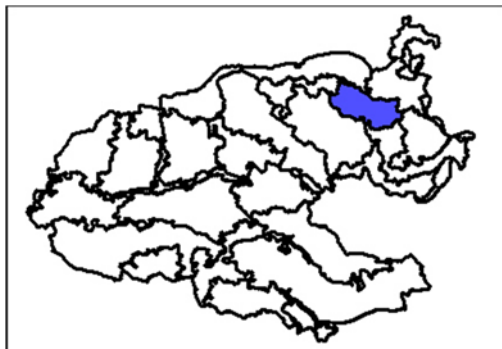
Map Produced by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy 2012. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2012.

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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 8: West Ilsley and downland

The area is marked by the dominant form of the Late Bronze Age linear earthwork Grim's Ditch. There is significant cropmark evidence of Romano- British activity including potential Roman settlements. Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets. Small ribbons of open downland survive. These are an important historical survival representing a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland pre 1800. Areas of intact parliamentary enclosure have survived adjacent to the Ridgeway and around Locking representing an important historical survival of 18th and 19th century landscapes in the AONB.



Location – Downland to the North and South Ridgeway between Letcombe Bassett in the West and West and East Ilsley to the South

Geology and Topography – Middle and Upper Chalk overlain with drift deposits of clay with flint. Rolling upland with a round or flat topped hills intersected by dry valleys.

Landscape Character – Rolling downland dominated by arable fields with sparse woodland. *Source: North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment Landscape Area 1D: Blewbury Downs*

Archaeological Character – The majority of sites in this area are known from cropmarks. Earlier prehistoric archaeology is scarce. 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 Letcombe Bassett - 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 an Iron Age Hillfort, Letcombe Castle.

There is significant cropmark evidence of Romano- British activity including potential Roman settlements.

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. A number of Post Medieval hollow ways, (many associated with clay pits or quarries marked on OS maps), cross the earlier Grim's ditch at various places.

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 present day settlements is poorly understood. 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.



Farmland West Ilsley - Today the area is dominated by new 20th century fields created by enclosing the remaining downland and reorganised fields created by modifying the underlying parliamentary field patterns. These changes have created a landscape typified by very large arable fields with some earlier field boundaries remaining.

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Farmland East Ilsley – Open areas of close-cropped chalk grassland formerly dominated this area either side of the Ridgeway which ran East-West across this area. This was used as grazing for animals. The land was also associated with small patches of scrub and gorse which were used as fuel. Chalk track ways led from the villages to the South and North to join the Ridgeway.

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Church Farm, Compton – Apart from the isolated farms there is no pre 1800 historic settlement. Compton is close to the Eastern boundary of the area

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Historic Landscape Trajectory– Open areas of close-cropped chalk grassland formerly dominated this area either side of the Ridgeway which ran East-West across this area. This was used as grazing for animals. The land was also associated with

small patches of scrub and gorse which were used as fuel. Chalk track ways fed from the villages to the South and North to join the Ridgeway. These open areas were used as part of the common grazing regime that operated in many Downs parishes in the Medieval period. Some small areas were enclosed prior to 1700 through the creation of regularly-shaped, small to medium sized fields with boundaries composed mainly of hedges. The form of these fields is likely to be because these fields are the result of phases of planned, but undocumented, enclosure. Large swathes of common downland in the centre of this area were enclosed during parliamentary enclosure in the 18th and 19th century notably in the parishes of Letcombe Regis and Wantage.

However, significant reserves remained as a major part of the sheep/corn system of agriculture until the early 20th century. This was a system of grain production made possible by the large sheep flocks, supported by early crops of grass produced by the water meadows in the Winterbourne Valley and the Thames flood plain, which fed all day on the high open chalk downland and by night were folded on arable lands to enrich the soils. These were located to the far West and far East of the area. With the collapse of this system in the 20th century further enclosure and ploughing up of chalk grassland occurred.

There were small areas of ancient woodland on the steep downland slopes.

Present Day Historic Landscape Character – Today the area is dominated by new 20th century fields created by enclosing the remaining downland and reorganised fields created by modifying the underlying parliamentary field patterns. The mechanisation of agriculture in the later 20th century has led to an almost total re-organisation of these fieldscapes. These changes have created a landscape typified by very large arable fields with some earlier field boundaries remaining. Areas of parliamentary enclosure have survived adjacent to the Ridgeway and around Locking. Large regular blocks of post 1800 plantation woodland have been created on the South side of the area.

Today small ribbons of unenclosed chalk downland survive along the tops of the North facing chalk escarpment and in steep sided combs in areas where arable agriculture is impractical or uneconomic. This is however a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland. New gallops have been created adjacent to the Ridgeway on Warren Down.

Historic Settlement Character – Apart from the isolated farms there is no pre 1700 historic settlement.

Historic Farmstead Character – Historic farms pre 1800 are not common and where they do exist they are isolated in the landscape. A few new 19th century farmsteads were also created for example at Angeldown Farm.

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 bottom. 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

- Earlier Bronze Age round barrows are widespread many existing only as ring ditches.
- Late Bronze Age linear earthwork Grim's Ditch.
- Later prehistoric activity is widespread.
- Significant cropmark evidence of Romano- British activity including potential Roman settlements.
- Later Medieval activity on the downland areas includes extensive areas of lynchets.

Historic Interest

Archaeological sites in this area have less illustrative value than other areas as the majority of sites are only known from cropmarks. Late Bronze Age linear earthwork Grim's Ditch and Iron Age hillfort, of Letcombe Castle have strong illustrative value.

Surviving areas of open chalk downland can be used to illustrate early pre modern land use.

Architectural Interest

Buildings associated with pre-1750 farmstead buildings are important architectural survivals.

Aesthetic and artistic interest

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

Coherence, Rarity and Time depth

The historic landscape of this area is extremely coherent dominated by 20th century enclosure. These changes have created a landscape typified by very large arable fields with some earlier field boundaries remaining.

Areas of intact parliamentary enclosure have survived adjacent to the Ridgeway and around Locking.

Small ribbons of open downland survive. These are an important historical survival representing a fraction of the former extent of chalk downland.

There is strong time depth relating to the later prehistoric and Roman period.

Designated Heritage - Scheduled Monuments (14) are dominated by sections of Grim's Ditch, Bronze Age round barrows and Letcombe Castle hillfort. The Listed Buildings (5) are related to milestones on the Ridgeway and historic farmsteads. There are 0 parklands on the register of parks and gardens.