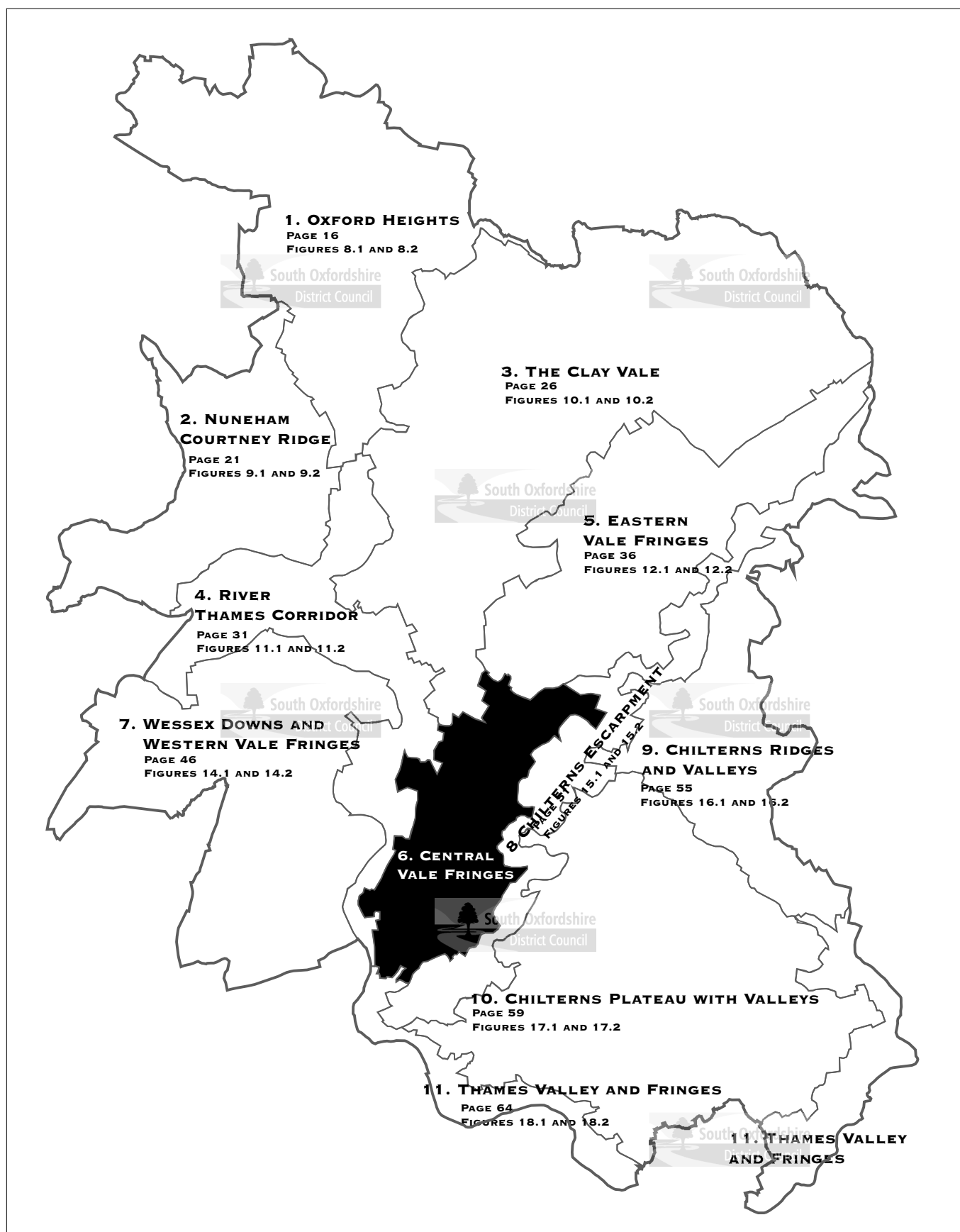


CHARACTER AREA 6: CENTRAL VALE FRINGES



Landform and landcover

This character area forms the western section of a distinctive belt of low, rounded hills, approximately 3 to 4 kms wide, which follow the base of the Chiltern escarpment and form a transitional zone between the chalk uplands and the low-lying clay vale and River Thames floodplain.

This 'shelf' of higher ground is formed by an outcrop of Middle and Lower Chalk which fringes the Gault Clay of the vale. These permeable, calcareous rocks produce the smoothly rolling landform and light, loamy soils that are characteristic of chalk areas and which contrast with the low-lying, subtle relief and heavy soils of the clay vale. The productive and easily worked sandy brown earth soils have been cultivated over a very long period and are now predominantly under intensive arable land use. Woodland and tree cover is generally quite sparse due to hedgerow removal, particularly towards the south of this area where intensive agriculture has created a particularly exposed and expansive, open landscape - the so-called 'Ipsden Prairies'. This landscape is likely to be similar to the earlier, bare open vistas of the ancient common fields which would have dominated this area.

Quite extensive parts of the chalk are overlain by Coombe deposits which contain gravels and flints, the latter conspicuous in the soils and traditionally used as a local building material. These deposits have been worked for crushed flint gravel and hoggins, for example in the area to the east of Benson.

Settlement and buildings

As described under Character Area 5, this belt of higher ground has provided a favoured area for settlement since prehistoric times. The Icknield Way, a prehistoric thoroughfare, followed the outcrop of dry, permeable rocks between the wet land of the vale and the steep Chilterns escarpment and became a focus for early settlement and forest clearance.

This part of the chalk belt is, however, more sparsely settled than the Eastern Vale Fringes. It is characterised by a dispersed pattern of farmsteads with a few small nucleated villages, such as Ipsden, Turners Court and Hailey, and straggling rows of houses along some of the many rural roads which criss-cross this area. The southernmost part of the area is particularly empty of settlements, while there is a focus of larger settlements just outside this area within the River Thames corridor (eg. Crowmarsh Gifford, North Stoke and South Stoke).

Earlier buildings within the area were timber-framed with wattle and daub infill, replaced later by brick nogging. Brick and flint are widespread with some examples of the local soft 'clunch' or chalk stone used in association with brick dressings. Roofs are typically red tiles with occasional thatch [9].

THE CENTRAL VALE FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the large-scale, intensively farmed landscape of the Central Vale Fringe around Wicks Hill.



2 The denuded arable landscape of the 'Ipsden Prairie'.



3 The picturesque village of Ewelme which straddles a shallow, sheep-grazed valley.

Landscape and visual character

Like the eastern vale fringes, the landscape within this area has a fairly consistent character, with coherence and unity provided by the underlying chalk or greensand geology which produces the characteristic smooth, rolling landform and grey, flinty soils. However, the character of this area is dominated by the somewhat bleak chalk landscapes around Ipsden, which have historically been quite open but have been further denuded by intensive arable farming (see Figure 13.1).

The main variations in landscape character are between:

- the smoothly rounded **downs and vale fringe** landscapes of the chalk hills;
- an area of **parkland and estate farmland** landscape;
- and a couple of **landfill** sites within former quarries.

Downs and vale fringe landscapes

These are the predominant landscape types within the area, forming a consistently rolling agricultural landscape of smooth, rounded landform and gentle valleys. The structure of hedgerows, trees and woodland belts, and the degree of visual enclosure, are the main factors which distinguish one area from another. These differences are closely related to the nature and intensity of farming practice.

Open rolling downs

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large-scale field pattern;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- denuded and somewhat bleak and sterile character, with few features of landscape or wildlife value;
- rural character with few detracting influences but large-scale farm buildings tend to be particularly prominent in this very open landscape;
- open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.

Semi-enclosed rolling downs

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation but some areas of permanent pasture or grassland;
- large-scale field pattern contained within a comparatively intact structure of hedges, with hedgerow trees and some linear belts or stands of planted woodland;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- rural character with few detracting influences, although main roads create some localised intrusion;
- semi-enclosed landscape with moderate intervisibility.

Parkland and Estate Farmland

A small area of parkland and estate farmland was noted on the fringes of Crowmarsh Gifford.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, or 'estate' landscapes dominated by woodland blocks and clumps of trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

Mineral and landfill sites

Two landfill sites were recorded during the survey, the main one being the recently restored site south of Ewelme with another smaller site a short distance to the south.

Key characteristics:

- un-natural landform and uncharacteristic vegetation cover, giving impression of disturbed ground;
- introduction of incongruous styles of fencing and highway treatments which lend an urban character to the landscape.

Landscape management issues

Apart from the area of parkland at Crowmarsh Gifford, there are no other landscapes within the **conserve** category within this area (see Figure 13.2). However, the smooth, rolling contours of the lower chalk hills which dominate the area are scenically attractive and have a strong rural character and sense of place. Where the structure of hedgerows and woodlands is more intact, (eg. towards the foot of the wooded Chiltern scarp and south of Ewelme), the landscape is of higher quality and requires only modest intervention to **repair** areas weakened by intensive farming practice.

Across the remaining area, however, the impact of modern farming practice has been more intense and, in some areas, has resulted in the complete removal of hedgerows and trees creating an exceptionally denuded and sterile landscape. Action to **restore** some of its former structure would be desirable, taking the historic pattern of large-scale enclosures as a guide to an appropriate density of field boundaries. Quarries and landfill sites are examples of land uses which have disrupted the natural pattern and character of the rural landscape. Here, intervention to **reconstruct** a more sympathetic character and to mitigate adverse landscape impacts would be desirable.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- retain a generally open character and important views from the chalk hills but encourage some replacement of hedgerows and woodland planting within the 'open rolling downs' landscapes (to restore the former pattern of large-scale enclosures);
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and convert arable land to permanent pasture where possible;
- maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland at Crowmarsh Gifford;
- mitigate the impacts of quarrying and landfill operations (including urbanising road

treatments) and restore to a rural character in keeping with the surrounding landscape;

- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 6.1 and 6.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Central Vale Fringes, as explained on page 6.

Some general conclusions are that:

- the high quality parkland landscape within this area is particularly sensitive to change and least able to accommodate new development;
- the semi-enclosed rolling downs landscapes benefit from a more intact landscape structure and the strong backdrop of the Chilterns escarpment, but their scenic quality (part AONB) and visual prominence makes them sensitive to development;
- development within the open arable downs landscapes will be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form;
- in general, landscapes with stronger landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows may be more able to absorb small-scale development, as long as it is in character with the locality, carefully sited and well-integrated;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside.