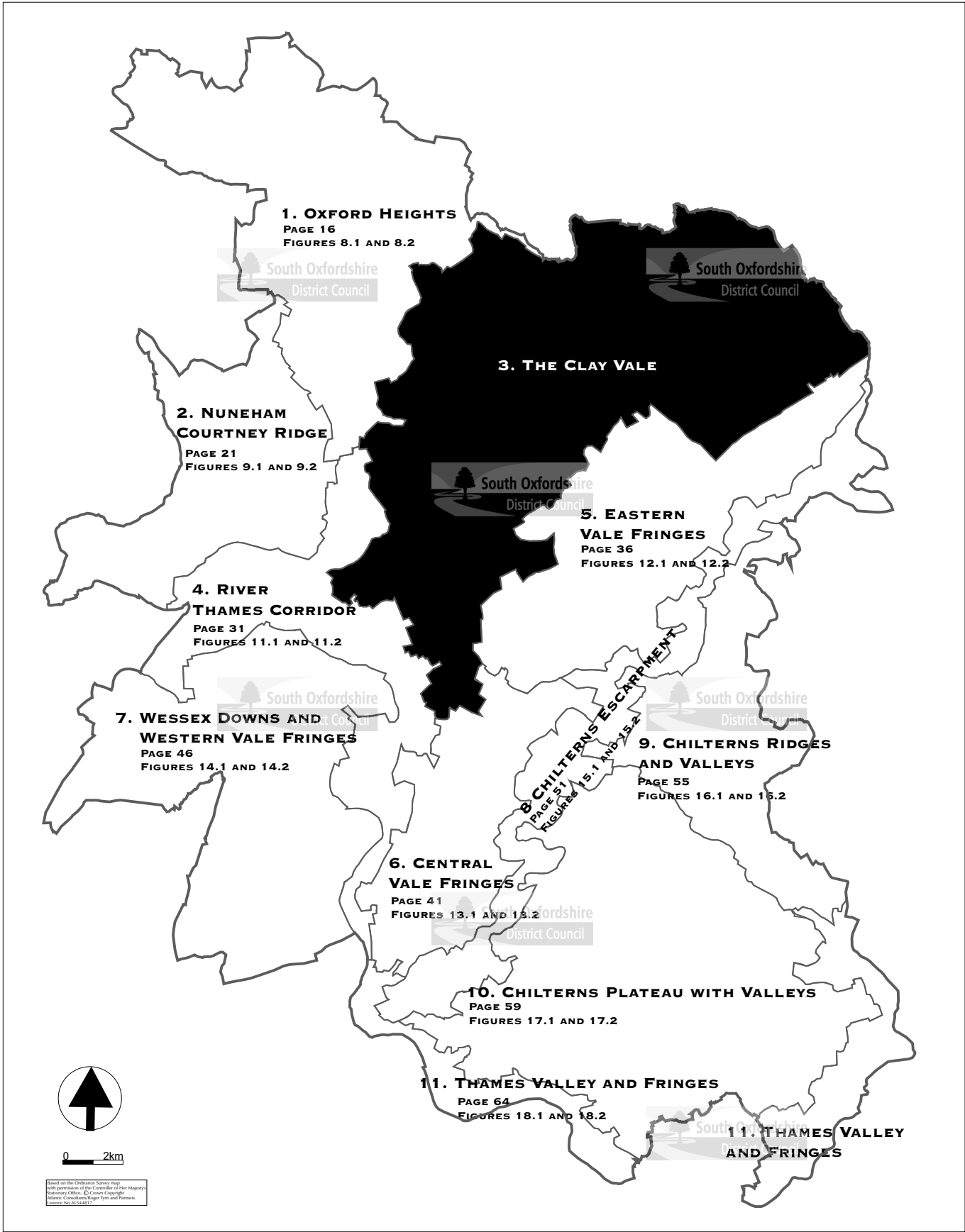


CHARACTER AREA 3: THE CLAY VALE



Landform and landcover

This character area embraces the lowland agricultural landscape of the central clay vale, which lies between the hills of the Mid-vale Ridge and the chalk of the Chiltern Hills, and stretches from Thame in the north-east to Benson in the south-west. This broad valley forms the transition between the Vale of White Horse to the west and the Vale of Aylesbury to the east.

The underlying geology is dominated by heavy blue grey Gault Clay, which was laid down during a marine incursion in the Lower Cretaceous period. This gives rise to the low ground, subdued topography and heavy soils which are typical of the gently rolling vale landscape.

At its western end, the vale grades gently into the flat alluvial floodplain of the River Thames. However, along its northern edge, the vale becomes more strongly undulating, partly as a result of more mixed geology around Great Milton and towards the upper Thame valley, where the Gault Clay gives way to exposures of Lower Greensand, Portland Beds and Kimmeridge Clay. Here, in places, there is a distinct sense of elevation although most of the area lies well below 100 metres AOD.

The vale supports mainly arable farming with some tracts of pasture, particularly in the lowest areas along various watercourses where drainage is impeded. Farming practice is particularly intensive on the better-drained soils of the Lower Greensand and Portland Beds, such as around Great Milton, where field enlargement and hedgerow removal have created a very open landscape probably similar to the bare open vistas of the ancient common fields.

Settlement and buildings

Settlement pattern within the vale is strongly influenced by physical factors. The heavy clay soils and a risk of flooding have traditionally discouraged settlement on areas underlain by the Gault Clay and there are still quite large areas of the vale which are sparsely settled (eg. to the north-east of Chalgrove).

However, the area does contain the town of Thame and a number of smaller villages which tend to be associated with the sandstones and mudstones of the Portland Beds, Upper Greensand and Kimmeridge Clays. For example, Thame is built on a sandstone island which emerges from the surrounding clay and is almost entirely encircled by the River Thame and its tributaries (the town takes its name from the river, which means 'dark waters'). Other examples of this link with geology are the villages of Great Milton and Great Haseley which sit on the rolling plateau formed by exposures of the Portland Beds and Lower Greensand.

Thame was one of the primary Saxon settlements but was deliberately enlarged in the twelfth century by the Bishop of Lincoln and still retains the characteristics of a classic linear medieval new town [6]. This and several other settlements retain a substantial number of old buildings of historical importance and contain designated Conservation Areas. Because of the lack of building stone, most of the older houses are timber framed with thatched roofs and there are occasional examples of walling in cob, a mixture of mud and straw. Brick was also widely used from an early date and appears as 'nogging' for timber framed houses, in alternating bands of brick and flint in some eighteenth century cottages and in a characteristic pattern of mellow red and grey brickwork [6].

THE CLAY VALE



1 Air photograph showing the flat open landscapes around Chalgrove airfield in the centre of the clay vale.



2 Undulating wooded vale around Tiddington.

3 The denuded arable landscape of the 'undulating open vale' near Little Milton.



Landscape and visual character

Although this is a large character area, its landscape character is remarkably unvarying. It is dominated by gently rolling or undulating landform upon which lies a typical pattern of medium to large-scale fields bounded by regular hedgerows, typical of the planned agricultural landscape of the parliamentary enclosures. The main differences lie in the degree of 'intactness' of the hedgerow structure and the degree of openness or enclosure in the landscape, although there are minor variations in land use which have localised effects on landscape character (see Figure 10.1).

The main distinctions that have been drawn are between:

- the different sub-types of the typical **undulating vale** landscapes which dominate the area;
- the flat, low-lying **floodplain** landscapes of a number of minor river valleys;
- areas of **parkland** landscape at Thame Park and a number of smaller parks throughout the Vale;
- an area of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf course to the west of Thame;
- two distinctive, flat **airfield** sites, at Chalgrove and Benson.

Clay vale landscapes

These are the characteristic farmed landscapes of the clay vale, characterised by gently rolling or undulating landform and a regular pattern of fields bounded by hedgerows. The main variations are between the very open, denuded large-scale arable landscapes with a weak hedgerow structure (eg. along the centre of the vale) and areas with stronger structure of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodland, and a more mixed pattern of land use (eg. around Tiddington).

Undulating open vale

Key characteristics:

- low-lying, undulating or gently rolling landform;
- large-scale farmland, mostly under intensive arable cultivation;

- typically large fields, with rectilinear pattern of field boundaries;
- weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees;
- open, denuded and exposed character, with high intervisibility;
- distinctive elevated and expansive character on higher ground, with dominant sky and long views;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development.

Undulating, semi-enclosed vale

Key characteristics:

- as above but with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clearer definition of field pattern;
- predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and in the more strongly undulating areas;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development;
- moderate intervisibility.

Undulating wooded vale

Key characteristics:

- as above but with significant woodland blocks which create a stronger sense of enclosure and visual containment;
- low intervisibility.

Floodplain landscapes

These landscapes occur as localised variations in character along the shallow valleys and floodplains of the minor watercourses that drain the vale and separate areas of raised ground. These landscapes predominantly comprise thin strips of floodplain pasture (eg. along Haseley Brook) but also include some areas which have been drained and cultivated and are now under arable farmland (eg. the flat, low-lying farmland next to Chalgrove airfield).

Flat, open farmland

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat farmland with a low-lying character;
- rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion from built development near Chalgrove;
- open, denuded landscape with high intervisibility.

Flat semi-enclosed farmland

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character (eg. along Cuttle Brook near Thame Park);
- rural and semi-enclosed character;
- moderate to low intervisibility.

Flat floodplain pasture

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- small-scale landscapes with intimate, pastoral and tranquil character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river corridor may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas.

Parkland and Estate Farmland

The area contains the listed parkland landscape of Thame Park and a number of smaller parks at Rycote, Ascott, and Brightwell Park.

Key characteristics:

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

Amenity landscape

This type is represented by two recent golf course developments - at the Oxfordshire Golf Course to the west of Thame and at Lower Farm, Waterstock.

Key characteristics:

- incongruous, artificial landform at the Oxfordshire Golf Course, out of context with surrounding gently undulating landform;
- typical golf course landscapes of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated features such as lakes and bunkers and buildings;
- intensively managed and sub-urban character;
- moderate intervisibility.

Airfields

Two large airfields are located within the area, at Chalgrove and Benson, taking advantage of low-lying, flat land.

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying land;
- large expanse of open ground with very little vegetation to interrupt views and an open, exposed character;
- typical features of high security fences, large-scale sheds or other buildings which are out of character with their rural setting;
- high intervisibility.

Landscape management issues

The landscape of the Clay Vale comprises attractive undulating countryside with a rural and predominantly unspoilt character but with some local variations in quality and condition.

Areas of particularly high scenic quality, which retain a strong character and landscape structure, comprise the formal parklands, parts of the pastoral floodplain landscape of the River Thame and its tributaries, the area of strongly undulating wooded landscape around Tiddington and the semi-enclosed farmland around Brightwell Baldwin. Management to **conserve** and enhance these landscapes is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 10.2).

Across much of the remaining area, intensive farming practice is responsible for varying degrees of decline in landscape condition and quality. Where field pattern, hedgerow structure and landscape character are still basically intact (eg. in the areas south of Thame, to the north and south of Stadhampton and to the south of Chalgrove) **repair** of a slightly weakened structure is the most appropriate strategy. However, there are quite extensive areas of farmland in the vale where landscape structure has been substantially weakened (eg. to the west and east of Thame, around Great Milton and to the south of the M40 and to the north-east of the airfields of Chalgrove and Benson). In these areas, more significant intervention is required to **restore** landscape structure and character.

Finally, the airfields themselves, the newly created golf courses and the dominant road network at the junction of the M40 and A418 east of Wheatley, are examples of land uses which have disrupted the natural pattern and character of the rural landscape. Here, intervention which would help to **reconstruct** a more sympathetic character and to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding landscape would be desirable.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river corridors;
- strengthen the typical pattern of field boundaries, with strong hedgerows and frequent hedgerow trees enclosing medium to large-scale fields;
- maintain and, where appropriate, restore parkland landscapes and features at Thame Park, Rycote, Ascott, and Brightwell Park;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas, airfields and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside;
- manage golf courses to provide better integration with character of surrounding countryside and to enhance landscape and wildlife value, eg. through low-intensity management of roughs, introduction of wildflowers into grasslands and planting of

native trees and shrubs on land between fairways and around periphery of sites.

Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas and along the river corridors. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-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 3.1 and 3.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the River Thames Corridor, as explained on page 6.

Some specific conclusions are that:

- the unspoilt floodplain pastures, wetlands and parkland/estate landscapes are vulnerable to change and least able to accommodate built development;
- areas of open landscape on elevated ground and on the floor of the vale (including airfield sites) are visually exposed and new development would be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form or well-integrated within new landscape frameworks;
- development within the motorway corridor would intrude upon the predominantly rural and sparsely settled character of the adjacent landscape;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of built development;
- the ribbon of floodplain which separates the eastern and western built areas of Thame should be maintained as an important green corridor.