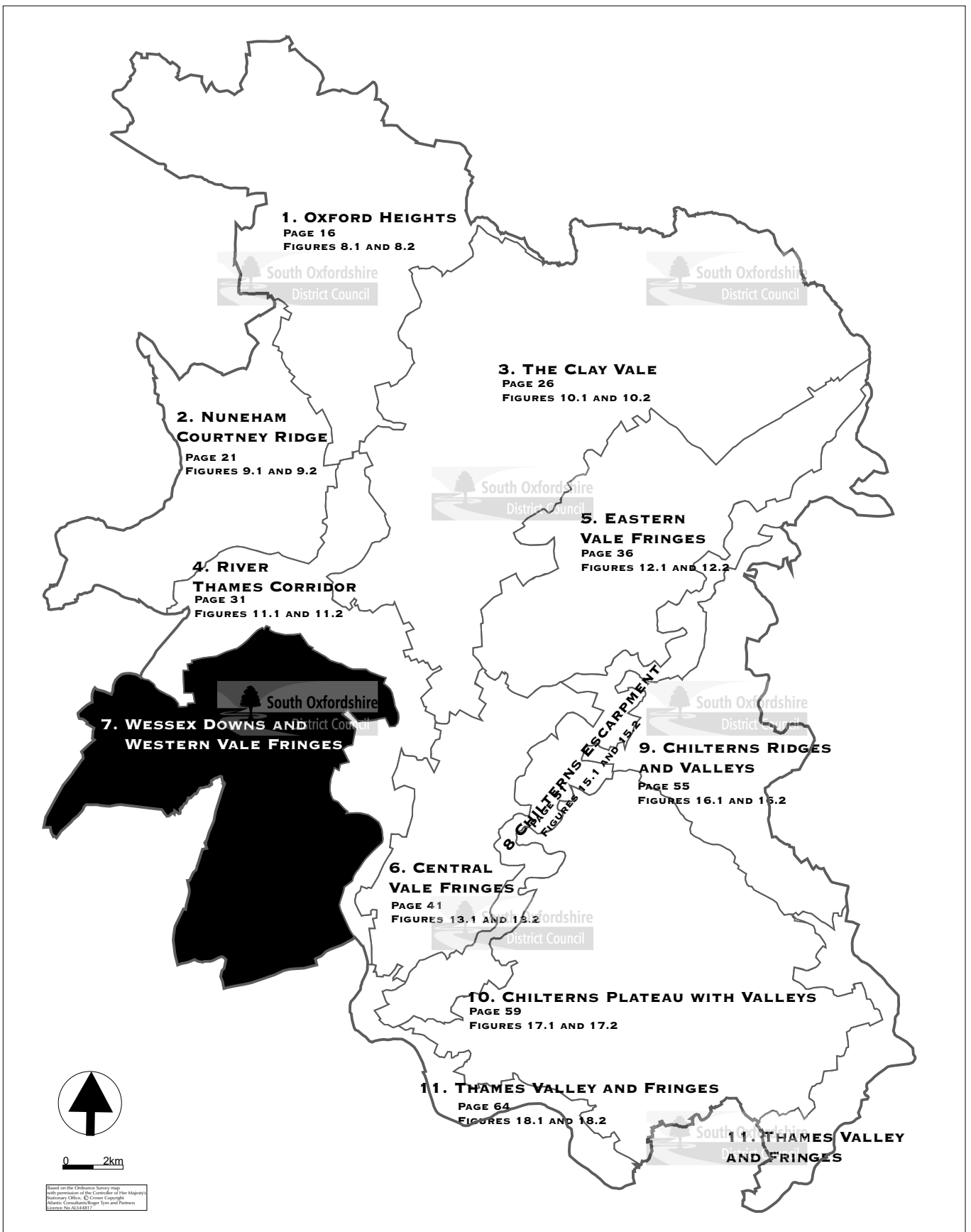


CHARACTER AREA 7: WESSEX DOWNS AND WESTERN VALE FRINGES



Landform and landcover

Like the Eastern and Central Vale Fringes, this character area forms a transitional area between the chalk uplands to the south and the clay vale to the north. The southernmost part of the area occupies part of the north-facing escarpment of the North Wessex (or Berkshire) Downs, part of the extensive cretaceous chalk belt of southern England. The area is characterised by typical chalk scenery of smoothly rounded open hills dissected by dry, and sometimes wooded, valleys and coombes. Parts of the area are overlain by clay with flints, the latter conspicuous in the soils and buildings of the area.

Around Didcot, a band of calcareous siltstones and sandy limestones of the Upper Greensand (or 'malmstone') forms the transition between the higher land of the downs and the lower-lying vale. These areas share characteristics of the chalk downland, with smoothly rounded landform and well-drained, 'chalky' and sometimes 'flinty' soils. Isolated outcrops of greensand and chalk form prominent rounded hills at Wittenham Clumps and Cholsey Hill, distinctive features within the flat vale landscape. Intensive arable farming is the predominant land use, with a sparse covering of trees and woodland, except on the steeper valley and hill-sides of the downs and at Wittenham.

Below the chalk and malmstone hills, the remaining area is underlain by alluvium, forming typically flat, low-lying and 'wet' landscapes. Much of this has been extensively drained and is now also under intensive arable farming, with permanent pasture concentrated mainly within areas prone to flooding next to the River Thames (see Character Area 4).

Settlement and buildings

Didcot is the largest settlement within the area, its growth from a small village being originally due to its location on the strategic rail network. With the arrival of the Great Western Railway in 1840 it expanded significantly and has continued to grow throughout this century [5]. The industrial estate and power station now link Didcot to Milton and the massive cooling towers are a distinctive and highly visible landmark across large parts of the flat clay vale and from the hills beyond.

Evidence of a long history of settlement is provided by various prehistoric earthworks and hillforts (eg. at Aston Upthorpe) which are scattered along the edge of the downs. Many of the surviving settlements have Saxon origins and are typically clustered along the foot of the downs, taking advantage of the water supply arising from springs at the junction of the chalk and clay (eg. the Astons and Cholsey). Others are located on isolated pockets of higher ground within the vale, such as Mackney, North and South Moreton and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell.

Many of the villages in the area have a typically nucleated form, with many attractive historic buildings. Thatch, red brick and weatherboard are characteristic of the older buildings, sometimes with knapped flint and weathered chalk in their walls. Traditional barns have a similar character. Some of these are associated with large horse-racing establishments which, along with the gallops, are distinctive features of the downs landscape.

WESSEX DOWNS AND WESTERN VALE FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the rolling chalk landscape of the Wessex Downs with wooded valley sides and open arable downs.

2 Typically grey, flinty soils and smooth landform of the open, rolling downs above the vale near Didcot.



Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in this area is varied because of its mixed geology and relief, although some coherence and unity is provided by the containment of the lower-lying areas by smoothly rounded hills (see Figure 14.1).

The main variations in landscape character have been identified as:

- the smoothly rounded **downs and vale fringe** landscapes of the chalk and malmstone hills;
- the flat, low-lying **floodplain** landscapes to the west of Wallingford;
- small areas of **parkland and estate** landscape between Brightwell-cum-Sotwell and the Thames;
- a small pocket of **amenity** landscape associated with the golf course to the east of Didcot.

Downs and vale fringe landscapes

These landscapes include the smooth north-facing flanks of the North Wessex Downs, which are heavily dissected by valleys, and a series of outlying rounded hills of chalk or Upper Greensand which fringe the downs to the west and east of Didcot and stand out as isolated landform features within the low-lying vale at Cholsey and Sinodun Hills (Wittenham Clumps).

Open rolling downs

Key characteristics:

- smoothly rounded hills and downland flanks;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large-scale field pattern;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- large-scale, open and denuded landscape;
- rural character with few detracting influences;
- open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.

Semi-enclosed rolling downs

Key characteristics:

- smoothly rounded hills and downland flanks;
- intimate dry valleys which dissect the chalk downs, typically with mixed woodland clothing the steep valley sides;
- dominance of arable cultivation but with a comparatively strong landscape structure of

hedges, trees and woods, providing visual enclosure and diversity;

- distinctive clumps of woodland on prominent hilltops, such as Wittenham Clumps;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- rural character with few detracting influences;
- extensive views from hilltops and downs across the vale to the north but intervisibility restricted by woods and hedgerows.

Floodplain landscapes

These form areas of low-lying landscape following the main streamcourses which flow off the downs into the vale and River Thames. These very flat floodplain areas are interrupted by the isolated chalk and greensand hills which stand out prominently within the landscape. Most floodplain areas have been drained and cultivated, with only small areas of typical floodplain pasture landscape noted along parts of the Mill Brook near East Hagbourne and Wallingford.

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;
- intimate and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the valley may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;
- comparative inaccessibility creates a tranquil, remote character.

Flat, open farmland

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (below 50 metres AOD);
- large-scale rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- comparative inaccessibility creates a rural and remote character;
- open, denuded landscape results in high intervisibility;

- overhead power lines intrude in the very open landscape to the west of Cholsey.

Flat semi-enclosed farmland

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character;
- scattered blocks of woodland between Didcot and South Moreton create some enclosure and diversity;
- smaller-scale, irregular field pattern near Brightwell-cum-Sotwell create a more enclosed, intimate character;
- predominantly rural, tranquil, remote or intimate character;
- regular pattern of ditches and rural roads;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

Parkland and Estate Farmland

Two areas of parkland and estate farmland are located on the eastern flanks of the isolated ridge of chalk at the Sinodun Hills, associated with the houses of Rush Court and the Sinodun Hills themselves.

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 and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

Amenity landscape

Key characteristics:

- rolling landform characteristic of the chalk and upper greensand geology;
- typical golf course landscape of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated buildings and features;
- generally weak landscape structure with immature tree planting, creating an open, exposed character;
- intensively managed and sub-urban character;

- lack of mature tree cover results in high intervisibility.

Landscape management issues

Overall, the character area retains a predominantly rural character with some particularly unspoilt and attractive areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of woods, hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character and are of high scenic quality. These are mainly associated with the more heavily dissected, wooded and enclosed parts of the North Wessex Downs but they also include the distinctive chalk ridge of the Sinodun Hills which supports the well-preserved hillfort, the prominent trees of 'Wittenham Clumps' and extensive woodland at Little Wittenham Wood and Long Wittenham Wood. Together, they form a distinctive and prominent landscape feature which is visible as a landmark over a wide area. Management to **conserve** and enhance these assets is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 14.2).

Most of the remaining farmed landscape of the character area, while still rural and attractive, is showing some signs of decline in condition and quality. Principally this is the result of a general weakening of landscape structure through intensive arable farming, creating an open and denuded character. This exacerbates the intrusion of built development and roads (eg. around Didcot), and the network of overhead power lines which cut across the open farmland within the central part of the area. Other typical land management issues include intrusive land uses on the fringes of the main settlements, some of which is the result of 'hope value' arising from perceived future development potential of land on the urban fringes. Intervention to **repair** or, more typically, to **restore** diversity to the landscape and to reintroduce a stronger pattern and structure of field boundaries, belts of trees and blocks of woodland, would be appropriate across these areas.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing hilltop and valley-side woods on the Wessex Downs and Sinodun Hills to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- retain important open views from the chalk downland and greensand hills but encourage some replacement of hedgerows and woodland planting within the 'open rolling downs' landscapes (to replicate the semi-wooded patchwork character of other downland areas);
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and encourage conversion of arable land to permanent pasture where possible;
- manage gallops to favour chalk grassland species;
- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river floodplains;
- encourage planting and pollarding of willows along ditches and watercourses and less intensive management of ditch systems to promote semi-natural aquatic and riparian vegetation;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- encourage the maintenance and restoration of parkland landscapes and features at Rush Court and Sinodun Hill;
- 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. Any development associated with future expansion of the main urban centres of Didcot and Wallingford would require careful integration to minimise its impact on surrounding areas.

The ability of the landscape to accommodate 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 7.1 and 7.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Wessex Downs and Western Vale Fringes.

Some general conclusions are that:

- the unspoilt, rural landscapes of the Wessex Downs, Sinodun Hills, floodplain pastures and parkland/estate landscapes are particularly sensitive to change and therefore less able to accommodate new development;
- development within visually exposed landscapes such as the denuded arable downs and the open flat farmland of the floodplain, will be highly prominent;
- landscapes with strong 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;
- 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 settlements;
- any new development on the fringes of Didcot and Wallingford should avoid visually exposed areas and prominent skylines, and be well-integrated within new landscape frameworks, which provide a strong edge to the built area, to minimise its wider impact on the landscape.