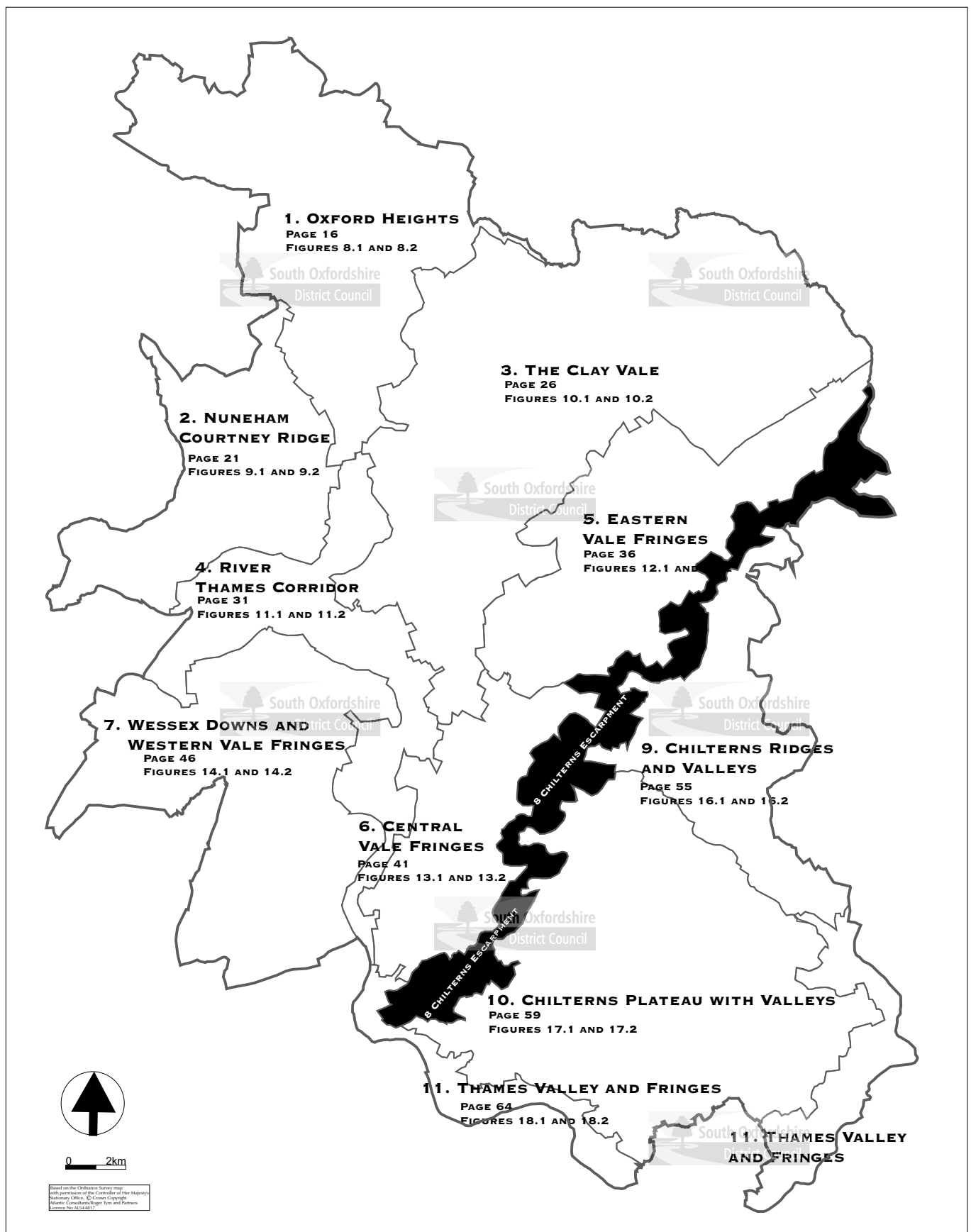


CHARACTER AREA 8: CHILTERNES ESCARPMENT



Landform and landcover

This character area forms the most visually significant and distinctive landform unit within the whole District. It comprises the steep face and top of the Chilterns escarpment, which forms a dramatic backdrop to the low-lying landscape of the vale to the north-west.

The scarp is formed from Upper Chalk, the youngest of the several layers of chalk laid down in the Cretaceous period which were subsequently tilted downwards towards the south-east leaving an abrupt north-west face. The escarpment rises in places to over 250 metres AOD and looms some 50 metres above the fringing shelf of the Middle and Lower Chalk.

Although it has the typically smooth and well-defined profile of chalk landform, the escarpment is heavily incised with spurs and valleys, especially towards its western end, which give it a more complex form and character. The steepness of the scarp also varies, with quite gentle slopes towards the western end (in places it hardly reads as an escarpment at all) and becoming increasingly and more dramatic moving eastwards.

The chalk geology is exposed along the steep scarp face giving rise to thin, calcareous soils on steep slopes which are unsuited to cultivation. Much of this part of the Chilterns escarpment is blanketed in broad-leaved semi-natural woodland which has developed in the absence of grazing management. However, this typically forms a distinctive mosaic of dense shady woodland interspersed, especially on the steeper slopes, with small pockets or larger stretches of open chalk grassland, often liberally dotted with scrub.

Settlement and buildings

While settlements are frequent along the band of Middle and Lower Chalk which runs along the scarp foot (see Areas 5 and 6), the steep scarp face itself is virtually devoid of buildings with only a few isolated farms nestling in hollows along the lower slopes and within the coombes and minor valleys. The main settlement is at Woodcote, where a sizeable village has developed on the much shallower and more gentle gradients of the southern scarp. Other settlement within the character area is located on the level ground at the top of the scarp. This largely comprises individual scattered farms but also some small settlements with a loose linear form, such as Chinnor Hill, Crowell Hill and Christmas Common, and the country mansions of Watlington Park and Swyncombe House, sited on or above the scarp.

Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole, with a predominance of red and silver-grey brick and flint. Around Woodcote, brick may account for three quarters of the pre-Victorian buildings and appears in all those built after 1850 [5]. Older houses were timber-framed in oak. Plain tiles were the rule on the larger roofs, with thatch on cottages with some slate introduced in Victorian times. Farmsteads are often characterised by large timber framed barns, typically clad with black, horizontal weather boarding with gable walls constructed out of brick and flint.

The scarp has a distinctive pattern of roads, with distinctive 'sunken lanes' climbing the scarp face or minor valleys from the vale and other minor roads linking the scattered farmsteads along the plateau top. The M40 motorway is a prominent feature where it carves a route through the chalk scarp near Lewknor.

CHILTERNS ESCARPMENT



1 Air photograph showing the sinuous form of the chalk scarp at Beacon Hill, Bald Hill and Shirburn Hill.

Landscape and visual character

The physical form of the scarp face and the 'semi-natural' unspoilt qualities of its vegetation cover provide both unity and coherence to the character of the landscape. However, some localised variations are created by differences in slope, vegetation cover and the degree of enclosure (see Figure 15.1).

The main variations in landscape character have been identified as:

- the distinctive face of the **escarpment** itself, varying from open areas of grassland and areas enclosed by dense woodland cover;
- small areas of **dipslope** landscape adjacent to the scarp top, either semi-enclosed or well-wooded;
- and areas of distinctive **parkland and estate** landscape at Watlington Park and Swyncombe House.

Chiltern landscapes

Open escarpment

Key characteristics:

- well-defined, smooth profile with the main scarp face folded into a series of spurs and valleys ;
- lack of trees creates a 'bald', open character;
- areas of unimproved chalk grassland of high nature conservation value at Bald Hill, Beacon Hill and Swyncombe Downs, with soft, muted colours;
- dominance of arable cultivation at Harcourt Hill where gradients are less steep, with stronger, more intense colours;
- elevated, expansive and invigorating character, with dramatic and extensive views across the vale below;
- predominantly rural character but with some significant intrusion from M40 motorway;
- scarp face itself is prominent in views from surrounding area and the lack of vegetation creates high intervisibility along the scarp face.

Enclosed escarpment

Key characteristics:

- scarp face dominated by dense woodland cover or a mosaic of open grassland, scrub and woodland;

- predominantly semi-natural character with a series of broad-leaved woodlands of significant nature conservation value (many designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest);
- smooth scarp profile masked by roughly-textured vegetation, with sombre, muted colours;
- enclosed, intimate character within densely wooded areas;
- semi-enclosed character and some views out across the vale from the scarp within areas with a mosaic of open grassland, scrub and woodland;
- escarpment prominent in views but woodland cover helps to absorb prominent features and results in low intervisibility.

Dipslope landscapes

Semi-enclosed dipslope

Three small areas of semi-enclosed dipslope landscape lie adjacent to the scarp top at Christmas Common and either side of the M40 at Bald Hill/Beacon Hill.

Key characteristics:

- level or gently sloping ground immediately adjacent to the scarp top;
- generally open character but surrounded by a strong structure of woods, hedgerows or trees;
- some views possible over the scarp edge at Bald Hill but otherwise views restricted by vegetation to create moderate to low intervisibility;
- generally rural character but some intrusion from M40 motorway.

Wooded dipslope

Two main areas of wooded dipslope landscape lie close to the scarp top within the character area, around Crowell Hill to the north and Woodcote to the south.

Key characteristics:

- flat or gently sloping landform dissected by valleys, particularly in the northern section around Crowell Hill;
- strong structure of woodland and valley landform creates an attractive, intimate and enclosed character;

- dominance of semi-natural broad-leaved woodland of high nature conservation value;
- generally rural character but with some intrusion of built development around Woodcote;
- low intervisibility.

Parkland and Estate Farmland

Two areas of wooded parkland and estate landscape occur at Swyncombe House and Watlington Park.

Key characteristics:

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

Landscape management issues

The chalk escarpment has a particularly strong and unspoilt character and is of high scenic quality, forming an impressive backdrop to views from the vale and a prominent 'natural' landscape feature. It also supports important remnants of chalk grassland and woodland habitats of high nature conservation value. The overwhelming priority within this character area is, therefore, to **conserve** and manage these resources in order to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value (see Figure 15.2). Some further remediation of the permanent scar left by the M40 motorway cutting is the main area for **repair** within this landscape.

Key enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing woodlands along the escarpment to ensure their long-term survival and to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- conserve and manage areas of chalk grassland to prevent scrub encroachment and to maintain species diversity;

- where possible, re-create chalk grassland habitats on areas converted to arable or improved grassland along the face or top of the escarpment;
- manage and promote the further development of vegetation along the M40 motorway cutting to provide effective impact mitigation in the longer term;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland along the scarp face and top.

Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas in general but particularly within the Chilterns AONB. 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 8.1 and 8.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Chilterns Escarpment, as explained on page 6.

Some general conclusions are that:

- the unspoilt character and ecological sensitivity of the escarpment face makes it particularly unsuitable for development;
- although less visually sensitive, the high quality of the dip slope and parkland landscapes means that most forms of new development will potentially have an adverse impact on the AONB;
- particular attention should be given to preventing the suburbanisation of the landscape through inappropriate highway improvements, lighting, signage, telecommunication masts etc.