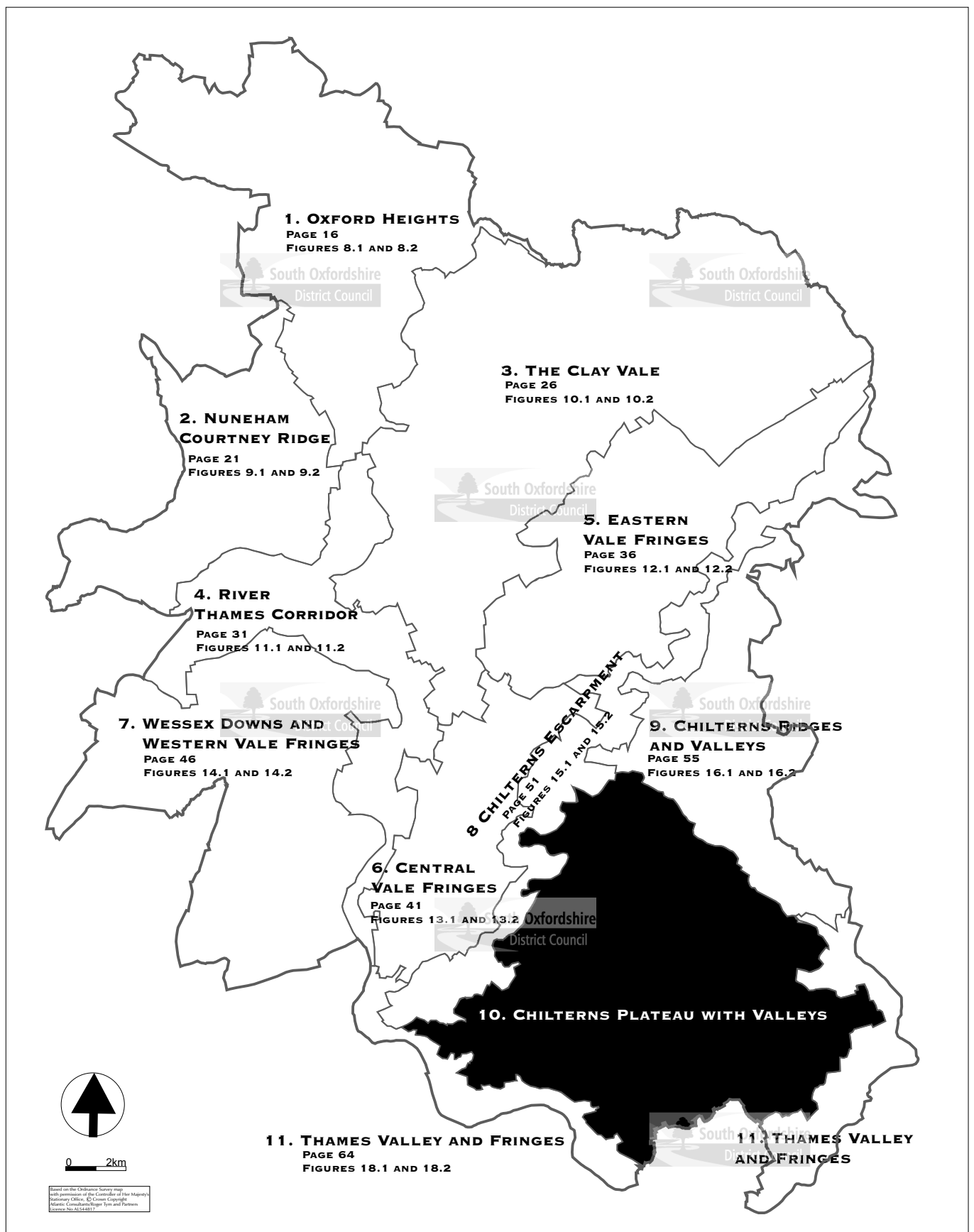


CHARACTER AREA 10: CHILTERN'S PLATEAU WITH VALLEYS



Landform and landcover

This character area forms the part of the Chilterns dip slope which lies roughly to the south of Nettlebed, bounded by the top of the escarpment to the west and the Thames Valley to the south and east.

The area is underlain by Upper Chalk, the youngest of the several layers of chalk laid down in the Cretaceous period. The strata are tilted towards the south-east but the land dips away from the scarp at such a gentle angle that the fall of the ground is almost imperceptible, giving the slope the character of a plateau. In this part of the dip slope, the plateau is comparatively level and expansive and is dissected by an irregular pattern of shallow, small-scale dry valleys which seem to appear unexpectedly in an irregular pattern across the plateau. Their enclosed, intimate and small-scale character tends to contrast with the broader plateau landscape above.

The valleys tend to be narrow without a flat floodplain and, typically, beech caps the valley sides with arable or pasture extending down to the valley bottom. Extensive deposits of clay-with-flints, with smaller pockets of Reading Beds, mask the chalk geology on the plateau and typically support extensive areas of woodland and small areas of remnant heath and grass common (eg. around Rotherfield Peppard and Nettlebed). In between, the plateau is typically occupied by arable farmland with large fields often seemingly carved out of the woodland to create a more open but well-structured landscape.

Settlement and buildings

The pattern of settlement in the Chilterns is typically one of small hamlets and farms scattered amongst extensive woods and commons. Many of these date from the early middle ages, which saw enclosure and clearance of 'wastes' and colonisation of previously unpopulated areas, during a period of relative prosperity and rapid population growth. Clusters of loosely grouped farmsteads were established on the plateau and new small fields were carved out of the extensive common woods, a process known as 'assarting'.

This process often led to the development of a loose, linear form to medieval settlements (eg. Nettlebed) and many were also associated with a village green or with larger areas of common land (eg. Rotherfield Greys). The village of Nettlebed is one of the largest within this area and has been an important centre of the brick and tile industry since the fifteenth century and for pottery after the seventeenth century. Production ceased in 1927 [6] and only a single bottle kiln remains preserved within a modern housing estate. Furniture making was another important industry within this area, using timber from the extensive beechwoods.

Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole with a predominance of red brick, together with silver-grey flint. Older houses were timber-framed in oak and chalk blocks have sometimes been used on Chiltern buildings [6]. 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 [7].

CHILTERNS PLATEAU WITH VALLEYS



1 Air photograph showing the typical wooded and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes of the Chiltern Hills near Stoke Row.

Landscape and visual character

Like the Chilterns Ridges and Valleys (see Area 9), this part of the Chilterns dipslope has a surprisingly uniform character, despite its irregular pattern of plateaux and valleys and its mosaic of farmland and woodland. This complexity is a consistent and distinctive feature of the area, and the most obvious differences in landscape character are between the very intimate, enclosed wooded landscapes and those which have a more open structure and character (see Figure 17.1).

The main variations in landscape character have, therefore, been identified as:

- the different sub-types of the typical **dipslope** landscape of ridges and valleys, with a wooded farmland mosaic of varying degrees of enclosure and small pockets of heath and common;
- areas of distinctive **parkland and estate** landscape at Greys Court, Checkendon Court, Crowsley Park and around the fringes of Henley-on-Thames;
- areas of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf courses near Rotherfield Peppard, Caversham and Henley.

Chiltern landscapes

Open dipslope

A few isolated pockets of open farmland with a weak landscape structure occur within the Chilterns dipslope, (eg. to the north-west and north-east of Caversham, south of Nuffield and to the west of Henley), usually where more gentle gradients have encouraged intensive arable cultivation.

Key characteristics:

- gently sloping ground;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with large-scale field pattern, weak hedgerow structure and very little woodland cover;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- predominantly rural character but with some limited intrusion from power lines (eg. on both sides of Caversham);
- large-scale, open landscape with high intervisibility in immediate area but long-

distance views contained by neighbouring woodland.

Semi-enclosed dipslope

This loose mosaic of farmland and woodland is characteristic of the more level ground of the plateau to the south of Nuffield and near Woodcote, and particularly the 'lower' dipslope to the south of Sonning Common.

Key characteristics:

- typically level or more gently sloping ground;
- comparatively open fields contained within a strong structure of woods, hedgerows or trees to form a loose mosaic;
- dominance of arable cultivation;
- strong structure of woods and hedgerows generally provides visual containment and results in moderate to low intervisibility;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character but with some 'suburbanising' influences within rural settlements and along main roads (eg. A4074, A4130), and localised intrusion of built development and power lines (eg. around Sonning Common and Caversham).

Wooded dipslope

This is the dominant landscape type within the area, with extensive blocks of woodland occupying much of the dipslope and creating a more enclosed mosaic of wooded farmland.

Key characteristics:

- distinctive landform of plateaux dissected by a network of shallow, dry valleys;
- heavily wooded character, including extensive stands of ancient, semi-natural broadleaved woodland, mature beechwoods and more recent plantations;
- strong structure of woodland and complex landform creates an intimate and enclosed character with a particular feeling of secrecy in some valleys;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character with only localised suburbanising influences within

villages, along road corridors or around the fringes of the main settlements;

- low intervisibility.

Commons and heaths

Two main areas of open common or heath occur within the area, around Nettlebed and Rotherfield Peppard.

Key characteristics:

- unfenced character with open access;
- semi-natural vegetation dominated by acid grassland or heath, typically forming a mosaic of open areas, scrub and woodland with typical species of acid conditions (eg. birch, gorse, bracken etc.);
- typically associated with loose linear settlements, with buildings dotted around the margins of the common;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- moderate to low intervisibility.

Parkland and Estate Farmland

There are several areas of distinctive parkland landscape within this part of the Chilterns dip slope, including Greys Court, Checkendon Court and Crowsley Park and a number of other parks located around the fringes of Henley.

Key characteristics:

- distinctive parkland landscape with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, blocks of mature woodland and estate boundaries;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility;
- generally well-managed character but some parks showing signs of decline (eg. Crowsley Park).

Amenity landscape

This type is represented by a number of golf courses scattered within the Chiltern Hills and a sports ground near Caversham.

Key characteristics:

- typical golf course landscapes of greens, fairways, roughs and bunkers, with associated buildings and car parking;
- intensively managed and somewhat suburban character;
- use of exotic tree species out of character with locality;
- rural, often well-wooded setting with moderate to low intervisibility.

Landscape management issues

The landscape of this area is particularly rich in terms of its intricate mosaic of woodland and farmland and its semi-natural habitats, picturesque settlements and buildings. Across much of the area, a strategy to **conserve** these important resources is most appropriate (see Figure 17.2).

However, some of the more open landscapes and parks are showing some signs of decline, through lack of management or intensive farming practice. These include some of the more open areas of the plateau south of Nuffield and between Sonning Common and Caversham, these latter areas also suffering from some localised intrusion of built development and power lines. These landscapes are still attractive and rural but their structure and features are in need of some **repair**. The golf courses and the remnant parkland at Crowsley Park also fall into this category.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing woodlands to ensure their long-term survival and to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and encourage conversion of arable land to permanent pasture and chalk grassland where possible;

- protect areas of acid grassland and heath and manage to prevent encroachment of scrub and woodland;
- maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal or woodland clearance;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding landscape.

- prevent ribbon development along roads and the coalescence of settlements.;
- high quality parkland and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes around the fringes of Henley limit potential opportunities for further expansion of the town.

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 10.1 and 10.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Chilterns Plateau and Valleys, as explained on page 6.

Some general conclusions are that:

- although less visually sensitive, the high quality of much of the semi-enclosed and wooded dipslope 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.;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to