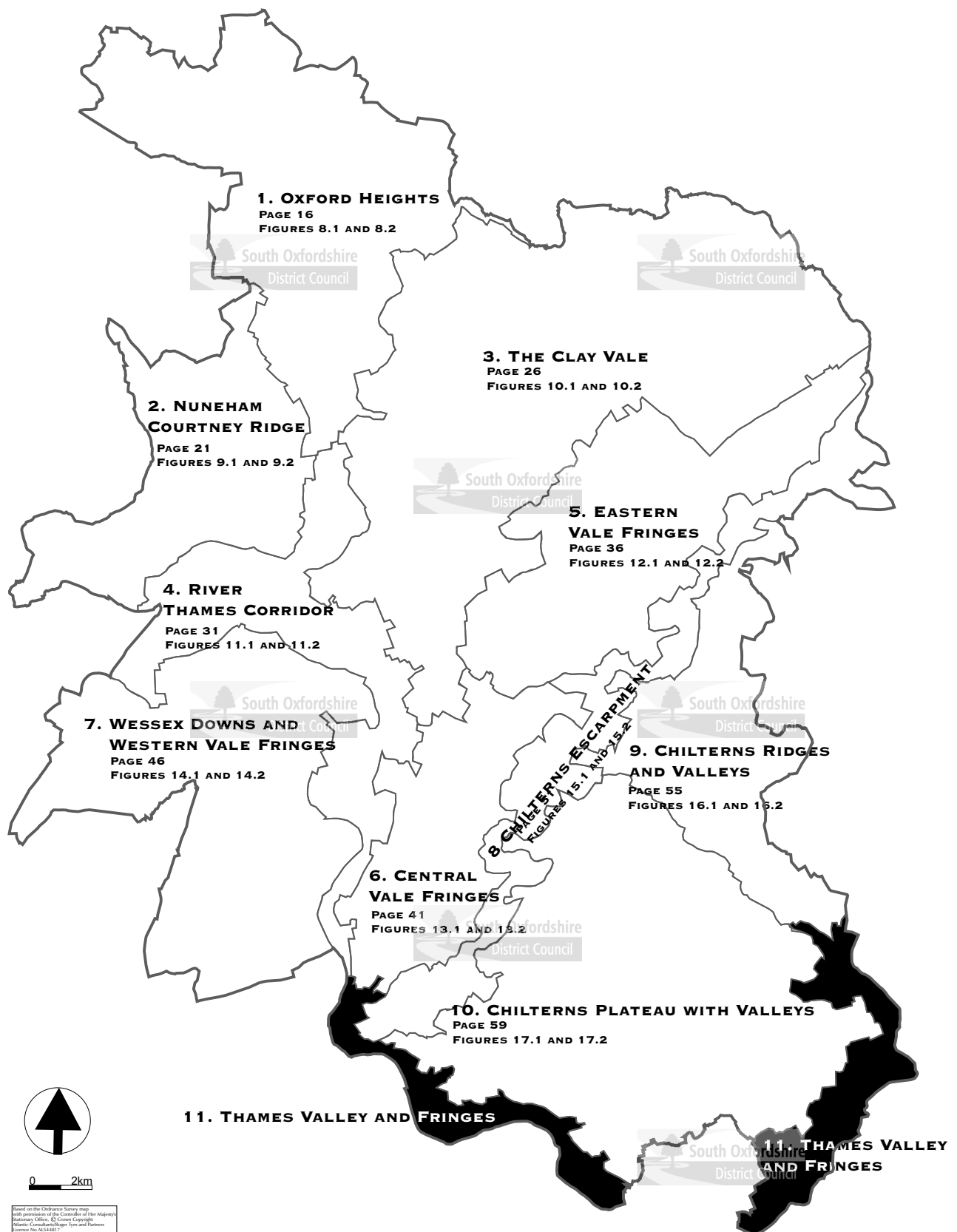


# CHARACTER AREA 11: THAMES VALLEY AND FRINGES



## Landform and landcover

This character area embraces the northern side of the River Thames corridor between Goring and Henley-on-Thames, divided into two sections by the built-up area of Caversham. The character area includes the flat valley floor, the steeper valley sides to the west and the more gentle hills and sloping fringes of the lower Chilterns dipslope to the east.

At the western end of the area, the River Thames has carved a distinct valley, known as the Goring Gap, through the chalk uplands, dividing the Chiltern Hills from the North Wessex Downs. This marks the transition from the more open floodplain of the River Thames Corridor (Character Area 4) and the more constricted downstream sections of the river.

The flat floodplain is underlain by alluvium but with frequent deposits of river terrace gravels. The heavier soils generally support extensive cattle grazed pastures but the gravel areas support some arable cultivation and have been quarried to the east of Caversham to create a series of flooded gravel pits.

Above the valley floor, the Chiltern Hills rise abruptly as a line of rolling hills, supporting extensive areas of woodland. The line of hills appear as an escarpment, with numerous protruding spurs and narrow valleys that cut back into the adjoining plateau landscape and create quite complex topography. In contrast, beyond Caversham the valley sides are more gentle and grade almost imperceptibly into the Chilterns dipslope. Here, the chalk is masked by coombe deposits and gravels.

## Settlement and buildings

This section of the Thames Valley includes a string of riverside towns and settlements, including Goring-on-Thames, Caversham (which now forms the northern outskirts of Reading), Whitchurch (linked to Pangbourne), Lower Shiplake and Henley-on-Thames. Many of these originated as favoured sites on the terrace gravels for prehistoric, Roman and Saxon settlement. However, their strategic position at important river crossings, and as trading or staging posts along the river and main east-west routes, was the key to their later development [5].

The special qualities of the riverside landscape, set below the wooded Chiltern Hills, were also a key factor in the development of settlements and buildings between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, drawing opulent villas to the towns and riverside and inspiring the creation of a sequence of beautiful parks along these reaches of the Thames. These include Hardwick House, Mapledurham House, Coombe Lodge, Caversham Park and Fawley Court, some of which are associated with fine Tudor brick manor houses. Later development of road and rail communications led to significant expansion of the main towns (including the overwhelming of Caversham by Reading) and the growth of commuter villages.

The principal traditional building materials within this area were timber followed by brick and tile, with Welsh slate introduced after the arrival of the railway in 1857 [6].

# THAMES VALLEY AND FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the Thames Valley landscape around Mapledurham.



2 The River Thames waterfront at Henley.



3 Air photograph showing the effects of gravel extraction on the landscape of the Thames floodplain near Caversham.

## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in this area has a strong degree of coherence, with the River Thames providing a strong unifying influence. There are consequently few variations in landscape character (see Figure 18.1).

The main distinctions that have been drawn are between:

- the different sub-types of the flat, low-lying floodplain landscapes which dominate the area;
- the different types of Chilterns landscapes, including both escarpment and dipslope landscapes;
- a number of examples of parkland and estate landscape located on the edge of the valley floor and around Henley.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

Floodplain pasture is the dominant landscape type within the immediate corridor of the River Thames. Flooded gravel pits form areas of floodplain wetland which are a feature of the floodplain to the east of Caversham.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character (although some areas of arable may be interspersed within the floodplain);
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate, pastoral, tranquil and quite remote character with some 'arcadian' qualities along the Thames close to settlements and riverside parklands;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river corridor may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas.

#### *Floodplain wetland*

Key characteristics:

- complex of freshwater lagoons formed from flooded gravel pits;

- artificial form and character but colonising vegetation helps to create a more semi-natural character and developing wildlife value in some areas;
- comparatively inaccessible, remote character but active gravel workings, recreational use and proximity to roads, railways and built development intrude on rural qualities of the area;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

### *Chiltern landscapes*

These include the chalk escarpment which forms the steep valley side to the east of Goring and is mostly wooded with only small pockets of open land, and the more gentle dipslope landscape rising up from the Thames between Caversham and Henley.

#### *Open escarpment*

Key characteristics:

- well-defined, smooth profile folded into open, rounded spurs;
- small-scale open spaces contained by a framework of woodland but with some open views out over the Thames Valley;
- arable land use typically on the upper, more gentle slopes with pasture typical of the steeper slopes and thinner soils;
- predominantly rural character;
- scarp face itself is prominent in views from surrounding area but surrounding woodland reduces intervisibility along the valley side.

#### *Enclosed escarpment*

Key characteristics:

- valley side typically clothed in a mosaic of woodland blocks, particularly on the steepest slopes, and open grassland;
- predominantly rural, and semi-natural character with broadleaved woodland of nature conservation value (eg. Hartslock Wood);
- smooth scarp profile masked by roughly-textured vegetation, with sombre, muted colours;
- intimate and enclosed character within densely wooded areas but elsewhere, the valley side has a semi-enclosed character with some long views out over the Thames valley from the more open areas;

- valley side prominent in views but woodland cover helps to absorb prominent features and reduce intervisibility.

#### *Open dipslope*

Key characteristics:

- gently sloping ground at the foot of the Chilterns dipslope next to the valley floor between Caversham and Shiplake;
- 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 with limited intrusion from built-up areas;
- large-scale, open landscape with views out over the Thames Valley and high intervisibility.

#### *Semi-enclosed dipslope*

Key characteristics:

- sloping ground and minor valley at foot of Chilterns dipslope next to the valley floor around Lower Shiplake and a small area to the north of Henley adjacent to the floodplain;
- mixture of medium-scale fields to west of the A4155 and smaller-scale field pattern around the settlement edges;
- strong structure of hedgerows, trees and small blocks of woodland, generally provides visual containment and results in moderate intervisibility;
- predominantly rural character, especially to the west of the A4155, but some localised influence from roads, ribbon development on minor roads and built-up areas immediately around settlement edges.

#### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

Although much of the landscape of the floodplain and valley sides has been managed as part of large estates and parks, only three areas were identified as having a specific parkland character, namely the parks associated with Hardwick House, Shiplake House and Fawley Court.

Key characteristics:

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

## Landscape management issues

The landscape of the Thames valley and fringes is generally of high scenic quality, with its ribbon of tranquil floodplain pastures, wooded hillsides and picturesque parklands. Management to conserve and enhance these characteristics and qualities is the most appropriate strategy within this area (see Figure 18.2).

Some very localised parts of the floodplain are affected by the gradual sub-urbanisation of the river corridor landscape through built development (eg. on the fringes of Goring), where there is a need to repair the landscape setting of the river corridor, or by the effects of gravel extraction (eg. east of Caversham), where the restoration of landscape structure is already in progress.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river corridors;
- 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;
- minimise disturbance to wildlife caused by recreational use of former gravel pits near Caversham and encourage management of aquatic and riparian vegetation to maximise wildlife value;
- 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 within the river corridor;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside and river corridor landscape.

## 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 11.1 and 11.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the River Thames Corridor.

Some general conclusions are that:

- development is generally inappropriate within the unspoilt floodplain pastures, wetlands and parkland/estate landscapes;
- development within visually exposed landscapes (eg. along the valley sides) will be highly prominent and is also generally undesirable;
- 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;
- high quality floodplain and parkland landscapes on the fringes of Henley limit the potential for further expansion of the town along the river corridor.