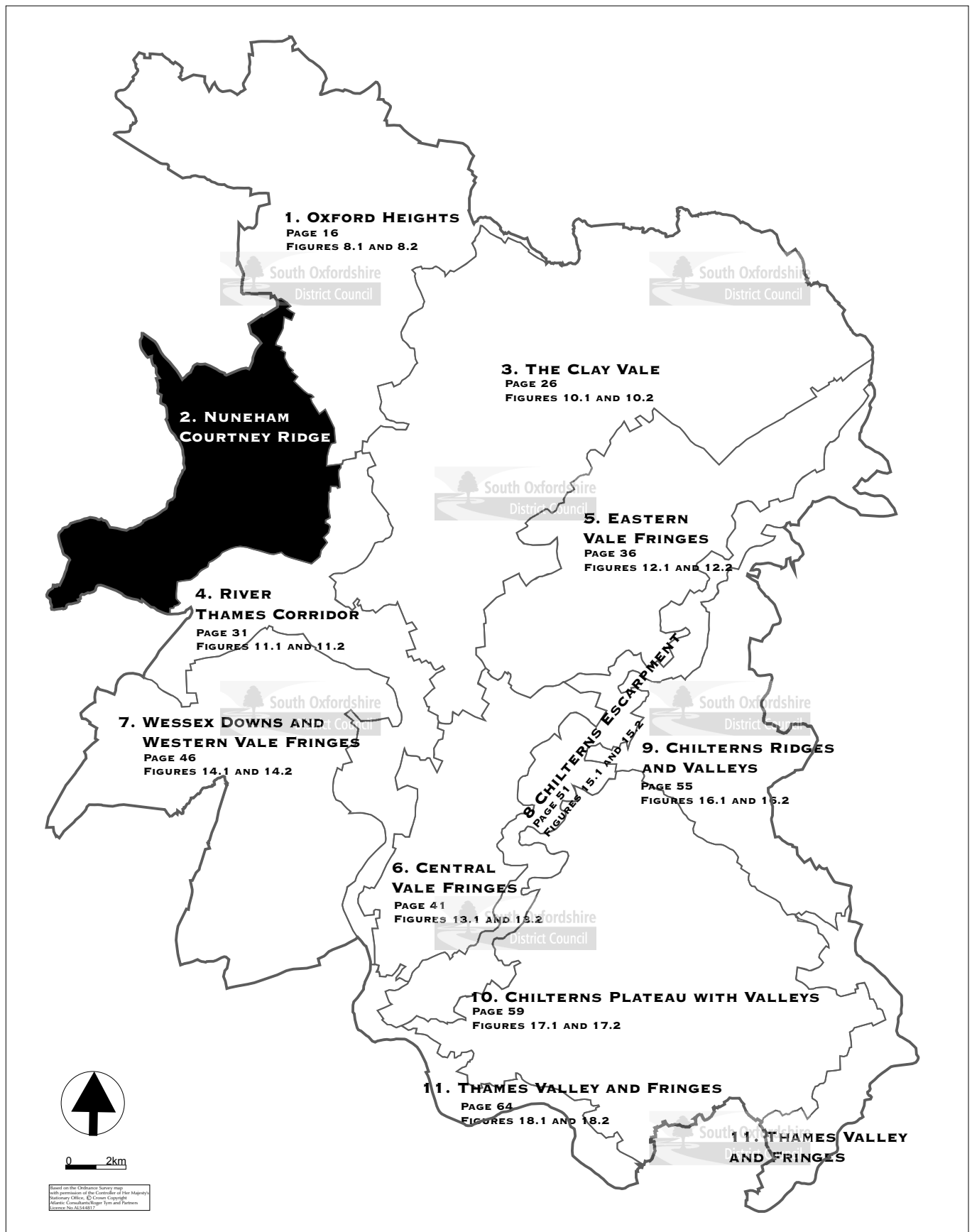


## CHARACTER AREA 2: NUNEHAM COURTNEY RIDGE



## Landform and landcover

The character area occupies the southerly part of a belt of low limestone hills that surround Oxford and divide the low-lying clay vales which lie to the north and south. Here, the underlying Corallian limestone is capped by Kimmeridge Clay, Portland Beds and Lower Greensand which form a rolling plateau of lower elevation than the northern Oxford Heights but which still appears as a prominent spur of higher land above the River Thames which bounds it to the west and south.

The landform is particularly pronounced on its western side where it drops steeply towards the Thames, creating a dramatic river bluff with impressive views over the river towards Abingdon. Further north and to the south and east, the landform grades more gently into the low-lying floodplains of the Rivers Thames, Thame and Baldon Brook.

The landscape of the area was transformed in the eighteenth century by the creation of Nuneham Courtney park, designed by 'Capability' Brown for Lord Harcourt. The legacy of this picturesque landscape is still evident in the extensive woodlands and formal parkland which dominate the central part of the plateau. Elsewhere, the free-draining sandy soils of the Lower Greensand are mostly under arable crops while permanent pasture is more common on the heavy clay soils of the floodplains.

## Settlement and buildings

Settlements in this area have varied origins. For example, the Saxon settlement of Nuneham Courtney was originally located on high ground overlooking the Thames but it was subsequently demolished and rebuilt as a model estate village in its present location in the mid-eighteenth century, its original site being used for Lord Harcourt's 'villa with a view'[5]. Other Saxon settlements, such as Culham and Clifton Hampden, developed just above the Thames floodplain where they took advantage of the higher ground and proximity to well-watered river meadows.

Toot Baldon also originated as an old English settlement, perched on the outer edge of a hill where the greensand gives way to the clays below. However, medieval expansion of settlements and colonisation of nearby marshland created a larger estate with a shared field system, which included the associated settlement of Marsh Baldon and two other Baldons, Little Baldon and Baldon St Lawrence, of which only the isolated church of the latter survives [6].

The villages typically developed around a central green, of which Marsh Baldon has one of the finest surviving examples. In contrast to the predominance of stone buildings in the Northern Oxford Heights, Marsh Baldon also demonstrates the lack of uniformity in building styles and materials within this area. Clustered around the green there is 'a colourful medley of houses in coursed rubble, brick or timber framing, with roofs of thatch or tiles' [5].

The area has historically been bisected by major routes, including the Roman Road which linked Dorchester with Alchester (near Bicester) and the eighteenth century London to Oxford turnpike road, now the A4130. Another main road connects the important Thames crossings at Abingdon and Clifton Hampden but most other roads connecting the villages retain a minor, rural character.

## NUNEHAM COURTNEY RIDGE



1 Air photograph centred on the 'parkland and estate landscape' of Nuneham Park

2 Well-managed hedgerows with mature trees along the boundary between Nuneham Park and the 'semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys' landscape.



3 Cottages surrounding the large village green at Marsh Baldon.



## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in the Nuneham Courtney Ridge is dominated by the extensively wooded parkland and estate landscapes of Nuneham Courtney, which occupy the core of the area. However, landform is also a unifying element, with the distinctive rolling plateau rising prominently above the surrounding river valleys.

The main variations in landscape character (see Figure 9.1) have been identified as:

- the low-lying **floodplain** landscapes of the River Thames and Baldon Brook;
- distinctive **parkland and estate** landscapes at Nuneham Courtney;
- the **institutional** complex of The Culham Laboratory;
- and the distinctive rolling **hills and valleys** which typify the rest of the area.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

To the south and east of the area, the hills give way to the broad lowland plain of the Thames valley floor (Character Area 4). However, to the west, the hills form a dramatic setting for the narrow valley of the River Thames near Abingdon, with its distinctive ribbon of fringing riverside meadows. To the north-east, the area also includes the strip of low-lying floodplain associated with the Baldon Brook which separates this area from the hills to the north. Within these broad areas, differences in land use and enclosure create distinctive variations in landscape character.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying riverside meadows alongside the River Thames, 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 with only localised intrusion close to main urban areas of Abingdon and Oxford.

#### *Flat, open farmland*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (below 65 metres AOD) occupying former marshland alongside the Baldon Brook on land less prone to flooding and more easily drained and cultivated;
- 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.

### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

These landscapes comprise the formal C18 designed parkland and associated estate landscape of Nuneham Courtney and a smaller-scale area with parkland characteristics associated with Culham House.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland, exotic tree species, formal structures and boundary features;
- associated 'estate' landscape extending into a few areas beyond listed parkland and characterised by large blocks of woodland, open grassland and mature trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover, low intervisibility but with some visually prominent hilltop and valleyside locations.

### *Mid-vale ridge landscapes*

The majority of this area is characterised by a comparatively homogenous landscape of farmed hills and valleys. Variations in character occur mostly as a result of differences in the degree of

enclosure and the landscape structure afforded by woodlands, hedges and trees.

#### *Open farmed hills and valleys*

Key characteristics:

- rolling plateau landform;
- large-scale farmland, mostly in arable cultivation;
- large fields, with rectilinear field boundaries, typical of parliamentary enclosures;
- weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees;
- open, denuded and exposed character, with prominent skylines and hillsides and high intervisibility;
- distinctive elevated and expansive character on ridges and higher ground, with dominant sky and long views;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads, overhead power lines and built development.

#### *Semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clearer definition of field pattern;
- occurs mostly in association with settlements (eg. Marsh Baldon), where a smaller-scale field pattern and the hedgerow structure remain more intact;
- predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and on steeper hillsides;
- predominantly rural character;
- landform and landscape structure create enclosure and reduce intervisibility.

#### *Wooded hills and valleys*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with a particularly strong structure of hedgerows, trees and woodlands at the western end of the greensand plateau and steep escarpments of the River Thames;
- strong relief, mixed land use and blocks of woodland create an attractively diverse landscape;
- intervisibility reduced by landform and landscape structure to create a more enclosed and intimate landscape, but long

views possible from hillsides and higher ground across Thames valley;

- predominantly rural character with few detracting influences.

#### *Institutions*

Culham Laboratories is located within this area and comprises a complex of institutional buildings within landscaped grounds.

Key characteristics:

- landscaped setting with mature trees and semblance of parkland character but lacking its formal features;
- dispersed complex of buildings, signs and land uses have an urbanising influence on rural context of site.

## **Landscape management issues**

Overall, the Nuneham Courtney Ridge has an attractive, rural and generally unspoilt character but with some localised variations in quality and condition.

In particular, there are 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. They principally comprise the historic parkland and wooded landscape associated with Nuneham Park, the very attractive wooded hills and escarpment at the western end of the plateau above the Thames and parts of the River Thames floodplain itself. Management to **conserve** and enhance these assets is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 9.2).

Most of the remaining farmed landscape of the Nuneham Courtney Ridge, 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, in places creating a particularly open and denuded character. This exacerbates the intrusion of built development (eg. at Berinsfield and the edge of Oxford) and the network of overhead power lines which cut across the open farmland to the north

of the area. Other typical land management issues include the impact of 'horsiculture' and somewhat 'scruffy' or intrusive land uses on the fringes of villages. In these areas, it would be desirable to **repair** or **restore** a stronger structure of field boundaries, trees and woodlands (typical of the mid-vale ridge landscapes), and to reduce the adverse impact of certain land uses.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- encourage the maintenance and restoration of historic parkland landscapes and features at Nuneham Park and Culham;
- manage existing hilltop and valley-side woods to the north of Culham to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- encourage further woodland, hedge and tree planting on farmland to reinforce the distinctive patchwork of open fields, woods and strong hedgerows of the farmed hills and valleys landscape;
- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river valleys;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

## Planning and development issues

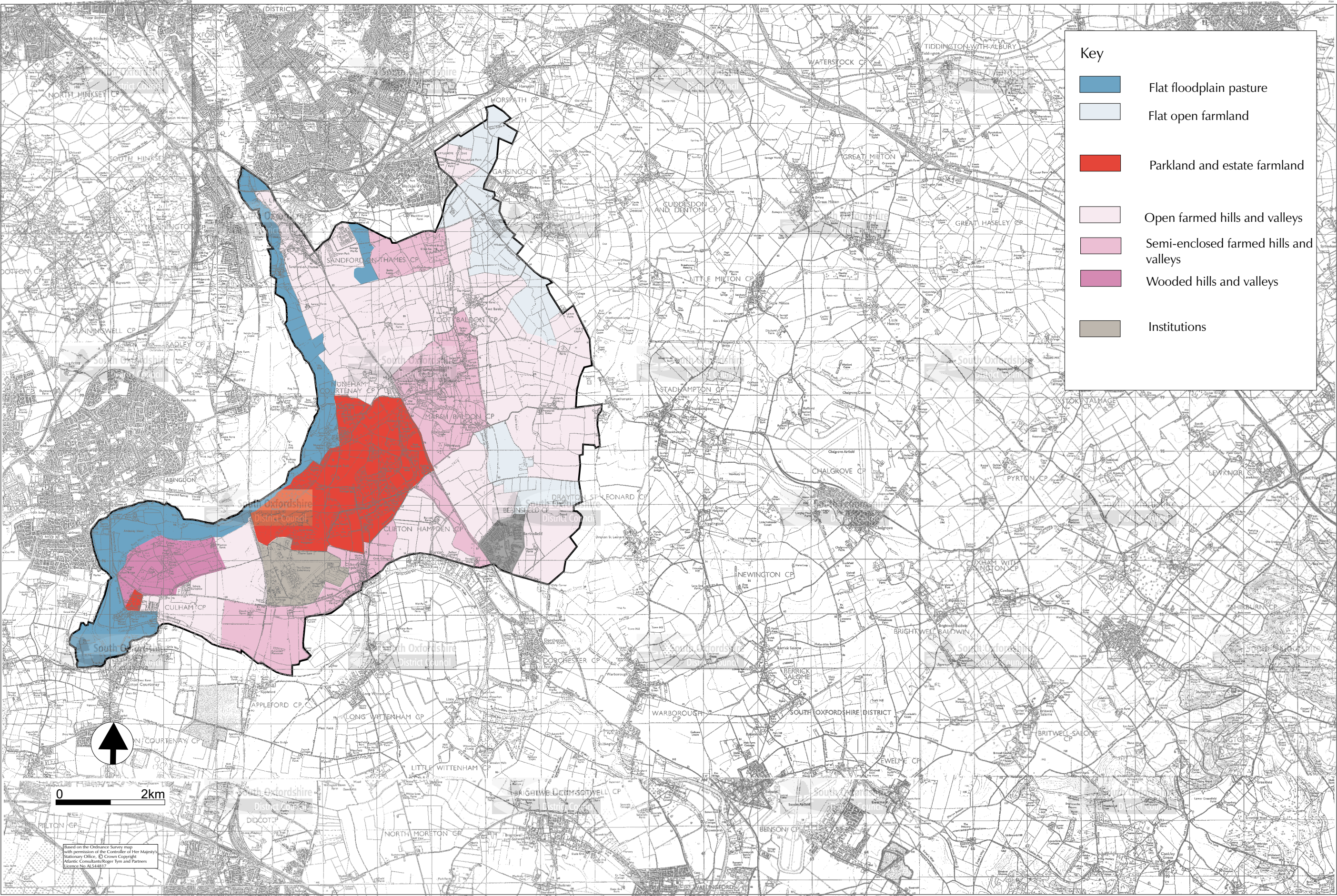
Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within this essentially rural and unspoilt landscape. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

- 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.

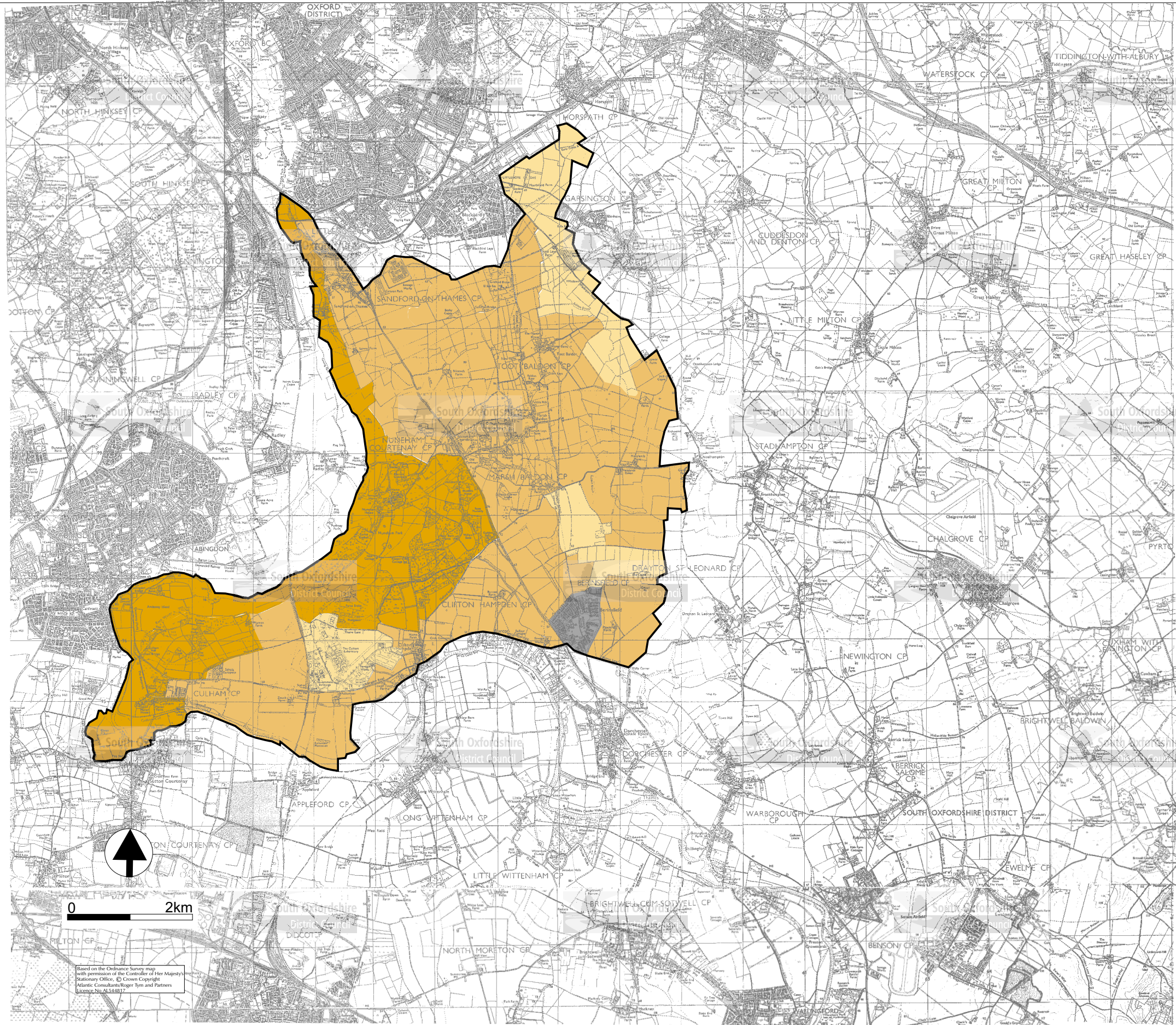
Tables 2.1 and 2.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Nuneham Courtney Ridge, as explained on page 6. However, some general conclusions are that:

- the parkland/estate landscapes and the remote, low-lying floodplain landscapes are particularly vulnerable to change and are likely to be unsuited to new built development;
- open landscapes, hill-tops and hill-sides are visually exposed and unsuitable for prominent development unless closely integrated with existing built form or well-integrated within new landscape frameworks;
- landscapes with strong landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows are less visually exposed and may be more able to absorb change but they are generally of higher landscape quality and therefore sensitive to development;
- 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.









**KEY:**

	Conserve
	Repair
	Restore



**Table 2.1: Nuneham Courtney Ridge - Landscape and settlement character**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open farmed hills and valleys	Semi-enclosed hills and valleys	Wooded hills and valleys	Institutions
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>								
<b>Scale</b>	large		●		●	●	●	
	medium	●		●			●	●
	small							
<b>Diversity</b>	complex			●			●	
	moderate	●				●		●
	simple		●		●			
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●		●			●	
	medium	◆				●		●
	weak		●		●			
<b>Enclosure</b>	open		●		●			
	semi-enclosed	●				●		
	enclosed/intimate			●			●	●
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●	●		●	●	●	
	sinuous			●	●	●	●	●
	stone walls	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●		●		●	●	●
	estate boundaries			●				●
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>								
<b>Location</b>	hilltop				●	●	●	●
	ridgetop				●	●	●	
	hillside			●	●	●	●	
	valley side	●	●					
	valley floor							
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	hamlets				●	●	●	
	small village				●	●	●	
	large village					●		
	town							
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	concentrated							
<b>Form</b>	nucleated				●	●	●	
	linear					●		
<b>Materials</b>	stone	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	brick	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆	●
	flint							
	cob							
	timber frame							
	tiles	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	thatch	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆

**Table 2.2: Nuneham Courtney Ridge - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open farmed hills and valleys	Semi-enclosed hills and valleys	Wooded hills and valleys	Institutions
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY								
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●		●			●	
	medium		●		●	●		
	low							●
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●		●			●	
	medium					●		
	weak		●		●			●
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●		●			●	
	occasional		●		●			●
	frequent					●		
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon		●		●			●
	occasional	●				●		
	frequent			●			●	
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high		●		●			
	medium	●				●		●
	low			●			●	
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●		●				
	moderate		●		●	●	●	
	low							●
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve	●		●			●	
	repair	◆			●	●		
	restore		●					●
	reconstruct							

Notes on landscape quality and sensitivity:

- 1 Quality of floodplain pasture influenced by proximity to new development on edge of Oxford and sewage works