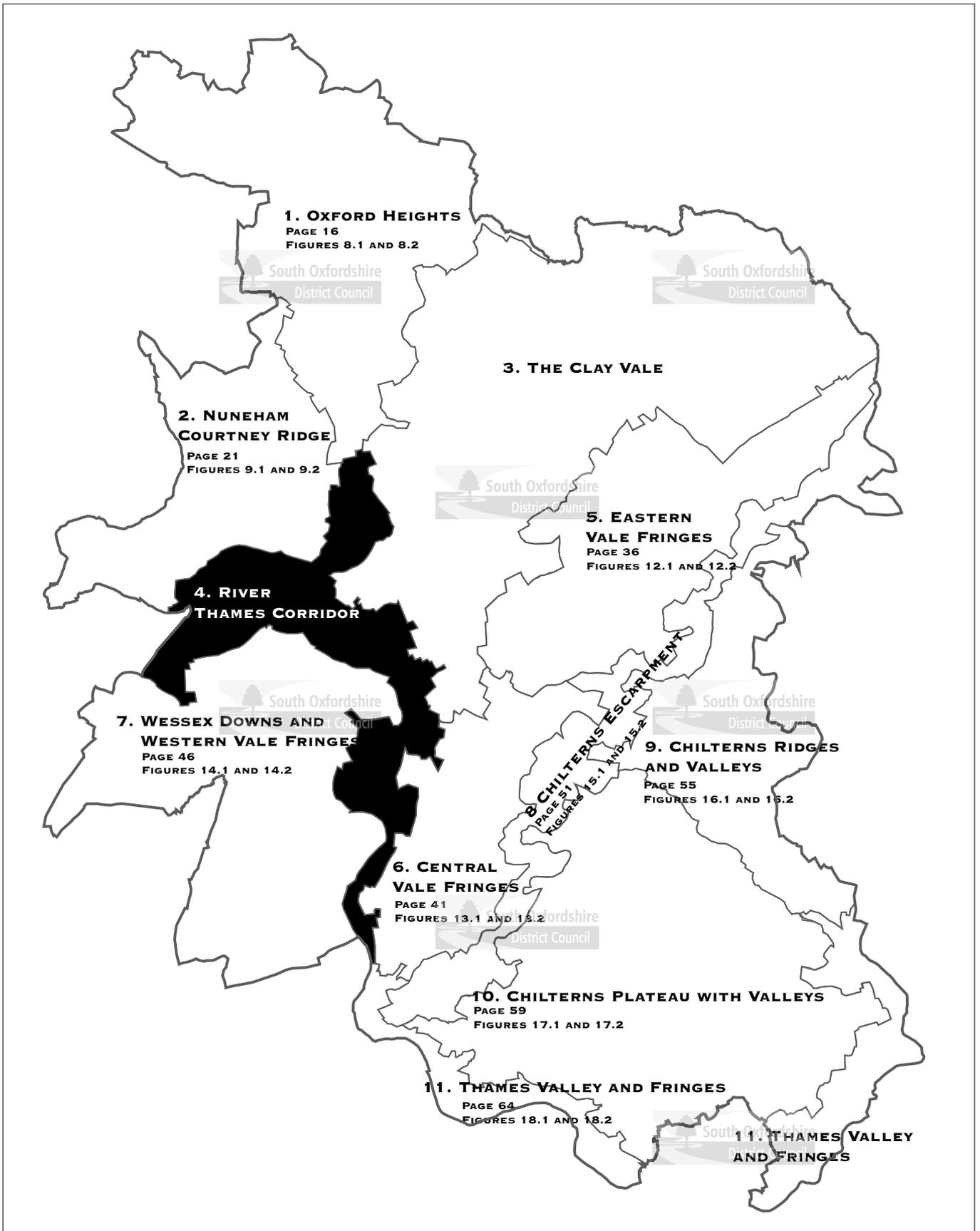


CHARACTER AREA 4: RIVER THAMES CORRIDOR



Landform and landcover

This character area embraces the flat, low-lying floodplain of the River Thames between Long Wittenham and Goring and includes the lower reaches of its main tributary, the River Thame.

The land lies almost entirely below 60m AOD and is exceptionally flat, with little perceptible variation in relief. The floodplain is confined to a comparatively narrow strip where it is bounded by the harder rocks of the lower and upper greensand and chalk but widens considerably around the confluence of the Thames and Thame within the softer Gault Clay of the central vale. The transition between the floodplain and surrounding landscape is comparatively subtle, with no obvious valley form, but the boundaries of the character area do follow a perceptible break in slope between the very flat floodplain floor and rising ground beyond.

The underlying solid geology is dominated by Gault Clay but this is masked by extensive quaternary deposits. A thin strip of alluvium follows the immediate river corridors, giving rise to heavy soils with naturally impeded drainage. These areas are still liable to flooding (as designated within the Local Plan) and are predominantly under permanent pasture.

Beyond this, the floodplain is dominated by extensive spreads of river terrace gravels which are better drained and support lighter more easily worked soils. Much of this has been extensively drained and is now under intensive arable cultivation.

Settlement and buildings

The Thames-side terrace gravels have been a favoured area for settlement from prehistoric times. Neolithic settlers at Dorchester and other downstream gravel sites along the Thames took advantage of the lighter, more workable soils, an accessible water supply and slight elevation above the most flood-prone areas. This pattern of settlement persisted and was extended through the Roman and Saxon periods, with Dorchester providing a particularly notable persistence of settlement and overlap of cultures. Apart from the physical advantages of these locations, this continuity of settlement was also due to the strategic importance of the River Thames as a territorial boundary and for defence, transport and trade.

The string of Thames-side settlements from Dorchester to Goring include the smaller settlements of Shillingford, Warborough, Benson, Preston Crowmarsh, Crowmarsh Gifford, North and South Stoke and Moulsoford. They also include the town of Wallingford which originated by an important ford over the Thames [6]. This strategic position made it a meeting point of ancient routes and contributed to its importance as a town.

Many of these settlements retain a substantial number of old buildings of historical importance and contain designated Conservation Areas. Because of the lack of building stone, most of the older houses here are timber framed with thatched roofs and there are occasional examples of walling in cob, a mixture of mud and straw. Brick was also widely used from an early date and appears as 'nogging' for timber framed houses, in alternating bands of brick and flint in some eighteenth century cottages and in a characteristic pattern of mellow red and grey brickwork (eg. in Dorchester) [9].

RIVER THAMES CORRIDOR



1 Air photograph showing the River Thames corridor at Burcot.



2 Flat open farmland within the River Thames corridor near Shillingford.



3 Typical brick and thatch cottages in the Thames-side village of Clifton Hampden.

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 11.1).

The main distinctions that have been drawn are between:

- the different sub-types of the flat, low-lying **floodplain** landscapes which dominate the area;
- small areas of **parkland** landscape to the north of Wallingford and at Mongewell;
- an area of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf course to the south of Mongewell park.

Floodplain landscapes

Floodplain pasture is characteristic of the immediate corridor of the Rivers Thames and Thame, on the heavy alluvial soils more prone to flooding. Elsewhere, the areas underlain by terrace gravels have been extensively drained and are now under intensive arable cultivation, typically with a weak landscape structure and very open character. Areas of floodplain wetland, created as a result of extensive gravel workings around Dorchester, are particularly distinctive features of this character area.

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.

Flat semi-enclosed farmland

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character around Burcot and to the north of Wittenham Clumps;

- predominantly rural character but with some intrusion of built form around Burcot;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

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, pastoral and tranquil character with some 'arcadian' qualities along the Thames close to settlements and riverside parklands (eg. Mongewell);
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river corridor may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;
- important areas of riverside greenspace within or adjoining the main settlements and urban areas (eg. the riverside at Wallingford).

Floodplain wetland

Key characteristics:

- complex of freshwater lagoons formed from flooded gravel pits;
- margins colonised by native plants and animal species to create a semi-natural, riparian character with developing wildlife value;
- predominantly tranquil, rural character but with some localised intrusion from main roads around Dorchester;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

Parkland and Estate Farmland

The area contains two main areas with a distinctive parkland character, associated with Wallingford Castle and Mongewell Park.

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.

Amenity landscape

Key characteristics:

- typical golf course landscape of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated buildings and features;
- intensively managed and sub-urban character;
- moderate intervisibility.

Landscape management issues

Overall, this area retains a predominantly rural character with some particularly unspoilt and attractive areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character and are of high scenic quality. These mainly comprise the pastoral floodplain pasture landscapes and the small areas of remnant parkland immediately next to the Thames. Management to **conserve** and enhance these characteristics and qualities is the most appropriate strategy in these landscapes (see Figure 11.2).

Much of the remaining area comprises a rural farmed landscape which 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 which exacerbates the intrusion of built development and roads (eg. to the south of Wallingford). Action to **repair** or **restore** former landscape diversity and structure would be desirable within these areas.

Other typical land management issues include the impact of 'horsiculture' and somewhat 'scruffy' or intrusive land uses on the fringes of settlements, and the gradual sub-urbanisation of the river corridor landscape through development along the riverside.

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 Dorchester 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 at Wallingford Castle and Mongewell Park;
- 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 4.1 and 4.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the River Thames Corridor, as explained on page 6.

Some specific conclusions are that:

- development would generally be inappropriate within the unspoilt floodplain pastures, wetlands and parkland/estate landscapes;

- development within visually exposed landscapes such as the open flat farmland of the floodplain, will be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form or well-integrated within new landscape frameworks;
- further recreational development associated with the former gravel pits is generally incompatible with nature conservation interests and therefore 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.