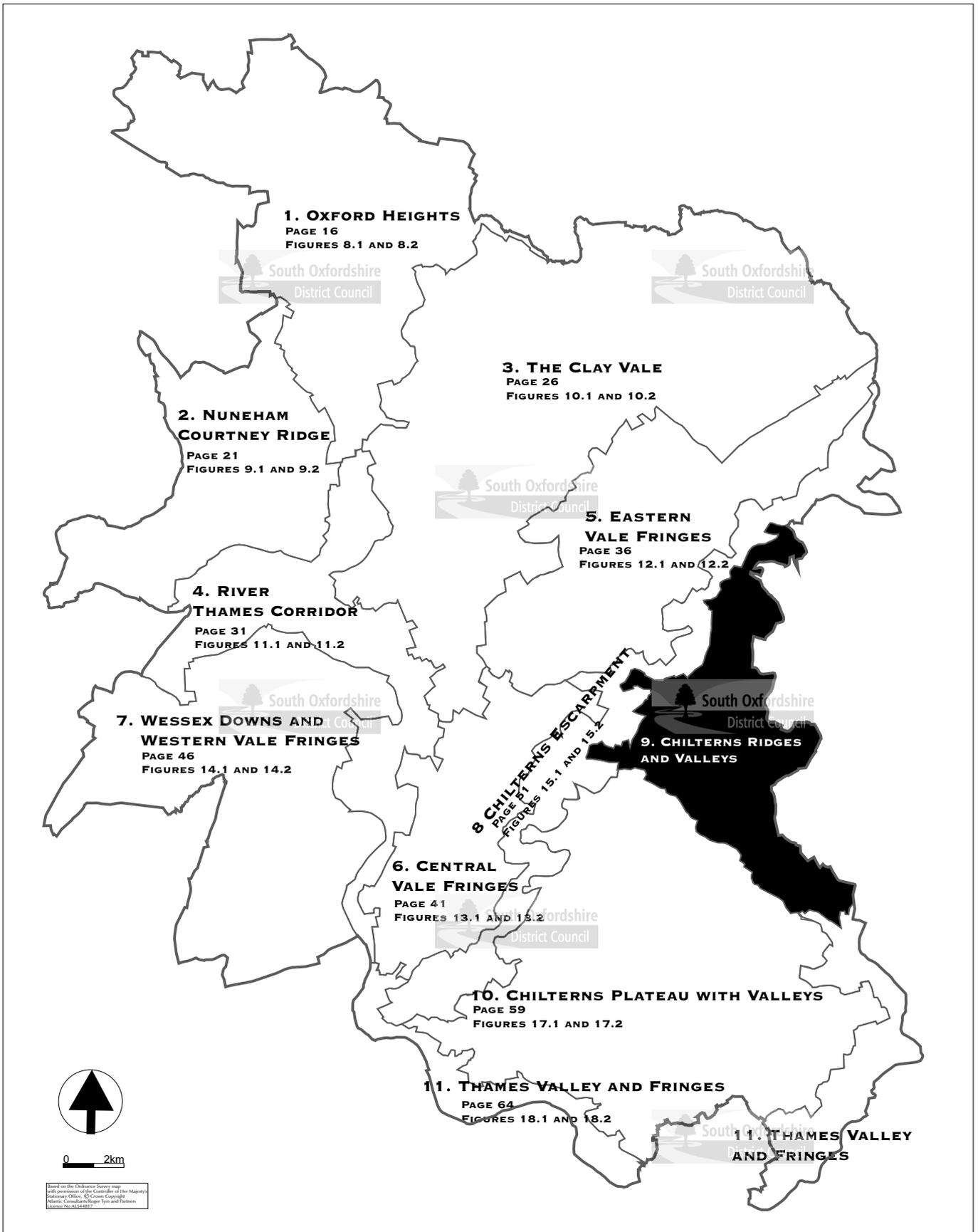


# CHARACTER AREA 9: CHILTERN RIDGES AND VALLEYS



## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the part of the Chilterns dip slope which lies roughly to the north of Nettlebed, bounded by the top of the escarpment to the west and the District boundary to the 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 heavily dissected by quite steeply incised valleys, leaving only narrow ridges in between which contrasts with the more level and continuous plateau further south.

The local topography of this area is dominated by the Assendon and Stonor Valleys which merge to form the distinctive straight approach into Henley known as the 'Fair Mile'. Above this, the valleys have a strong and complex profile, with heavily folded sides and narrow meandering spines which create enclosed, intimate landscapes. The steep valley sides typically support woodland, with distinctive valley top 'beech hangers' framing the valley and emphasising its depth, and pasture or arable land on the lower valley sides and bottoms. The B480 runs along the Stonor Valley, while the Assendon Valley beyond Bix Bottom is less accessible and has a more remote character. Neither valley contains permanent streams or valley-bottom fields.

Deposits of clay-with-flints and pockets of Reading Beds mask the chalk geology on the ridges and typically support woodland and small areas of remnant heath (eg. at Russell's Water). However, some areas are more intensively farmed and, for the Chilterns, have a more open character.

## Settlement and buildings

The pattern of settlement in the Chilterns is typically one of small hamlets and farms scattered amongst extensive woods and commons. Most of the settlements are located on the ridges (eg. Middle Assendon) or within the valleys (eg. Stonor) and have a typically linear form.

Many settlements 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' [7]. The process of enclosure through the Tudor and Jacobean period was accompanied by the development of grand mansions and manor houses, including Stonor Park which has a significant impact on local landscape character in the Stonor valley.

Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole. Brick-making was an early industry in the area (eg. at Nettlebed in the fifteenth century) and red brick, together with silver-grey flint, are the predominant materials [5]. Older houses were timber-framed in oak and chalk blocks have sometimes been used on Chiltern buildings. Plain tiles were the rule on the larger roofs, with thatch on cottages and 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.

## CHILTERN RIDGES AND VALLEYS



1 Air photograph showing Stonor village and park and the typical wooded and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes of the Chiltern Hills.

2 The distinctive buildings and picturesque parkland landscape of Stonor Park which nestles within a wooded Chiltern valley.



## Landscape and visual character

The complex topography and mosaic of woodland and open farmland paradoxically create both diversity and uniformity in the landscape of the Chilterns Ridges and Valleys. This very 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 16.1).

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 Stonor and on the fringes of Henley-on-Thames;
- a small area of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf course near Henley.

### *Chiltern landscapes*

#### *Semi-enclosed dipslope*

This slightly looser mosaic of farmland and woodland is characteristic of the western end of the area, particularly on the ridges and more gentle slopes at the head of the Assendon valley and along the lower slopes of the Stonor valley.

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 with pasture more typical of lower slopes or valley bottoms;
- some views off ridges into valleys but landform and strong structure of woods and hedgerows generally provides visual containment with 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.

#### *Wooded dipslope*

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

Key characteristics:

- complex landform of ridges and valleys;
- heavily wooded character, including extensive stands of ancient, semi-natural broadleaved woodland, mature beechwoods and more recent plantations;
- strong structure of woodland and incised valley landform creates an intimate and enclosed character;
- distinctive pattern of valley-side woods with arable or pasture on lower slopes and in valley bottom;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character;
- low intervisibility.

#### *Commons and heaths*

Two small areas of open common or heath occur within the area, at Russell's Water, Maidensgrove and at Bix.

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*

The main area of highly distinctive parkland landscape is associated with Stonor Park, set within a valley along the eastern boundary of the area.

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 boundaries;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- 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 most of the area a strategy to **conserve** these important resources is the most appropriate (see Figure 16.2).

Only one area has been identified as requiring some intervention to **repair** landscape structure - in the upper Stonor valley where arable farming along the valley sides has created a particularly denuded character and weak hedgerow structure.

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 at Stonor.

## 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 9.1 and 9.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Chilterns Ridges and Valleys, as explained on page 6.

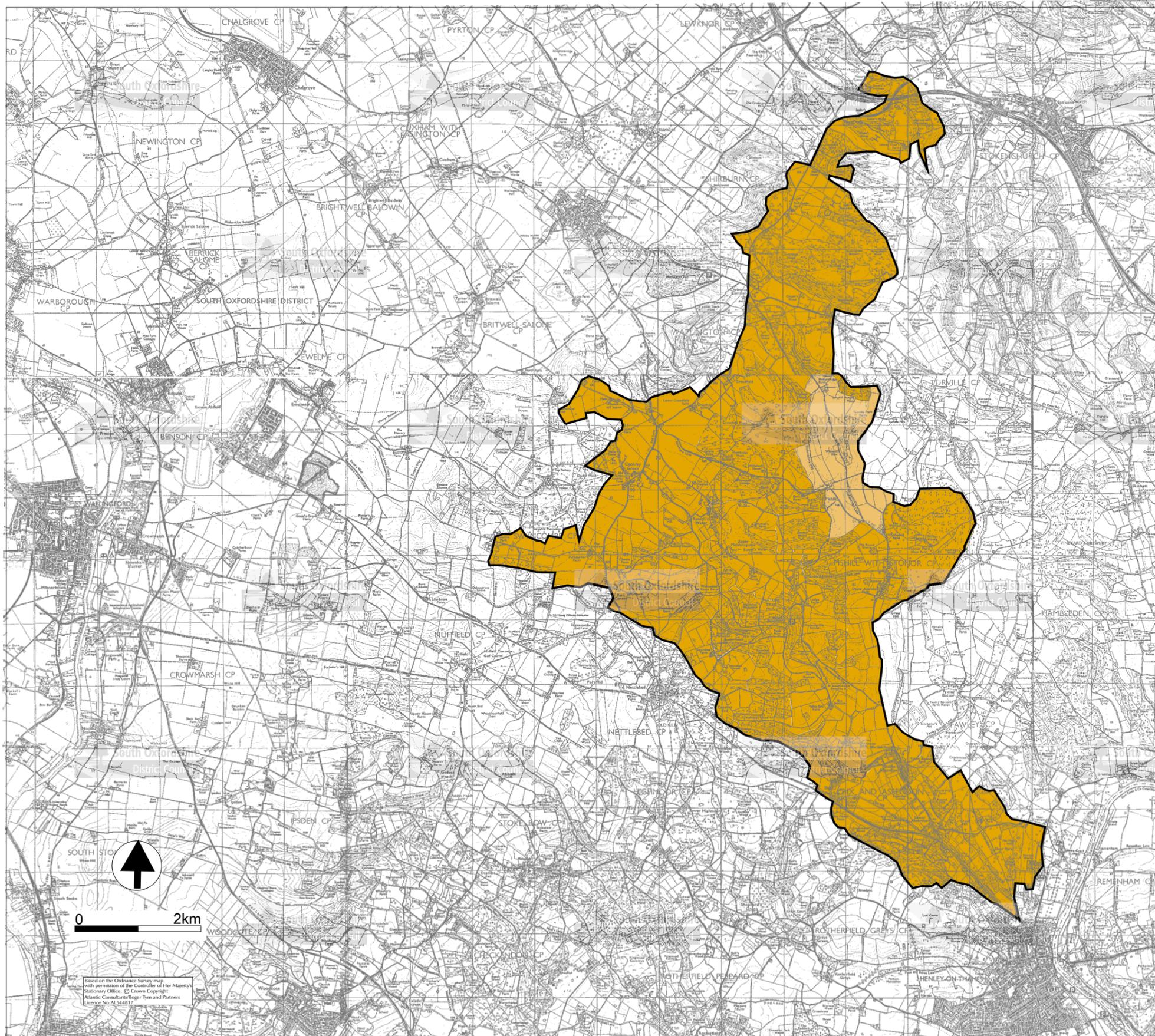
Some general conclusions are that:

- 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 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.



Key

-  Semi-enclosed dipslope
-  Wooded dipslope
-  Commons and heaths
-  Parkland and estate farmland



**KEY:**

- Conserve
- Repair

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**Table 9.1: Chilterns ridges and valleys - Landscape and settlement character**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Commons and heaths	Parkland and estate farmland
<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/plateau				
	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/weatherboarding	●	●	●	●
	tiles	●	●	●	●
	thatch	●	●	●	●
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆

**Table 9.2: Chilterns ridges and valleys - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Commons and heaths	Parkland and estate farmland
<b>LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY</b>					
<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 Intensive arable farming has affected quality of Stonor Valley