

## APPENDIX E Part 2

### Landscape Character Assessments

#### Landscape Character Areas

Benson lies in a rural setting close to the Thames at the edge of the vale, where land starts to rise towards the Chiltern Hills. The shape of its historic parish (and consequently the Plan Area) typifies the pattern of local scarp-side settlements in providing for a mix of fields on low-lying and rising ground, with access both to riverside meadows and hill-top woodland. Its varied landscape reflects those needs, albeit subject to modern agricultural practice.

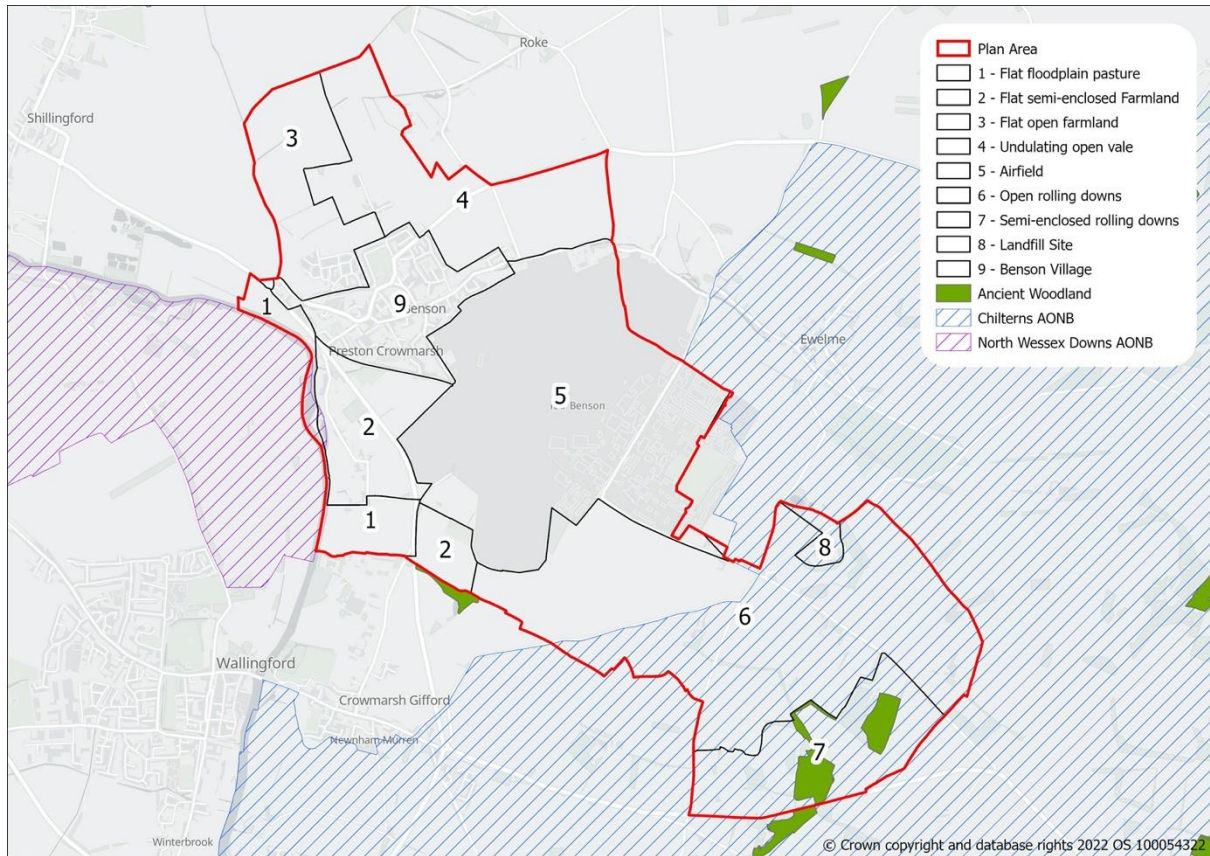
The arrival of RAF Benson in the 1930s cut right through that landscape, absorbing an extensive area of former farmland to the immediate south east of Benson, and separating the village from much of its rural hinterland. The separation was and is a bar on access rather than a visual separation, as the airfield is very flat and open, and buildings on the far side of the base do not prevent views of the rising land and wooded heights beyond. The airfield is also essentially a grassed area, carefully managed but nonetheless green (or brown in times of drought). It does not detract from views out of the village or its low-lying surrounds. Its presence, however, means that Benson's main access to its rural landscape setting is to the north and south east, where paths still lead towards Warborough, Rokemarsh, and Ewelme, and to the river and Preston Crowmarsh. As the allocated sites subsume the near parts of the fields to the north, the remaining landscape setting becomes ever more important.

The different types of landscape are described in the South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment (SOLCA) of 2017 under the headings of The Clay Vale (LCA3), the River Thames Corridor (LCA4) and The Central Vale Fringes (LCA6), with sub-areas relating to Benson set out on the map below. The map also notes the small areas of Ancient Woodland and the areas accorded national importance as parts of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This further assessment for the Neighbourhood Plan builds on the base the SOLCA provides, noting the recommendations for "Planning, managing and protecting distinctiveness", and looks in closer detail at the value of the different landscapes for local people.

For references to Views please see photographs in Part 3 of Appendix E.

## Map of the Landscape Character Areas within the Plan Area

(as defined by the South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment 2017)



## 1. River Thames Corridor: Flat floodplain pasture

### Thames Riverside

SOLCA: Flat floodplain pasture: 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 (e.g. 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 (e.g. the riverside at Wallingford).

Local observations:

- i. The riverside is important as a leisure facility for residents of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh and for visitors, as explained in Section 8 the Settlement Assessments. It provides beautiful countryside, fresh air and exercise opportunities, and tranquillity once away from the A4074. Public access via the Thames Path National Trail, and the opportunity to cross the Thames at the weir, are crucial to this, while the restaurant/café, marina and holiday facilities at the Waterfront add to the attraction.
- ii. The river itself is particularly interesting at Benson, not least because of the measures to manage the water flow: the weir and sluices provide a rush of water that is always impressive and can be thunderous at times of high water; the lock is always intriguing as a piece of engineering; and part of the river is diverted around an island to feed a millstream that historically powered a corn and then a paper mill. To north and south the river flows more calmly through the flood meadows.
- iii. The interventions at the weir do not stop the river from flooding. Flood events have happened frequently since the 1990s, and the South Oxfordshire Strategic Flood Risk Assessment of 2019 predicts that the frequency and severity of flood events will increase as a result of climate change. The Environment Agency Flood Map, included at

Figure 22 of the Plan, shows that extensive areas of the river banks lie within Flood Zones 3 (High Risk) and 2 (Medium Risk). The aerial photograph included at Figure 9 shows a flood event in 2003, while the two photographs below show water completely covering the mill island and almost up to the lane in front of The Old Mill House, Preston Crowmarsh in November 2012.



(Photos courtesy of Quillon Harpham)

The capacity of the Benson banks to hold flood water is not as great as the more extensive flood meadows on the far side of the river but is still significant to management of the river as a whole. The benefits of retaining this capacity are likely to become increasingly important as climate change takes a firmer hold. Planning decisions will need to take this into account every bit as much as the risk of flooding for any new development.

- iv. Benson retains two small fields of natural flood meadow to the north of the holiday lodges at the Waterfront (See View 1). They have not been grazed for over a decade and have developed a distinctive tall wetland vegetation with patches of scrub and remnant tall fen vegetation, the larger western field with an abundance of pond sedge. This vegetation supports an abundance of invertebrates, and in the larger field provides important food and nesting habitat for sedge warblers and reed buntings (see also Biodiversity Audit in Appendix K). Willows and alders along the river’s edge and the Elm Brook add to the visual attraction and the opportunities for wildlife, and mature hedgerows provide a sense of enclosure and protection from the A4074 and the nearby fuel station. The naturalness of the meadows is, however, beginning to feel unkempt, and it will be important that the fields are suitably managed if the attractiveness and opportunities are to be fostered. The fields are small, and provide the only remnant of such riverine landscape and habitat within Benson, but they link with further similar natural flood meadow <sup>viii.</sup> extending towards Shillingford. Their value is magnified as part of this wider ecosystem.
- v. An even smaller area of natural marshland survives in Preston Crowmarsh, immediately north of the Thames Path as it turns to cross the weir. Here the vegetation is mostly reed and scrub with silver birch trees.
- vi. Elsewhere the Benson banks are more managed. Between Riverside and the turn of the Path the management is



vii. Marshland N of the weir

quite harsh: the land is embanked and developed, with houses and gardens close to the edge. To the south of the path, through Preston Crowmarsh, the management is in the main much kinder. The banks of the millstream are garden grassland sloping down to willows and reeds, and the island is maintained informally with grassland and clusters of trees that present a more natural appearance.



Looking across the grounds in front of The Old Mill House to the mill island

Natural willows feature along the banks here, while pollarded willows line the river’s edge past Ferry Cottage and the field opposite Lower Farm. The field is pasture, and the gardens either side comprise long strips of informal grass that offer a similar soft green appearance. Buildings are set well back from the river, above the areas most liable to flood, and are vernacular in character. This part of the river bank perhaps has something of the “arcadian” quality suggested in the SOLCA assessment.



Looking from the Thames Path towards Lower Farmhouse, Preston Crowmarsh

- vi. This part of the Benson bank is private but is visible from the Thames Path on the Wallingford Bank (See also Views 4a and b). The views close to the weir are restricted by self-seeded natural hedging and reeds and can be seasonal, but there are good glimpses and clearer views available to anyone exploring the bank and the fishing pegs. Once the vegetation clears there are good angled views back across the river and the field towards the historic part of Preston Crowmarsh, and direct views of the more modern houses opposite.
- vii. These modern houses have also been set well back, and again have long grassy gardens that appear as part of a near-natural riverbank scene.



From the Thames Path opposite 58 and 60 Preston Crowmarsh

One large rebuild, however, is becoming particularly prominent in a new position closer to the river, with a garden room right on the bank, and a WW2 pillbox decorated in eye-catching manner. The ensemble intrudes on the calm greenness of the riverbank. A cluster of buildings to the south west of Crowmarsh

Battle Farm is also set closer to the bank, and recent changes are making it more dominant in the landscape.

Beyond these buildings to the south, the landscape reverts to agricultural use, with a field typical of the type described in the SOLCA assessment. It is low and flat, and divided into three parts by drainage ditches distinctively lined with pollarded willows. Further willows bound the river bank. Large parts of the field are within Flood Zones 2 and 3, and the part nearest the river is grazing land only. The openness of this field allows views from the far bank of the Thames and footpath 141/28/10 right across to the Chiltern Hills, and establishes a clear separation between Preston Crowmarsh and the Business Park at Howbery.

The quality of all the above views matters. It is important to the natural beauty of the riverside and wider countryside, and to the enjoyment of river-users and the many walkers along the Thames Path. The beauty on the Wallingford Bank is recognised by the AONB designation, and the attractive natural appearance of the Benson bank is important to that beauty and the setting of the AONB.

Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan:

- Designate the water meadows north of the Waterfront as Local Green Space in order to preserve their natural beauty, biodiversity interest and flood management capacity, and encourage appropriate management
- Support national and local policies and initiatives to manage flood risk appropriately in response to climate change
- Introduce a riverside buffer to require that future development at Preston Crowmarsh respects the natural green openness of the land along the riverside
- Highlight the landscape value of the field to the south of Crowmarsh Battle Farm, and the importance of the open rural character in allowing through views of the countryside and separation between Crowmarsh Battle and Howbery Park.

## 2. River Thames Corridor: Flat semi-enclosed farmland

### Fields between Preston Crowmarsh and Benson

SOLCA: Flat semi-enclosed farmland: Similar to flat, open farmland landscape type but with stronger landscape structure • Distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (below 50 metres AOD). • Distinctive network of drainage ditches. • Comparative inaccessibility creates a rural and remote character. • Predominantly rural character. • Semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

(NB: the fields and long plainly-grassed gardens between the River Thames and the lane through Preston Crowmarsh are discussed in the previous section on the Riverside.)

Local observations:

- i. This small area comprises the remnants of the fields that once stretched more extensively between the settlements of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, with parts of the large open field called Moor Lands to the north west, and 17<sup>th</sup> century enclosures to the south east. 20<sup>th</sup> century development beyond St Helen's Avenue has encroached from the north, and the airfield has cut across to the south east, leaving only a small wedge of rural landscape. This wedge has then been cut through by the A4074, which severs the historic field pattern.
- ii. The pressures on this area have made the surviving elements all the more valuable in preserving a rural setting for both settlements, and an area of openness to keep them separate and distinct. Both benefits are evident in distant views from the low hills to the SE (e.g. View 15 from Clack's Lane). These show the fields as open landscape space around the church tower, with Preston Crowmarsh hidden behind the associated trees and hedging.
- iii. The character of the landscape differs either side of the A4074. On the Preston Crowmarsh side there are smaller, more intimate fields, well-defined and enclosed by historic hedging and drainage ditches, with a particularly substantial line of tall poplars east of the former farm buildings at Lower Farm. More recent hedging is mature and species-rich (dogwood, viburnum, elm, guelder rose, hazel, dog rose, hawthorn and blackthorn), providing excellent habitat. Some of the land is damp and seasonally boggy, with grasses, sedges and hard rush, and is used for grazing or for hay meadow. One field is particularly noted as good habitat for butterflies, with grasses (red fescue, cocksfoot and Yorkshire fog) providing larval food for several species. The value of the fields also lies, however, in their very close association with the houses. Seen from the lane, in views between the buildings, the fields appear immediately behind, and are of great importance to the setting and rural character of the hamlet. Along with the plantation behind the Old Mill House they provide a valued green buffer between the hamlet and the busy road.
- iv. On the Benson side of the A4074 the historic layout of longer fields is retained, but truncated at both ends, the south west end again enclosed by the hedges along the main road. At the north end the 1930's boundary with St Helen's Avenue is strongly marked with a ditch and double hedge grown thick and high. The boundaries between the fields, however, are only thinly defined with scraps of hedging and open field fencing. This allows for very open views out across the airfield to the fields and woods on the low hills within the parish, with the wooded ridge of

the Chilterns rising behind (View 5). The field nearest the airfield is cultivated and has paddock adjacent, but the remaining field area is currently left as wild grassland. A patch of natural scrub near the A4074 is noted in the Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity Audit in Appendix K as valued for countryside butterflies. Willows along a remnant of drainage ditch make a feature by a small footbridge.



Long view from footpath across BEN7 towards the Chilterns, showing trees along the drainage ditch

- v. Access to these areas is provided by two public footpaths that connect Benson with Preston Crowmarsh, albeit without any aid for crossing the A4074. These paths allow short circular routes for exercise, and provide residents in the south of Benson with a valuable bit of countryside on their doorstep. The hedges along the main road are important in hiding it and providing mental separation from the traffic noise.
- vi. The fields on the Benson side have in the past been put forward for development

and were noted in the original Plan as BEN7 and BEN8. Applications for BEN7 were dismissed at appeal in 2017, primarily because of the proximity to the airfield and the environmental impacts of its use by military helicopters. This use will prejudice development opportunities as long as it endures, but the neglected state of BEN7 suggests that the owners are still in hope of eventual change. Development of this field would clearly result in loss of the benefits described above.

#### Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan:

- Preserve the openness and rural character of this area as an important local gap between Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, and as a valued remnant of their (now diminished) rural landscape setting
- Encourage continued grazing and agricultural use, and reversion to that use wherever possible, whilst allowing for biodiversity interest
- Strengthen the field pattern between Benson and the A4074 with local species hedging whilst allowing for gaps that reveal the long-distance views SE to the hills
- Preserve drainage ditches and associated willows
- Preserve and enhance existing hedges
- Retain footpaths along existing historic routes between Benson and Preston Crowmarsh.

## 3 . River Thames Corridor: Flat open farmland

### Fields to the north and west of Hale Farm

SOLCA: Flat open farmland: • 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.

Local observations:

- i. These fields are low, large and arable. One is enclosed but the other forms part of the impressively vast open flatness of the big field that extends beyond the parish boundary as far as Warborough (See View 6). The openness of the land reflects something of the character of the historic open field system and the tracts of common pasture that preceded enclosure of this land in 1852-63.
- ii. Drainage ditches are important. They collect water from the fields and from Roke and Rokemarsh, and feed into the Elm Brook (also known as the Lady Brook) and so to the Thames. Historic field names (“Foul Slough Field” on the Davis Map of 1788) make clear that the fields would be wet without them, and the footpaths can still become a quagmire after heavy winter rains.
- iii. Although the drainage ditches have been channelled, they make distinctive landscape features, dividing up the openness and watering the roots of hedges. They make for species-rich field margins and damp habitats for amphibians and reptiles, and provide wildlife corridors. The hedges are of greater value than the SOLCA assessment suggests. The hedge along the northern boundary is now extremely scant, but corn buntings and yellowhammers still regularly use them. There is a thick, unruly hedge with trees along the southern edge of the big field, and a very distinctive line of willows along the Elm Brook at the west boundary of the Plan area. These help to screen the development at BEN1.
- iv. The bridleway between Hale Farm and Warborough, and the public footpath along the far side of the Elm Brook provide public access across the big field, and are heavily used by local residents for exercise and recreation. The great sense of space and fresh air are highly valued, as are the sounds of the skylarks, the scale of the agricultural world just outside the village, and the views.
- v. The openness of the landscape allows for wide extensive views. From Viewpoint 6, at the northern head of the lane past Hale Farm, views out across these fields take in Wittenham Clumps within the North Wessex Downs AONB, the historic rural village of Warborough, and the distinctive line of tall poplars between Warborough and Berrick Salome.
- vi. As part of a huge area of open field, these fields are highly visible in long-distance views from the hills around, including from Wittenham Clumps to the west, from the footpath across BEN 4 to Rokemarsh (View 12), and from Eyre’s Lane (View 14), Rabbit Hill and Clack’s Lane (View 15) to the east and south east.
- vii. The fields as a whole provide the agricultural landscape setting for Benson as viewed from the bridleway from Warborough (View 11), and through gaps in the hedge along the A4074 (Views at 10).
- viii. The approved layout of development at BEN 1 provides for amenity green space along the east side of the Elm Brook, and for hedges to be retained along the northern boundary, so as to provide a green buffer between the new houses and the rural landscape setting.

#### Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan:

- Promote agricultural use of the land so as to sustain the open rural character of the field landscape and the rural setting of Benson
- Retain and enhance the line of willows along the Elm Brook
- Retain the public rights of way as means of access to the countryside and village setting
- Ensure that development at BEN 1 is delivered with all the landscape mitigation and green space required by the existing approvals



- Pursue the intention to provide a bridge over the Elm Brook to connect BEN 1 with the footpath along the Elm Brook and the

nature area at Warwick Spinney, as agreed with the developers of BEN 1.

## 4. The Clay Vale: Undulating open vale

### Hale Farm and Fields to the N and NE of Benson

SOLCA: Undulating open vale: • Low-lying, undulating or gently rolling landform. • Large-scale farmland, mostly under intensive arable cultivation. • Typically large fields, with rectilinear pattern of field boundaries. • Weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees. • Open, denuded and exposed character, with high intervisibility. • Distinctive elevated and expansive character on higher ground, with dominant sky and long views. • Predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development.

Local observations:

- The farmhouse, cottages and working farm buildings at Hale Farm mark a decided change from village to countryside immediately beyond the houses at Port Hill and the development site at BEN2. They are surrounded by small fields of pasture and paddock on the west side of the lane, with strongly defined hedge boundaries. Some of these boundaries appear consistent with early enclosures shown on the Davis Map of 1788, and were retained when Hale Farm was established and the rest of the land enclosed in 1852-63. One of the cottages is dated 1854. A small spinney and a cluster of trees along the south boundary, together with occasional tall conifers, suggest a very modest informal parkland of that period around the farmhouse. The character of the landscape here is small-scale, intimate and highly distinctive, and is of particular value as a contrast with the approaching housing.



Small field N of Hale Farm

- Hedges are a feature on both sides of the lane/bridleway that leads north from Hale Farm. They are regularly cut and maintained and provide distinctively long, straight, orderly green boundaries, again typifying the 19<sup>th</sup> century enclosure period. The long view of the lane and its hedges is important to the character of Hale Road as part of the developed village.



Hedges along the lane at Hale Farm

- The lane is well-used as a bridleway, primarily by walkers. It provides brief but welcome views through the few field accesses, but is essential for access to the

- footpath to Warborough and the openness and views of the big field described above.
- iv. The fields to the east of the lane form a small part of an extensive rural landscape extending to the north and east of the Plan area, but lie at the margins of the character type described in the SOLCA. At the north end the land forms part of the big field and is low and boggy. The drainage ditches converging from Roke and Rokemarsh are marked with strong hedgerows, with willow predominating. The land then rises very gently southwards to a low ridge at Port Hill, with long rectilinear arable fields. Outwardly bounded by hedges at the parish boundary and along the lane, the internal boundaries become more open, with simple stock fencing, and there are views up towards the development site at BEN3/4.



Hedge and willows around N end

- v. The development at BEN 3/4 subsumes a major part of the field between Benson and Rokemarsh. The approval seeks to mitigate the landscape impact by allowing for green space and hedging along the northern boundary - to soften the appearance of the development as seen from the route to Warborough (View 11) – but with gaps to allow views out to Warborough and Wittenham Clumps (View 12). The approval also looks to preserve green landscape space between Benson and Rokemarsh, in order to preserve the distinction between the two settlements, and to retain and reinforce the hedge along the B4009.
- vi. Fields south of the B4009, above Brook Street and Fyfield, are noticeably rectilinear but well-hedged, with remnants of ancient hedging and old laid elm flanking Braze Lane, and well-established modern planting along the B4009. The eastern parish boundary is defined by Tidmarsh Lane, a historic, slightly sunken route that has long provided a significant corridor of scrub habitat, notably for invertebrates. Arable use is on hold for those fields previously put forward for development as sites BEN5 and 6, presumably because of landowners' continuing hopes for the future. The fields slope gently downwards from the road and the Port Hill ridge before pitching down more steeply to the settlement along the Benson Brook. Views through gateways over the BEN 5 and 6 fields (e.g. View 7) show an expanse of field with the backs of houses along Brook Street and The Cedars, set well down below. An informal path beyond Braze Lane allows views southwards (Views at 13), out over the airfield and the Fyfield barns towards the Chilterns.
- vii. The survival of these fields south of the B4009 is important to the historic settlement pattern of Benson as a rural linear village, with small farmsteads and cottages strung along the line of the Benson Brook and backing onto farmland behind. The fields also mark the isolation of Fyfield as a separate holding.
- viii. Use of these fields south of the B4009 will have to have regard to the functioning of the airfield as a military air base, currently a helicopter base but with runways still served by landing lights set into the field at View 13.

Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan:

- Provide policy to protect the rural landscape setting of farmsteads, to include recognition of Hale Farm as distinct from the growth of the village northwards and

as part of the countryside setting of the village

- Ensure that development at BEN 2 retains the hedge and trees along the boundary with Hale Farm, and consolidates that boundary with a green buffer as proposed in the Reserved Matters application and as required by Policy NP3
- Ensure that the development at BEN 3/4 is delivered with the green spaces adjacent to the countryside as approved, and with the landscape mitigation measures that have been proposed and required by Policy NP4, including retention and consolidation of the hedge along the south-east boundary
- Ensure that surviving landscape space between Benson and Rokemarsh is

retained as open and tranquil countryside – so as to maintain the rural character of these settlements and the separation between them

- Clarify the distinction between the settlement and the countryside as performing different functions and as subject to different policies
- Require respect for the relationship between settlement and rural setting, and for the historic pattern of settlement
- Promote uses that sustain the rural character of the field landscape
- Promote retention and consolidation of the hedges and Tidmarsh Lane as features in the landscape, as means of preserving the historic patterns of enclosure, and as habitats for wildlife and biodiversity.

## 5. Airfield



The grassland of the airfield as seen from the A4074

SOLCA: Flat, low-lying land. • Large expanse of open ground with very little vegetation to interrupt views and an open, exposed character. • Typical features of high security fences, large scale sheds or other buildings which are out of character with their rural setting. • High intervisibility.

Local observations:

- i. The airfield cuts through the centre of the Plan Area, replacing agricultural fields to the immediate south east of Benson with a secure military base, and severing the road link between the village and its agricultural hinterland on the low hills beyond. The impact in the 1930s must have been brutal, however much in the national interest. Today, though, the shock has passed, the landscape impact has softened, and the airfield is part of the expected scene, bringing considerable social and economic benefit to the village.
- ii. The airfield sets part of the boundary for the built settlement of Benson, limiting further expansion to the south east, and is valued as extensive open space in the immediate vicinity of the houses off Brook Street and along the Old London Road.
- iii. Until enclosure in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the airfield was farmed in strips as a large open field, named Stoney Lands on the Davis Map of 1788. It remains large and open and is managed as semi-improved grassland, of some biodiversity value and attraction as a habitat, with proportionately little hard infrastructure. Views from above (e.g. Views 13 and 15) show it as predominantly green, varying with the season. While the airfield is hardly an area of landscape beauty or major natural resource, its appearance is more neutral than negative to the landscape setting of Benson.
- iv. The size of the airfield is not wholly apparent from views at the same level – in views from the fields between Benson and Preston Crowmarsh (View 5), for instance, the eye looks across rather than at the

ground, and the airfield appears as an indeterminate open gap between the agricultural foreground and the hills in the distance.



Looking across a field (BEN8) and the airfield towards the Chiltern Hills, from footpath 125/6/20

- v. The airfield buildings were never designed for show and are set well away from the village. In views from Benson and in View 5 they appear reasonably recessive and quiet against the landform behind. They and quarters only appear prominent when seen from higher ground to the south east e.g. in views from the bridleway that climbs Rabbit Hill along the northeast boundary of the quarters, or in views from Beggarbush Hill.
- vi. The function of the airfield does, however, have consequences for the rural setting of Benson - the environment is not always tranquil; operational requirements limit opportunities for nearby development; and while the site provides potential for biodiversity, certain forms of wildlife may compromise safe and efficient working of the RAF base (e.g. bird strike risks).

Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan: - not relevant while the airfield is in military use.

## 6. Central Vale Fringes: Open rolling downs

### Fields to the south east of the Airfield

SOLCA: Distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk hills. • Dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large scale field pattern. • Distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils. • Denuded and somewhat bleak and sterile character, with few features of landscape or wildlife value. • Rural character with few detracting influences but large-scale farm buildings tend to be particularly prominent in this very open landscape. • Open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.



From footpath 125/6/20, looking across the BEN8 field and the airfield towards the large green fields on the slope of the downs, with paired hedges marking the line of Beggarsbush Hill, woodland on the plateau above, and further woodland on the tops of the Chilterns behind.



Looking down the other way, from Clack's Lane, towards the airfield and Benson village, with large field typical of this character area in the foreground

Local observations:

- i. The land rises steeply up Beggarsbush Hill before flattening slightly around Gould's Grove and then rising sharply again, outside the parish, towards Nuffield and the crest of the Chilterns. While less dramatic than elsewhere along the scarp of the Chilterns, the gradient is still sufficient for the large arable or grassland fields here to read as a green face to the hills, rising upwards to the darker wooded heights beyond, in contrast to the flatter, lower land of the river valley and vale. This land bounds valley views, e.g. from Viewpoints 5, 9, 17 and 13, and appears far from bleak or sterile. Rather it has visual value as part of the scenic beauty of the Chilterns AONB. While the exclusion of RAF Benson from the AONB is wholly understandable, it is not clear why the exclusion is so extensive.
- ii. The landscape here is also of value in reinforcing the surviving rural context for the settlements and their historical reliance on agriculture. Its arable function provided a vital contribution to the sustenance and economy of both Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, and it is an important element in the elongated layout of the parish, linking valley meadows with hilltop heath and woodland. The large rectangular fields, now cut across by the diagonal of Clack's Lane, result from early enclosure (1663) of land at Crowmarsh Battle Farm by the Verney family of Claydon House in Buckinghamshire.
- iii. Farm buildings are necessary to the agricultural function of the landscape, and are necessarily large. Those at Clack's farm are particularly prominent on the exposed brow of the hillside. Continuing care with materials and finishes will be desirable if such buildings are not to detract further from the scene.
- iv. The historic, species-rich hedges flanking Beggarsbush Hill make a striking feature in the landscape, marking the axis of the parish layout and historic route to London. This route was responsible for the

prosperity of Benson during the coaching era of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the small cluster of buildings on the hillslope evolved to take advantage of coaching needs, providing succour in emergencies and extra horses to help with the steep climb and descent. Extraction of chalk stone, clay and lime provided an alternative income, as evidenced by the surviving signs of quarrying and brick kilns at The Well House and The Kilns. The lane to Potters Farm would historically have provided a secondary alternative route to the Old London Road, linking with the main road to Nettlebed at Gangsdown Hill.

- v. The minor lanes running south and north east from the crossroads at the top of Beggarsbush Hill are part of the ancient Icknield Way along the scarp of the Chilterns, and are thought to have been also the course of a Roman road. They continue to be notable as part of the Swan's Way public footpath. Hedges alongside are likely ancient, with at least ten woody species and evidence of historic laying, and provide a belt of sheltered habitat in an otherwise open landscape.
- vi. Beyond the line of the Icknield Way and Day's Lane the hillslope flattens to a raised plateau that becomes less visible in landscape views. Land to the north east of The Old London Road was historically known as Gould's Heath, and has been subject to gravel extraction and landfill, as noted for Area 8 on the Map of Landscape Character Areas. The affected area is more extensive than shown, and part has already been made good with grassland. Land along the south west side of the Old London Road has smaller fields reflecting the original pattern of enclosure in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- vii. Public access to this area is limited primarily to the road and lane network, but the lane to Potter's Farm links with footpath routes across to Ewelme.

- viii. Settlement is scarce, comprising dispersed farmsteads at Clack's Farm, Gould's Grove and Potter's Farm, and cottages at Beggarsbush Hill. Apart from the house at Gould's Grove, the scale is small. A small development has been built in place of the former Atalanta Garage on Beggarsbush Hill, and another has been allowed at Gould's Grove. It will be important to the rural character of the area that further development avoids any impression of more continuous development or suburban feel.

#### Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan:

- Promote continuing agricultural use of the land so as to sustain the open rural character of the field landscape and the rural setting of Benson
- Use Design Principles to promote use of natural or recessive materials and finishes for large farm buildings, to avoid or minimise over-prominence in the landscape
- Promote the retention of the distinctive hedgerows flanking Beggarsbush Hill, and the Old London Road and Swan's Way (Old Icknield Way)
- Define the distinction between built-up settlement and countryside so as to clarify that the houses along Beggarsbush Hill and the Old London Road are remote from the main settlements and will be subject to policies relating to the countryside
- Liaise with SODC, OCC and proprietors to ensure that landfill sites are restored to a natural appearance appropriate to their countryside surroundings within the AONB
- Use Design Principles to guide the appropriate provision of any further housing that may be permitted in this countryside location.

## 7. Central Vale Fringes: Semi-enclosed rolling downs Around Oakley Wood

SOLCA: Distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk hills. • Dominance of intensive arable cultivation but some areas of permanent pasture or grassland. • Large-scale field pattern contained within a comparatively intact structure of hedges, with hedgerow trees and some linear belts or stands of planted woodland. • Distinctively ‘grey’ and flinty soils. • Rural character with few detracting influences, although main roads create some localised intrusion. • Semi-enclosed landscape with moderate intervisibility

Local observations:

- i. This area has a more specialised character than the SOLCA suggests, with small enclosures defined by hedges and the bounds of Ancient Woodland at Oakley Wood and Mogpits Wood. The layout is of historic interest: the hedges are consistent with the 17<sup>th</sup> century pattern of enclosure shown on the Davis Map of 1788; and the historic value of the woodlands for timber, fuel and pasture helps to explain the elongated shape of the parish. Mogpits Wood survives reasonably intact, but Oakley Wood has been severely reduced compared with the extent still shown on OS maps in 1912.
- ii. The greater part of Oakley Wood has been cleared for quarrying and gravel extraction, and now serves as a much-used landfill and recycling centre. While these activities do not contribute positively to the character of the AONB they are not prominent in views from the valley because of their setting on flatter ground, beyond the initial crest of the hillslope.
- iii. The scrap yard immediately adjacent to Mogpits Wood is associated with former clay workings – Bryant’s map of 1823 shows a brick kiln on the site. The scrap is screened by the strong hedge lines but is evident to users of footpath 125/19/10.
- iv. This footpath forms part of the Chiltern Way Southern Extension and links with Swan’s Way and the Ridgeway National Trail. It provides pedestrian access through the area, allowing appreciation of the very particular character here. It passes through the surviving section of Oakley Wood (including the part south of the A4130 and the parish boundary), and then crosses fields with views of the main Chiltern scarp to the north and east, and hedges towards the south. It continues alongside the hedge to the west of Mogpits Wood.
- v. Where the path passes through Oakley Wood it reveals the ancient woodland as continuing to comprise a good variety of broadleaf trees (oak, beech, horse chestnut, field maple, coppiced hazel, silver birch), with seasonal under-carpets of bluebells, bracken, ferns and fungi. Woodland flora include violets, primrose, dog’s mercury, cuckoo pint and stitchwort. As a habitat, the wood benefits from connection with the further section to the south and the substantial hedgerows to the north. Tall oaks, providing nesting habitat for rooks and kites are of especial note. The limited survival of this woodland makes it particularly valuable in the local context.
- vi. There are few dwellings, all with plots marginal to the woodland and with buildings of a small scale.





Oakley Wood

Implications for the Neighbourhood Plan:

- Look to preserve ancient woodland and historic hedgerows.
- Liaise with SODC, OCC and proprietors to ensure that landfill sites are restored to a natural appearance appropriate to their countryside surroundings within the AONB, and that any future development at the scrapyards site mitigates the environmental and visual impact of the existing use.
- Use Design Principles to guide an appropriate scale and appearance for any development in this location.

Sources:

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