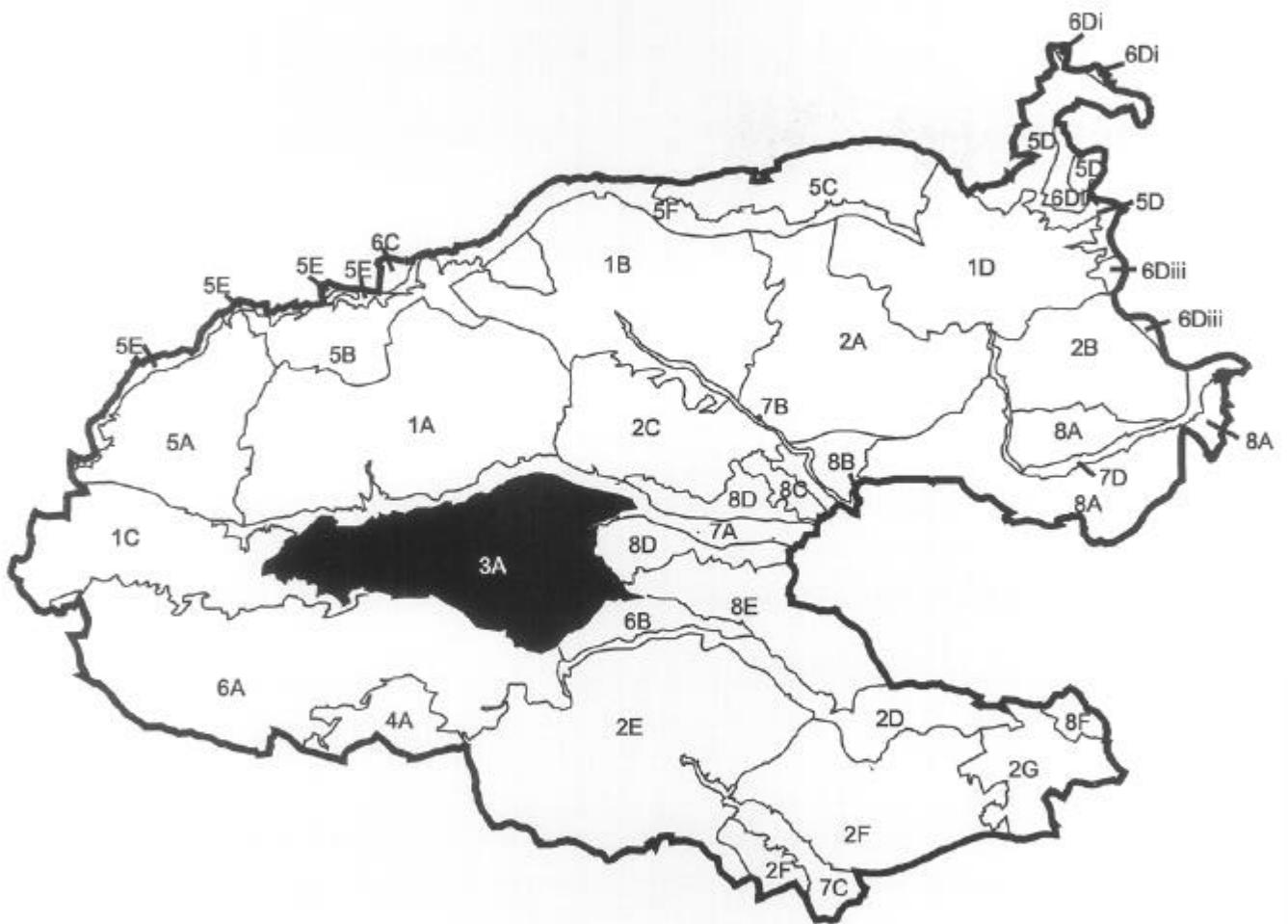


Landscape Type 3 - Wooded Plateau



10. LANDSCAPE TYPE 3: WOODED PLATEAU

Location and Boundaries

- 10.1. The Wooded Plateau landscape occurs in one location and is defined as a single character area: the Savernake Plateau. It lies in the western part of the AONB. The boundary is defined to the north by the valley of the River Kennet (7A) and to the south by the low-lying Vale of Pewsey (6A), where the wooded plateau terminates as a steep scarp. The west and eastern boundaries are less clearly defined, in terms of landform or physical features but are determined by a change of geology, with the Middle and Upper Chalk of Horton Down (1C) becoming prominent to the west, and to the east descending to the Lowland Mosaic (landscape type 8).

Overview

The Wooded Plateau is an attractive, intimate rural landscape, with qualities of peacefulness and seclusion in contrast to the remoteness and isolation of the adjacent open chalk downs.

The landscape type occurs in one location and forms a single character area, namely the Savernake Plateau, distinguished by its dense, continuously wooded character and with its boundaries approximately representing the bounds of the medieval Royal Forest of Savernake. Throughout this area, a thick covering of Clay-with-Flint drift deposit masks the solid chalk resulting in rich, damp and heavy soils. The plateau dips gently down to the east towards Froxfield, where it is crossed by the narrow meandering valley of the River Dun, a route subsequently exploited by the Kennet and Avon canal. The waterway is an important feature of the landscape, with a wealth of associated industrial archaeology, including the distinctive brick-built Bruce Tunnel.

Distinctive, visible archaeological elements are features of the plateau and provide evidence for the past use, organisation and management of the landscape. The Wansdyke, one of the best-known early (Saxon) land boundaries in the country, cuts roughly east west through the area, in some places up to 26 metres wide. The Bedwyn Dyke also survives as a fragmentary earthwork. Along with the Saxon royal estate at Wootton Rivers. The Forest had been established by the time of the Domesday Survey as a Royal Hunting Forest and today the large woodland blocks remain the dominant feature of the landscape. Extensive areas of ancient woodland are designated as an SSSI consisting of relict oak wood pasture and 18th and 19th century beech plantation. It is especially notable for its magnificent veteran trees which support an outstanding lichen flora and rich invertebrate fauna, including nationally scarce butterflies and moths. The forest also encompasses Tottenham Park, the 18th century parkland with its majestic avenue, woodland rides, follies and formal planting forming a classic polite landscape.

There are few settlements within the area, reflecting the extensive woodland cover and patterns of land ownership. Those settlements that do exist are located in the east of the area in the valley of the River Dun, including Great Bedwyn and Little Bedwyn, the former with a surviving village wharf onto the canal. The brickworks at Great Bedwyn provided the source for distinctive rust coloured bricks that characterise many of the local buildings. Flint churches are prominent landmarks.

Key Characteristics

- high chalk plateau overlain by deposits of Clay-with-Flints. Clays, sands and gravels of London Clay, the Reading Beds, Bagshot Beds and Plateau Gravel are also found to the east;
- extensive and continuous woodland cover including the ancient wood pasture, semi-natural woodland blocks and beech and oak plantation of Savernake Forest and West Wood;
- an attractive woodland-farmland mosaic surrounds the Forest, plus a few areas of more open arable land;
- presence of historic parkland and formal designed landscapes of Tottenham Park and Littlecote Park, with their built features, permanent pasture, parkland trees, avenues and rides;
- small areas of remnant chalk grassland confined to scarp slopes on the southern boundary, plus relict areas of heathland commons on more acidic clays and gravels;
- Savernake Forest: an extensive (900ha) woodland established by 1086 as a Royal Hunting Forest, and an SSSI notable for its ancient trees and outstanding lichen flora;
- distinct pattern of settlement comprising a remote 'uninhabited' western plateau and a concentration of villages in the east of the area, in the valley of the River Dun. Building materials include some timber framing, with the main material being red brick;
- the Kennet and Avon Canal and associated industrial archaeology features;
- an extensive network of public rights of way allow good access to the many attractions of the Forest;
- smaller settlements (e.g. Froxfield) are characterised by a lack of local services whilst Great Bedwyn, has better service provision;
- quiet, rural and secluded character.

Physical Influences

10.2. **Geology and Soils:** The plateau is comprised almost entirely of the Upper Chalk, which is overlain across much of the area by Cretaceous deposits of Clay-with-Flint. Further to the east, clays, sands and gravels of London Clay, the Reading Beds, Bagshot Beds and Plateau Gravel are found. The superficial deposits mask the underlying chalk, creating damper heavier soils which support woodland cover and contribute to the distinct landscape character.

10.3. **Landform:** The plateau dips gently to the east towards Froxfield, where it is crossed by the River Dun, a route subsequently exploited by the Kennet and Avon Canal. The landform of the higher land is typical of the underlying chalk with rolling downland dissected by small valleys. The highest point in the area is Martinsell Hill, to the west, on the boundary with the Horton Downs character area (1C), which reaches a height of 289m AOD. The hills to the east of the area are generally lower, descending to heights of around 150-160m AOD.

Biodiversity

10.4. The Wooded Plateau contains a diverse range of habitats, predominantly, as the name suggests, extensive woodland habitats. These comprise a large ancient forest, formal historic parks and estates plus many areas of farmland/woodland mosaic. Remnant chalk grassland areas are small, scarce and found only along the scarp slope

of the southern boundary. The Kennet and Avon Canal, with its associated wetland habitats, crosses the eastern part of the area.

- 10.5. The dominant habitat and most important in terms of ecological value is the woodland. Of the woodlands well-over 50 sites have non-statutory designation, including Lady's Wood, Jugg's Wood and Oxlease Copse. In addition the nationally important Savernake Forest SSSI forms an extensive tract (900 ha) of ancient woodland consisting of relict oak wood pasture and eighteenth and nineteenth century beech and oak plantation. The trees were originally planted in an open parkland pasture setting, but are now mixed with more modern broadleaved and coniferous plantation. The wood has over 1,000 years of documented history and contains well over 500 species. With its magnificent ancient oak and beech trees, it is especially notable for its outstanding lichen flora and diverse plant communities, including species with nationally restricted distributions such as the scarce narrow lipped helleborine and green-flowered helleborine. The rich invertebrate fauna includes several rare insects, including nationally scarce butterflies and moths. In addition the Forest supports a diverse assemblage of birds and has mammal residents including dormice which are a UK BAP priority species.

Historic Environment

- 10.6. **Prehistoric Landscape:** There are a few visible monuments on the Savernake plateau including a Neolithic long barrow in the West Woods south-east of Lockeridge and several Bronze Age round barrows on hilltop ridges or higher ground, including two small groups in Savernake Forest and on Bedwyn Common. Linear earthworks visible on Postern Hill, south of Marlborough, may be late Bronze Age or Iron Age in date and a prominent earthwork enclosure at Chisbury also has possible Iron Age origins.
- 10.7. **Romano-British Period:** Although only visible in parts, the Icknield Way, the Roman road from Wanborough to *Venta* (Winchester), ran NW-SE across the area, through the settlement at *Cunetio* (Mildenhall).
- 10.8. **Saxon Earthworks and Settlement:** One of the most characteristic features of the open plateau in the west of the area is the **Wansdyke**, one of the best known of early land boundaries in the country. The earthwork, in places some 26 metres across, runs roughly east-west across the area, before petering out to the west of Cadley. It is thought to have been built around AD 500 as a defence against Saxon attacks from the north. The **Bedwyn Dyke** that survives as fragmentary earthworks may also be Saxon, and some modern field and wood boundaries and roads appear to follow its original course. Chisbury was re-used as a Saxon burgh, and was later the centre of a royal estate. Along with the Saxon royal estate at Wootton Rivers, it is likely that these formed the basis for the creation of a Royal Forest at Savernake.
- 10.9. **Savernake Forest:** The Character Area reflects the approximate bounds of the royal forest of Savernake which was at its greatest extent in the twelfth century. This was an area circumscribed by defined boundaries, which was the preserve of the king for hunting, particularly deer and wild boar, and was subject to special forest laws, outside the common law. Forest Law, even when not enforced to extremes, inhibited agricultural expansion during a period of population expansion - and the restrictions imposed upon landowners and commoners was a source of much

grievance throughout the early medieval period. It was not until the land was returned to common law - a process known as deforestation - which in the case of Savernake occurred in the mid sixteenth century, that changes took place in the landscape which give the area so much of its character today.

- 10.10. **Tottenham Park:** A new great park at Savernake was created in the early eighteenth century, which over the years became a classic 'polite' landscape with wooded rides, follies and plantings and avenues, many of which are still visible today. In the nineteenth century much of Savernake Forest was owned by the Marquis of Ailsebury, and in 1825 Tottenham House was extended and refurbished and the landscape gardens around it enhanced. In 1861 Mary Caroline, the Marchioness of Ailesbury, founded the grandiose St. Katherine's church for Savernake estate workers. By the late nineteenth century the Savernake estate was heavily in debt, and most of the woodlands were eventually handed over to the Forestry Commission, and Tottenham House became a school.
- 10.11. **Field Patterns:** South and south-west of Marlborough, and around Rudge and Froxfield, the largely open, modern landscape of large, regular fields is mostly the product of formal Parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prior to this, some areas may have been open grazing or commons. West of Hungerford, some more sinuous boundaries may reflect late medieval or early post-medieval informal enclosure. South of Lockeridge, the woods show some signs of assarting, probably post-medieval in date. South of Bedwyn and west of Shalbourne, lots of small copses also show signs of assarting, and the fields are smaller and more irregular. This may reflect informal late medieval or post-medieval enclosure.
- 10.12. **Nineteenth Century Canal and Railway:** The Kennet and Avon Canal and a now dismantled railway from Marlborough to Andover were important nineteenth century communication routes which exploited the pass through Savernake Plateau from Crofton to Hungerford.

Settlement and Building Character

- 10.13. There are few settlements within the Savernake Plateau landscape type, reflecting its extensive woodland area and patterns of land ownership. This is one of the key differences to the Downland with Woodland landscape type. The majority of settlements are located in the east of the area, in the valley of the River Dun and within the ancient forest. Great Bedwyn and the smaller village of Little Bedwyn are both situated adjacent to the canal. Further up the slope are the smaller hamlets of Chisbury and Froxfield. A number of the settlements are grouped around small greens. There is some timber framing, but the main building material is brick, with a former brickworks at Great Bedwyn, providing a local source and resulting in the distinctive rust brick buildings of this village. The flint churches are prominent landmarks.

Recreation Character

- 10.14. Excellent recreational opportunities are provided by Savernake Forest and other large areas of publicly accessible woodland. An extensive public rights of way network allows good access to the woodlands, which are significant attractions offering opportunities to view the magnificent bluebell display in West Woods during May or to walk along the Grand Avenue laid out by 'Capability' Brown in the

Savernake Forest. There are picnic sites within these woods and a campsite at Savernake Forest. A section of the Kennet and Avon Canal provides attractive walks and opportunities for coarse fishing and other attractions such as the Crofton Beam Engines. Other recreational routes that run through the area include sections of the Severn and Thames National Cycle Route, the Wiltshire White Horse Trail and a British Horse Society promoted Bridleway (the Downland Villages Riding Route).

Social and Economic Character

10.15. As noted, there are few settlements within the wider Savernake Plateau landscape type, and villages are restricted to the eastern part of the area. These include Froxfield and Great Bedwyn. Within both these parishes, the populations have increased steadily since 1981, with a total rise of approximately 30%. This steady growth may indicate successive generations of families remaining for the duration of their lifetime. However, proximity to a rail station at Great Bedwyn and accessibility to London, means that this area is also very attractive to commuters. On the whole, this area is considered to have greater employment links with London than the urban centres that fringe the AONB.

10.16. As a small settlement, Froxfield does not have any local services and its community only has the use of a village hall. Great Bedwyn, with a greater population, has a range of services. On the whole the two nearby market towns of Hungerford and Marlborough are the main service providers for this area.

Key Issues

- in the past, intensification in farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland/relict heathland) archaeological features and creation of large open fields;
- need for **woodland management**, particularly areas of ancient and semi-natural woodlands formerly managed by coppicing and as wood pasture;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- **climate change** - potential impact on woodland and parkland including increase in non-native species and tree loss (drought/windthrow);
- intense **development pressures**, notably for new housing in the villages in the eastern part of the area, which have good rail links to London - potential harmful effect on the character of the small nucleated hamlets and villages, plus demand for housing stock leading to inflated prices and absence of affordable housing;
- **loss of tranquillity.**

Key Management Requirements

10.17. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the character of the Wooded Plateau with its extensive woodlands and farmland mosaic, special qualities of peacefulness and seclusion, and wealth of sustainable recreation opportunities. Key features to be conserved and enhanced are:

- the extensive woodland blocks at Savernake Forest and West Wood, plus the numerous ancient and semi-natural woodlands of great biodiversity value;
- the corridor of the Kennet and Avon Canal and associated features;
- intimate mosaic of woodland and farmland created particularly the intact pattern of hedgerows and smaller woodland blocks;
- remnant areas of heathland, with opportunities for management and habitat restoration;
- areas of open access, woodland walks and recreational paths;
- historic parkland and formal designed landscapes of Tottenham Park and Littlecote Park, with their permanent pasture, parkland trees, avenues and rides;
- the distinct pattern and character of the settlement with a remote uninhabited western plateau and small hamlets and villages in the east;
- the quiet, rural character of the plateau, which in the more open areas is particularly vulnerable to large scale or tall infrastructures.

Character Areas

- 10.18. The Wooded Plateau landscape type occurs in a single area, with a unity of character and therefore forms one character area: 3A: Savernake Plateau.

