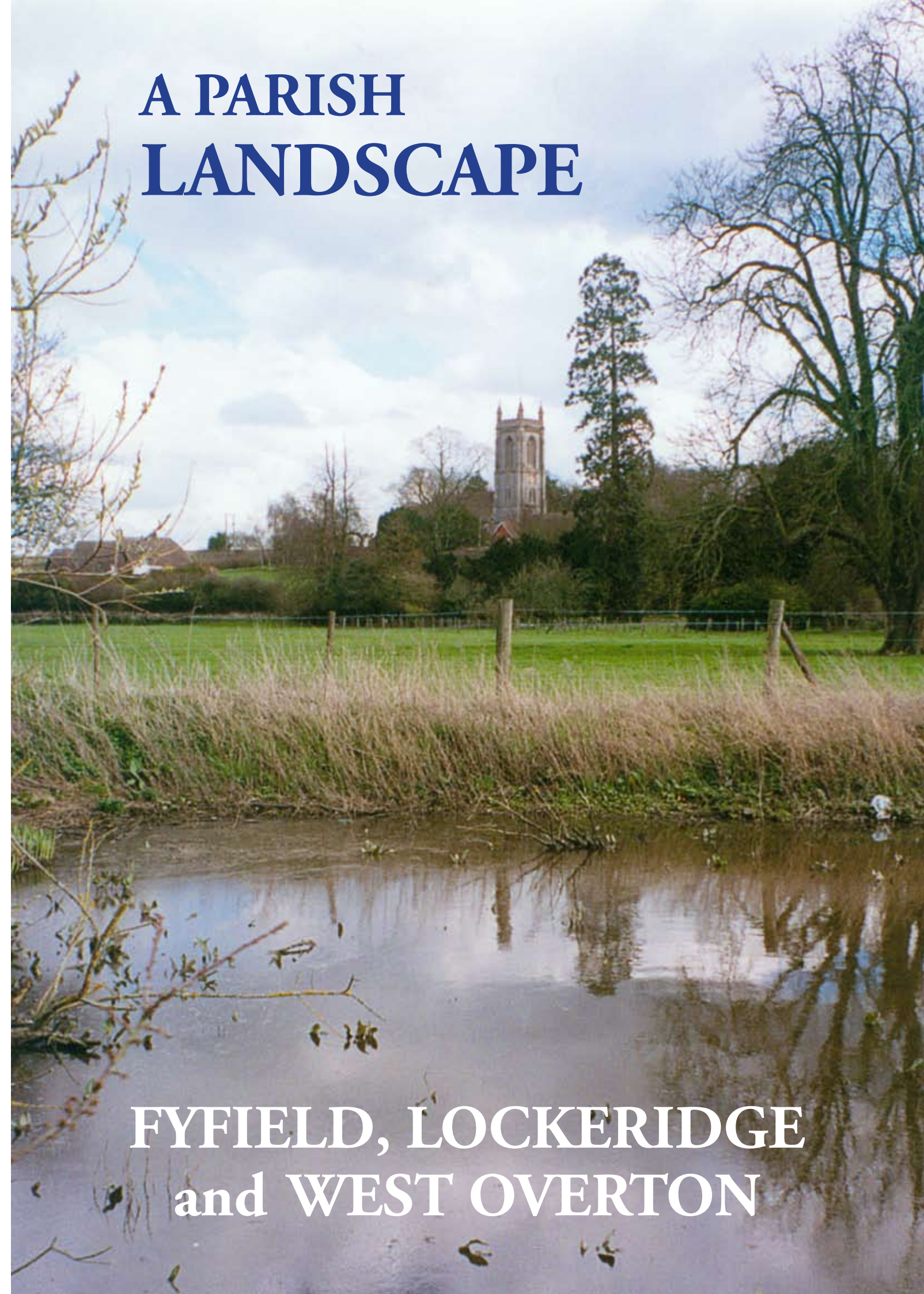


*Taken from the Upper Kennet Valley Embroidery, which hangs in the Kennet Valley Hall  
(reproduced by kind permission of the Marlborough and District Embroiderers' Guild)*



# A PARISH LANDSCAPE



## FYFIELD, LOCKERIDGE and WEST OVERTON



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WHY PUBLISH?

In March 2004 a group of interested people within the Parish formed a Landscape Group to inform themselves and others about the local landscape and to record what they found. The physical aspects were considered along with the history and wildlife. An additional aim was to record people’s feelings towards the landscape: what they enjoy about it, what makes them feel good, what did they like doing in the landscape, what would they miss if it were not there?

The information produced has been exhibited twice in the Kennet Valley Hall and many comments were received.

This was followed by a series of seventeen articles in the Parish Magazine to which responses were received and several walks organised.

Having achieved so much it was then felt that a permanent record should be made of the information gathered, and thought given to what everyone would like to conserve, strengthen or repair in the landscape context. This is particularly important, as without doubt the future will bring many pressures to bear on our landscape. Exactly how it will be affected is very difficult, if not impossible, to say, except that instability will be a factor. For example over the medium to long term it is thought that the climate is changing, but will it be wetter and milder, wetter and colder or drier and hotter? On a shorter timescale, the predicted severe increases in the price of oil will determine the sustainability and profitability of arable farming on the poor soils in this area, but the global growth in population may increase demand for food, or will the demand on land be for renewable energy supplies? As in the past, land use practices will react accordingly, within the remit of the relevant regulatory bodies.

The need to be able to manage these changes cannot be undertaken without knowledge of our particular corner of the landscape and how it is appreciated. It was decided that a published booklet would provide a suitable vehicle, especially if it were to be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document.

In this aim, we are following the successful production of our Village Design Statement (VDS), published by the Parish Council in the year 2000 (soon to be revised), which describes the built environment of our three villages and includes information on their facilities, the changes in demographic character, employment, housing and transport. See reference below.



The Working Landscape



Landscape Exhibition held in Kennet Valley Hall





# WHY IS OUR PARISH SO SPECIAL?

From both geographical and historical perspectives the special qualities of the parish landscape are acknowledged by its inclusion within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Included in their Management Plan 2009-2014 are objectives: to maintain and enhance the distinctive landscape character of the area, to encourage biodiversity, to enhance protection, management and settings of archaeological and historic features and their sites and to ensure that the natural resources of soil and water are sustainably managed. A large section of the parish is within the Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS) and is managed according to their aims and objectives for protecting the historic environment set out in its Management Plan. The National Trust owns two areas within the parish. The Forestry Commission has a Design Plan for the future of West Woods, Natural England have SSSI sites on Fyfield Down. Not least there is the Kennet Landscape Conservation Strategy, which is Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) to Wiltshire Council's planning policies. There is a wealth of information from these organisations to be found from the references below. This document aims to enlarge upon the very special character and history of our parish landscape from the perspective of its inhabitants.

The present day brings continual change as farming responds to political and economic pressures. During World War II and the subsequent years of austerity many acres of permanent grass meadow and downland were ploughed. Since then cheap fertilizers have increased yields, making it economic to keep these areas in arable production. In following decades EEC legislation and a price squeeze by the supermarkets resulted in the disappearance of our dairy herds. Subsidies produced a dramatic outbreak of yellow oil seed rape and the brief appearance of delicate blue linseed. In 2005 single farm payments replaced subsidies for specific crops. Farming has become more accountable. Matters such as hedgerow buffer zones, livestock movements and inappropriate run off are taken into account. In the future there may be some arable conversion back to grass in parts of the parish where there are conservation designations and protection of the historic environment is a priority. Gains to biodiversity may follow. These priorities should also guard against unsuitable deep-rooted planting such as large trees and *Miscanthus* (Elephant Grass, a bio-fuel) in these areas.

Larger, more expensive machinery has resulted in a much smaller labour force. In the post war decades there were ten times as many farm workers. Now contract farming has taken over. Several farms have been subdivided and frequently equestrian businesses have taken their place, reusing the old dairy barns. The desirability of country living has pushed up house prices. Car ownership has increased, and many villagers who work away from home know the landscape best through their leisure pursuits.

**GEOGRAPHICALLY** the parishes of Fyfield and West Overton are unique within the Marlborough Community Area: they contain four different landscape character areas described in the former Kennet District Council Landscape Conservation Strategy as the Kennet Valley, Marlborough Downs, Horton Downs and the Savernake Plateau.

**The Kennet Valley** is a distinct topographic unit, which cuts through the chalk of the Marlborough Downs from west to east dividing the parishes in two. It is characterised by smooth valley sides, which roll gently down to a narrow strip of flat, floodplain farmland following the meandering course of the river Kennet. Here remains of the water meadows and withy beds can be found.

The road bridges which cross the river form entrances to both West Overton and Lockeridge, and the older sarsen stone bridges are distinct features of the river, as are the willows and sarsen stones along its banks. **The Marlborough Downs** are an area of high chalk upland formed by Middle and Upper Chalk which sweeps across the north of the Parish forming an expansive landscape of open, smoothly rolling downland, mainly under intensive arable farming but with areas of remnant chalk grassland on the upper slopes, small mixed tree copses and dry valleys filled randomly with Sarsen stones or "Grey Wethers". The area is defined on its western edge by the Ridgeway, which runs along the top of a steep, west-facing chalk scarp. **Horton Down** to the south of the river in the south-western part of the Parish is also an area of chalk upland landscape, remote and open with sparse tree cover, rural and agricultural in nature. The **Savernake Plateau** to the south of the river valley in the south-eastern part of the parish is chalk under a cap of clay with flints, which supports a dense cover of beech trees, mixed woodland and some evergreens. Known as West Woods, this was once the western end of the Savernake Forest. The woods are noted for their carpets of bluebells in spring and magnificent tree colour in autumn.

**THE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE** of the landscape is enormous. There is visible evidence everywhere of previous inhabitants from Neolithic times through the Bronze Age, the Roman and Saxon periods and the Middle Ages, when the area was owned by the Abbots of Wilton and Winchester and the Knights Templar, followed by the Pembroke and Marlborough Estates, until the latter half of the 19th century when the Meux family left their distinctive mark.

The geography and climate have as always dictated the land use, and remains of various field systems from previous ages to the present day are clearly visible. The geographic areas in the parish are all interlinked by a complex network of pathways and roads, which were used by the inhabitants to move animals between the sheltered valley villages to the grazing lands or to market, as well as by invading armies, and those involved in commerce and communications. The land has never been sufficiently fertile to bring great wealth to the area, but for millennia the parish has been at the crossroads of north-south and east-west cross-country movements via the prehistoric Ridgeway and the Roman road from Londinium to the west.

## References and further reading:

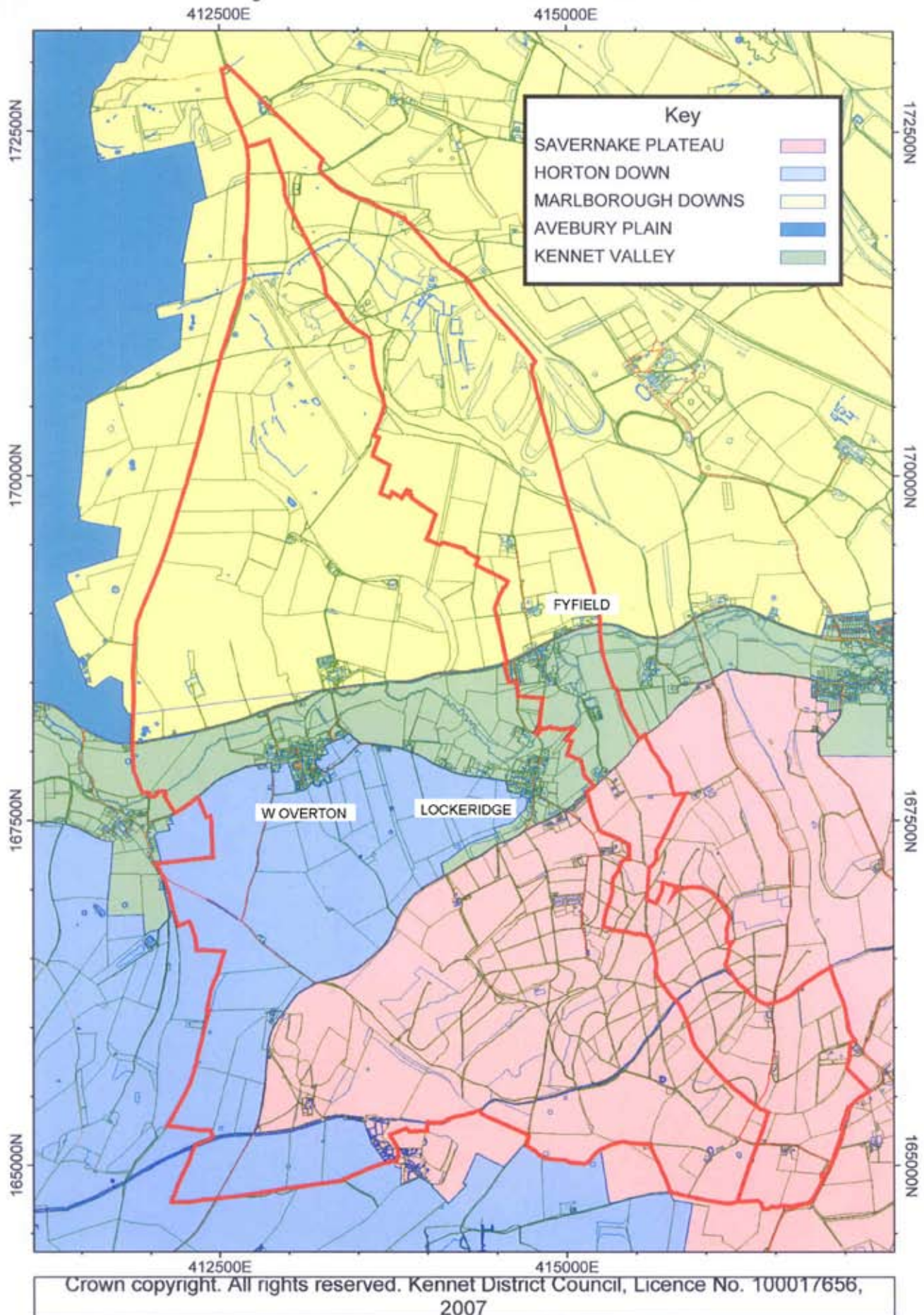
North Wessex Downs AONB management Plan 2009-2014  
[www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk)

Avebury World Heritage Site Management Plan  
[www.eng-h.gov.uk](http://www.eng-h.gov.uk)  
[www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)  
[www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

ARK  
[www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org)  
[www.wiltshire.gov.uk/planninganddevelopment/planningpolicy/supplementaryplanningguidance](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/planninganddevelopment/planningpolicy/supplementaryplanningguidance)

Village Design Statement  
[www.wiltshire.gov.uk/fyfield\\_lockeridge\\_west\\_overton\\_village\\_design\\_statement](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/fyfield_lockeridge_west_overton_village_design_statement)

# Fyfield and West Overton



*Landscape Character Area Map - produced by Kennet District Council and reproduced with permission of Wiltshire Council*



# THE KENNET VALLEY

## OVERVIEW

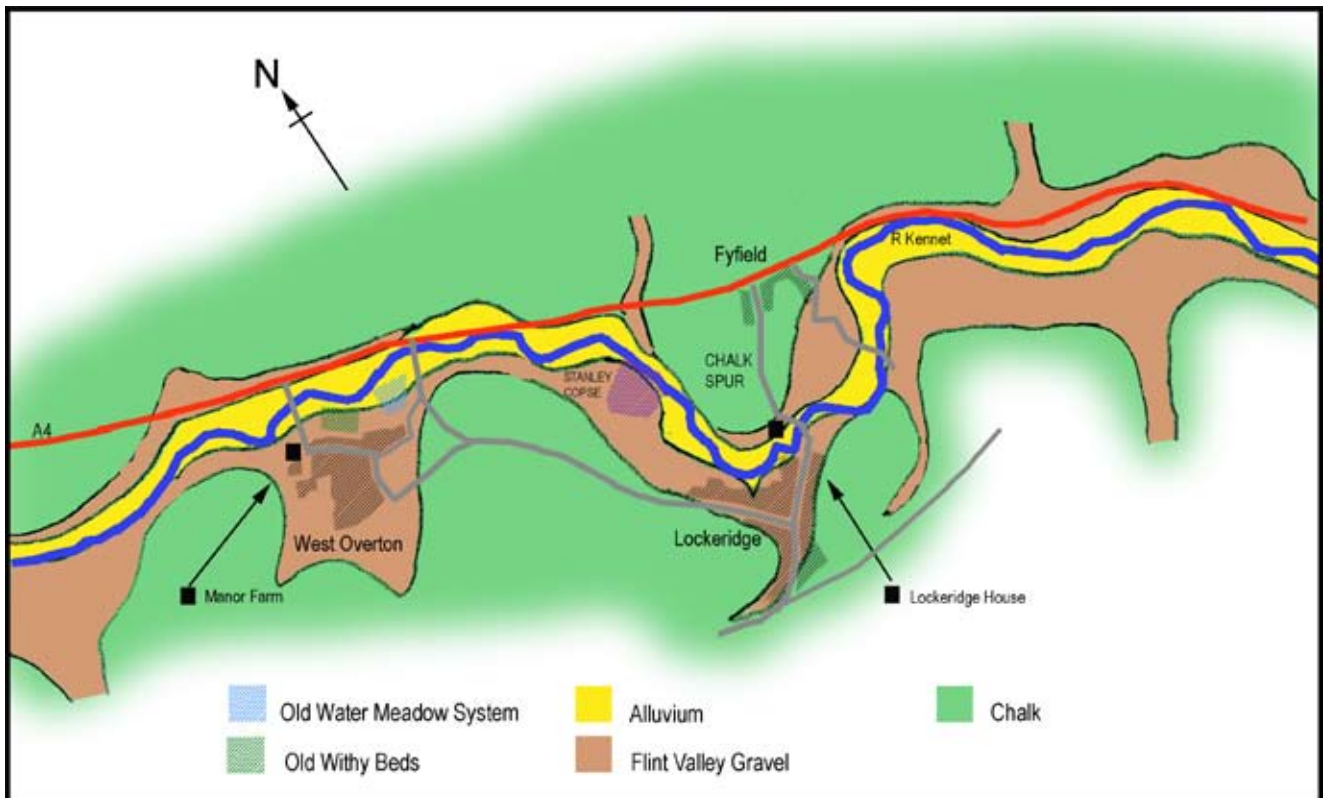
The valley is the most familiar part of the landscape for most of us. It is where we conduct our lives. It is where settlements found shelter and water, and roads followed easier gradients. For this reason we may think we know it better than we do.

## GEOLOGY AND LANDFORM

The Kennet River valley cuts through the chalk of the Marlborough Downs, along a narrow, flat strip bounded by the smooth slopes of the Downs to the north and the Savernake Plateau to the south. It is the chalk bedrock of the Kennet Valley that determines the special nature of the river. This upper section of the river is fed from springs bubbling up from the chalk. When the river is in full flow they can be seen bubbling up between West Overton and Lockeridge. Chalk acts as an aquifer, soaking up water like a sponge and holding it, while allowing water to percolate. The resulting flow of the river is dependent on the level of the water table, relying on autumn and winter rainfall to recharge the aquifer, but tending to dry up as the water table drops in summer. Unlike other types of river, the water in chalk streams is naturally mineral-rich but clear, carrying little suspended matter. Flints that were once embedded in the chalk upstream were swept down into the valley at the end of the ice age, creating a riverbed of flinty river gravel clearly visible due to the clarity of the water. Having risen from deep within chalk, the water temperature tends not to vary as much as in other rivers, sometimes leading to an appearance of steam rising from the river on cold winter mornings.

The valley floor itself is covered predominantly with alluvium and the flinty valley gravels deposited at the end of the Ice Age. Gravel deposits also mark the dry valleys that were once tributaries of the Kennet. Lockeridge Dene is a fine example of the dry valleys typical of this area, providing a wonderful opportunity to study sarsen stones. These stones were formed along an underground drainage line and left lying on the surface when softer material was washed away. More sarsens can be seen scattered around the valley, generally shifted to the edge of fields by local farmers. For more information on the dry valleys and sarsen stones see the Marlborough Downs section (page 11). Outside the gravel deposits, the valley is calcareous ie chalk with a thin covering of nutrient-poor soils.

The river generally meanders through the parish in an easterly direction with two notable exceptions, the first at Manor Farm in West Overton where it moves northwards and the second between Lockeridge and Fyfield: during the 1970s, the river at Manor Farm was straightened to increase productivity from the adjacent farmland. In the summer of 2009 this was reversed with the aim of restoring the diversity of habitats afforded by the natural curves of a chalk stream. The project also involved re-establishing a deep pool that once provided a refuge for fish when the river dries up. Before reaching Lockeridge, the river begins to flow in a south-easterly direction around a chalk spur that intrudes from the Marlborough Downs into the valley. Leaving Lockeridge it turns north again towards Fyfield before resuming its easterly flow.



*Geological Map of River Corridor*



*River Kennet between West Overton and Lockeridge*

## LANDCOVER

The river valley has always been grazing land but in recent decades it has become more diverse. Its pasture is broken by small areas of woodland planting, some quite recent. The length of hedgerow has increased both in gardens and in open fields, some of which contain maturing trees. Roadside and occasional isolated trees, indigenous species along the course of the river, and cultivated species in village gardens increase the ecological diversity of the valley and provide a richer habitat.

The characteristic riverside crack willow is gradually being replaced by white willow, which is less subject to disease. A few crack willows remain by George Bridge in West Overton

Overton has a wet area of shrub and willow at the end of Frog Lane. Traditionally many riverside villages had a withy or osier bed, to supply materials for basket making, eel traps, thatching spars, wattle and daub construction and the enormous number of hurdles needed for sheep-folds. The osiers were cut back regularly and allowed to regrow to provide a continuous supply of long, pliable stems or rods. As materials and methods changed osiers were no longer cut and the withy bed became overgrown. It is home to water birds and in summer to warblers. It is hoped that the much-declined water vole will establish itself though its future may depend on the control of its chief predator, escaped mink.

Along the valley on the outskirts of Lockeridge, Stanley Copse has mixed native deciduous trees including poplar and some oak with a hazel understorey. It offers good cover and nesting sites for a number of species.

To the east is Lockeridge House. Its gardens and open areas of shrub and trees are carefully maintained and have been extended; they offer an excellent habitat for a variety of wildlife. A feature, which will have a considerable impact on the landscape in the future, is a plantation of deciduous woodland on the spur of chalk downland projecting south from the Marlborough Downs. Between Stanley Copse and the sewage works at Fyfield land management has changed, adopting a low input - low output regime leading to more traditional wildflower meadows—which will benefit wildlife especially grassland species. There will also be some reduction in the amount of nitrogen leaching into the river. A copse of mainly ash and maple occupies the scarp to the south of the river between Lockeridge and Fyfield. A further wooded area to the north of the bridge at Fyfield contains some fine poplars.

Towards the eastern edge of our parish water flows become permanent but for the most part our stretch of the Kennet is a winterbourne, for a detailed description of its flora see the reference below.

The following extract is taken from an interview with Ray Godwin, gardener to Lockeridge House from 1955 to 1973:

*“Sir Christopher Peto managed the river from Clatford to the Bell at Overton. Sections of the stream would be attacked with scythes to clear it for fishing. All the weed would be dragged out for thirty metre stretches and trout from the Hungerford Trout Farm would be put in in April. They never had to feed the fish; there was so much natural food like molluscs, leeches, insect larva and so on. There would be some wonderful fishing such as at Stanley Wood. You could catch trout up to about four and a half pounds. The water always dried up around July. The trout would be left in little pools. They’d be collected up and returned to Hungerford Trout Farm.”*

Action for the River Kennet (ARK) is dedicated to limiting abstraction demanded to satisfy an ever-increasing use of water. Many residents are members, knowing our water flow is precarious. Our riparian owners have been conscientious in maintaining river banks and surrounding meadows.

## References and further reading:

[www.upperkennetnews.co.uk](http://www.upperkennetnews.co.uk)

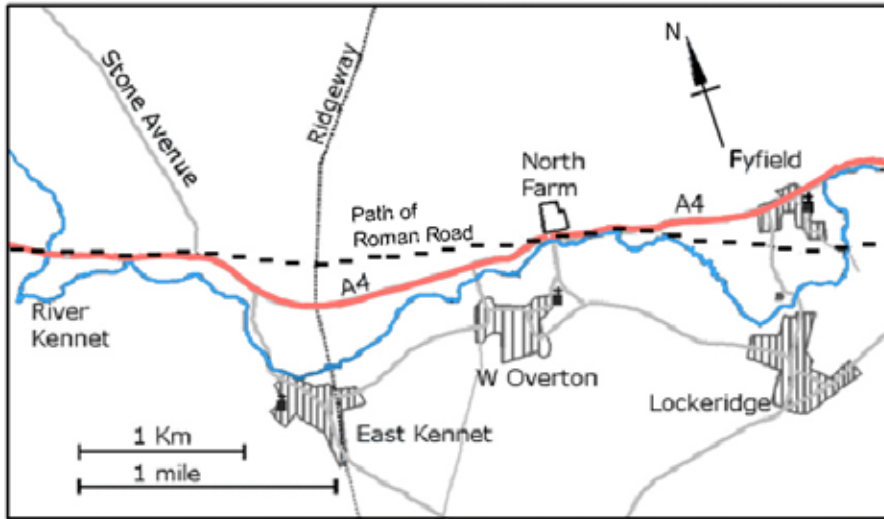
[www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org)

## HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The line of the Roman Road crosses the Kennet at Fyfield. Its revetments can still be seen between the Kennet and the A4 in the meadows to the west of Stanley Wood. In later times, when many features of unknown origin were laid at the devil's door, it was known at Fyfield as Piper's Lane. The Roman Road would have given easy access to neighbouring agricultural land, resulting in the settlement of farming estates and the villa at Fyfield House.

Our present-day parishes are long and narrow, following a pattern that has been in existence since records began. The Saxon estates, which were their predecessors, contained meadow land in the river valley, arable on the lower slopes and grazing and woodland on higher ground. Economic viability depended on the interaction of all parts, so the movement of people and flocks within the parishes has been north and south, dictated by the needs of agriculture. There were many river fords; a number of them are now bridged.





*Map of Roman Road*

The parish that is now West Overton was once two separate estates, East and West Overton. East Overton occupied the hill where the church still stands. The humps and bumps of Rings Close are the foundations of the village that clustered around it. West Overton lay nearer to East Kennet. Over the centuries West Overton shuffled eastwards until the settlements met at Frog Lane (previously Watery Lane). Frog Lane is now part of a right of way stretching from West Woods in the south to the downs in the north but historically it formed the boundary between the two estates and in places still marks tenurial boundaries. There is no explanation for the resulting single village being called West Overton.

The river has been managed as a resource since at least the 10th century when there is a reference in the East Overton Charter to a series of offtakes at Uferan Tun. These could have been for drainage but may have been an early form of irrigation. The river also provided power for mills. A mill stood at modern West Overton from the 11th century until the mid 19th century on a site a little north of Manor Farm, where there is now a large tree. At two points the river was managed for production of withies. The derelict withy beds at Frog Lane in modern West Overton are shown on the 1793 Andrews and Dury map as being fed by a water channel. The map is not precise but the little sarsen clapper bridge still in existence may have crossed this channel. Another withy bed, also fed from the river, is shown at Stanley Wood.

## **WATER MEADOWS**

The most intensive management of the river came with the construction of water meadows, a feature of chalk streams all over Wiltshire. West Overton is one of the few places where they have not been destroyed, and although fallen into decay, they still bear witness to an agricultural innovation that enriched the county for several centuries. Before the advent of artificial fertilizers sheep were folded over the arable to dung the soil. The sheep-carrying capacity of the land dictated the extent of arable. The number of sheep carried was limited in turn by the "hungry gap" at the end of winter when hay was used up and spring growth had not begun. Water meadows were devised to bring on "early bite" and close the gap. The springs that feed chalk streams maintain a consistent temperature of about 10 deg C so meadows could be kept frost free by allowing water to flow over them. River water also carries nutrients which enrich the soil. Deposits of gravel below assist drainage.

There were water meadows along the whole length of the river through our parish and downstream beyond it. Brickwork from the various constructions can still be seen in many places but the ridge and furrow formation typical of bedwork meadows has largely disappeared except at West Overton and, in slanting light, at Fyfield.

The flow of the river had first to be dammed by the construction of weirs and hatches so the water level could be built up. From the resulting ponds a water carrier took water along the upper level of the meadow. The ridge and furrow beds ran at right angles to the contour of the land and therefore



*The Clapper Bridge*

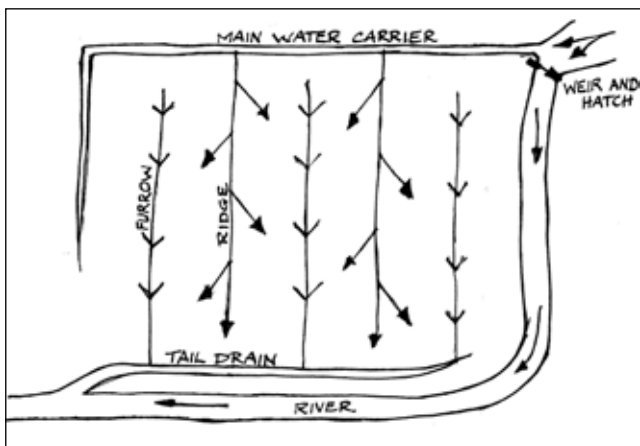


*Weir and hatches at Lockeridge House*



*Main water carrier on left and remains of flooded ridge and furrow beds on right*

to the water carrier. Water was released by way of sluices from the carrier to run through smaller channels cut into the crown of each bed. From here it overflowed down the sides, or panes, into the furrows and thence into a tail drain, which returned it to the river.



*Diagram of water meadow construction*

A single meadow system often continued beyond a single manor. It crossed tenorial boundaries. A drowner, or manager, could be responsible to several landowners. A mill could also be involved as at West Overton where the mill leat also fed the main water carrier. A precise demarcation of rights and responsibilities was needed.

The flow to the meadows was kept up throughout the winter months when there were most nutrients in the water. Short drying-out periods allowed the grass to "air". The meadows were ready for grazing by mid March when the sheep were folded over them by day and returned to the fields at night. As many as 500

sheep would be crowded for one day onto an acre of meadow and would then fertilize an acre of arable overnight. The flocks were moved over the meadows in sequence. At the end of April the sheep would be taken off and the meadows drowned again for the hay crop to be started. The hay would be cut in June producing four times the yield of an ordinary field, regardless of rainfall. After the hay crop the meadow could be drowned once more before summer grazing by cattle, though sometimes a second hay crop was taken off. Heavy grazing continued until October when the now trampled meadows were repaired before the winter rains.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries the sheep kept were Wiltshire Horn, now a rare breed. Neither fleece nor carcass was a primary consideration. These sheep were bred for walking. They were hardy and when not on the meadows they thrived on the rough grazing of the downland.

Elsewhere, experiments with primitive systems for flooding and draining to increase the fertility of the land had begun in the late 16th century. Surveys of the Earl of Pembroke's manors in the early 17th century show many references to "water mead", "wette mead" and "wett ground" and water meadows are well documented at his Ramsbury estate. It is likely that some form of "floating" (i.e. initial construction) took place on his estate at Overton. The meadows we see now are of a much later date but they appear to be laid out over an earlier system. "Floating" required a huge capital outlay but the improved value was also immense.

There were many reasons for the decline of water meadows: the planting of root crops, the introduction of improved winter grass, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the drift to the cities of rural labour, but for over two centuries these systems, unique to England, were one of the glories of our agriculture.



It seems safe to assume that the Sarsen stones now lining the river banks between West Overton and Stanley Wood, keeping it to its course, were cleared from the fields during the floating of the meadows. Here, along the riverbanks, they were preserved from the attention of the stone masons who worked the deposits at Stanley Copse in the 19th century. Until that date large numbers lay in the valley where the river Kennet was joined by its former tributary, the now dry valley of Pickledene. Only a few remain, the rest having been broken up and carried away on a narrow gauge railway. Since the enclosure map of 1819 the river between Stanley Wood and Lockeridge House has been canalized and the meanders removed. Much repair of the banks has taken place since the 1990s but a fording place has been retained.



*Wiltshire Horned Sheep*

### Key landmark and landscape features:

- Roman Road.
- Weirs, with hatches and watercarriers leading from them, (although in a ruinous state):
  1. Between East Kennet and West Overton.
  2. Where the river runs close to the A4 west of Pickledene.
  3. East of Stanley Wood.
  4. At Fyfield, south of Fyfield House.
- Remains of the main water carrier on West Overton meadow with positions of some sluices marked by tumbled masonry. Stone walls to take water through the withy beds. Ridge and furrow.
- Abutments of two bridges and the intact clapper bridge on Frog Lane right of way. Sarsen stock bridge, probably 19th century, in the grounds of Lockeridge House. Paving of the old ford under the road bridge at Lockeridge. Brick-built stock bridge south of Fyfield House. Bridge at Fyfield.



*Stock bridge south of Fyfield House*

### Recommendations:

All of the features mentioned as key landmark and landscape features deserve preservation from further dereliction. Hampshire County Council has produced an excellent guide to the conservation of water meadows. It would be very ambitious to attempt a reconstruction but enough evidence remains for us to see how they worked. Elsewhere many have been destroyed.

### Sources and further reading.

Peter Fowler: Landscape Plotted and Pieced

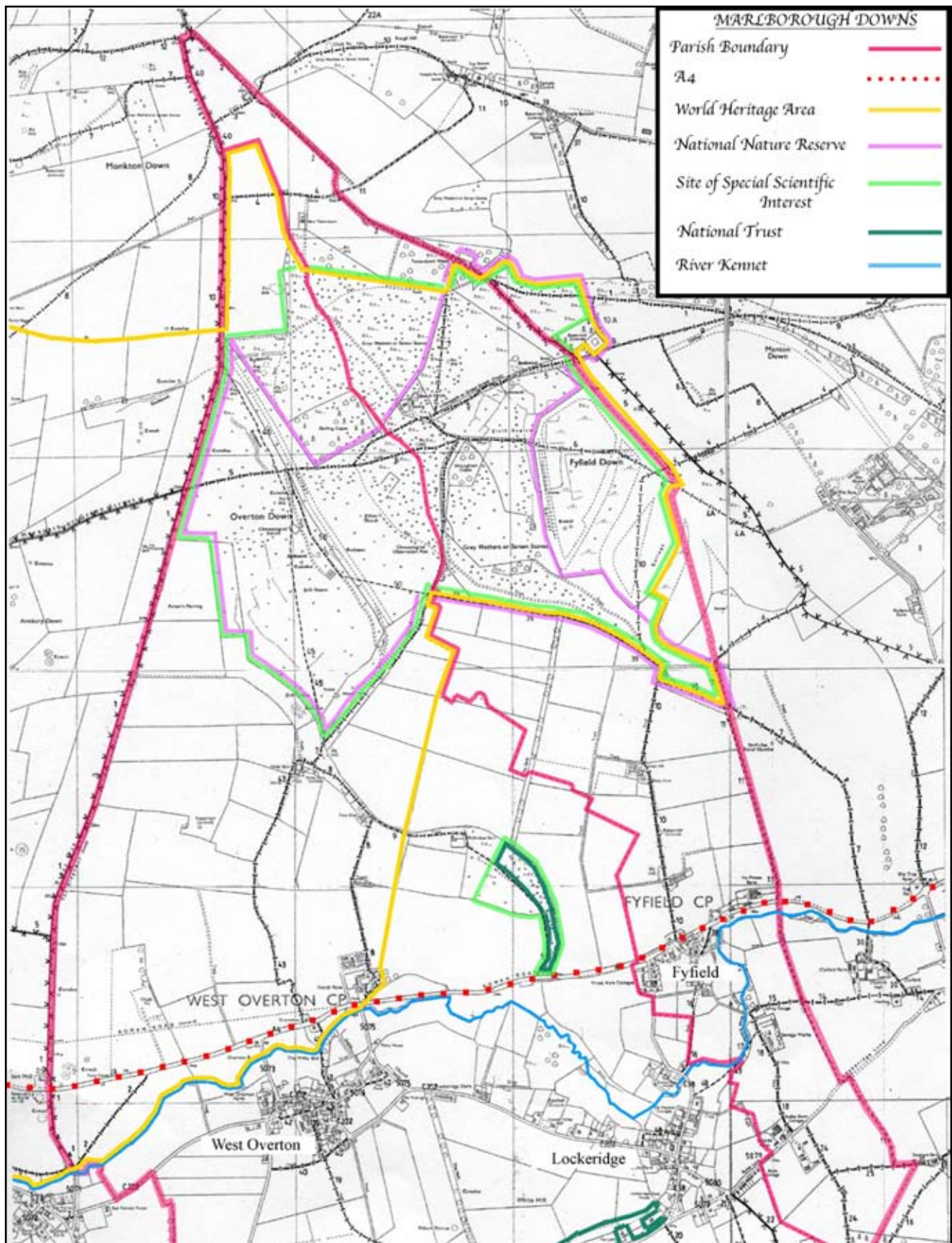
Michael Cowan: Wiltshire Water Meadows

Eric Kerridge: The Floating of the Wiltshire Water Meadows WAHNS 1953

George Attwood: A Study of the Wiltshire Water Meadows WAHNS 1961

Hampshire County Council: The Conservation of Water Meadows Structures [www.hants.gov.uk/56389\\_water\\_meadows.pdf](http://www.hants.gov.uk/56389_water_meadows.pdf)





Map of Marlborough Downs showing Parish and conservation area boundaries



# MARLBOROUGH DOWNS

*"This is pure downland, the breasted hills, curved as though under the influence of a great melody. It is beautiful; a quiet and unrenowned, and a most visibly ancient landscape."* Edward Thomas 1878 – 1917

## OVERVIEW

The great landscape value of the area is reflected in the amount of protection afforded it. Because of its archaeological importance much of it lies within the Avebury World Heritage Site (AWHS), which has recently been extended to include Fyfield Down. Within the World Heritage Site is Fyfield National Nature Reserve, lying athwart the Valley of Stones and extending north-east across Fyfield Down a little beyond our parish boundary. It includes most of the Valley of Stones south of The Delling. The National Nature Reserve lies within a separate Site of Special Scientific Interest. Pickledene (together with Lockeridge Dene) is owned and managed by the National Trust and is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The whole of our parish lies within a much larger Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

## GEOLOGY LANDFORM AND LANDCOVER

To the north of the Kennet river valley the Marlborough Downs rise through an area under arable cultivation to a high plateau of chalk grassland. Cutting through the chalk are the dry valleys of Pickledene and the Valley of Stones, once feeder streams leading to the River Kennet and containing the best preserved sarsen trains in southern England. In the very north of the parish towards Totterdown and on the brow between Pickledene and the Valley of Stones remnants of the original capping of clay with flints remain.

This is open downland, visually unenclosed except for a few remnant hedgerows bordering the large arable fields to the west. Nothing interrupts the downs, the sky and the weather. Field size is larger than average for both arable and pasture. Post and wire fencing is insignificant at these distances. Its "see through" quality preserves the unenclosed character better than hedging (though post and rail does not). It also avoids root disturbance to archaeology.

Some small woods enhance rather than diminish the sense of space. A belt of trees, planted in the time of the Meux estate, at the end of the 19th century, rises from Pickledene and crosses the hill to the Valley of Stones. It contains some conifers but is for the most part beech. The Delling, near the head of the Valley of Stones, has recently been part-felled of its conifers and replanted with mixed broadleaf trees including oak. Both are currently used as shelter for pheasant breeding. To the south-east Wroughton Copse is a mixed wood with a hazel understorey. Dead wood is not cleared here and it is a haven for wildlife.

Historically the chalk grassland has been cultivated but the tendency has always been for grazing to take over. The downland soil cannot support continued, long-term cultivation, since its typical flora thrives on poor soil. Within the protected areas grazing is managed to allow wild flowers to seed and also to prevent shading of the stones and the lichens they support. Communities of unusual lichens and mosses grow on the sarsens, some of these are more frequently found on higher land or by the coast. One lichen species is found in Britain only on the acidic hard rock of sarsen stones. It is National Trust policy to leave dead wood to rot and harbour a microworld of wildlife. Large mammals include hare, roe deer and muntjak. Smaller mammals support birds of prey. Buzzards ride the thermals overhead. Barn owls are increasing and the reintroduced red kite can be seen. Flocks of fieldfare winter over and sometimes a ring ouzel will take a break in its migration. There are skylarks, and chalkland butterflies abound.

## HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

*"Over much (but not all) of Fyfield and Overton downs is a cover of earthworks, in the main a landscape which developed between c 2,000 and c 600 BC. This was in its turn selectively overlaid by further workings, which have left earthwork remains in the first-second centuries AD and in medieval times."* Peter Fowler.

Even earlier than the first cultivation, as long ago as 7,000 BC, the intermittent clearance of the land had begun. By the fifth





millennium B.C. the downs were peopled by the men who built the long barrows and sharpened their stone axes on the “polissoir” above The Delling. To stroke its concave surface, silken smooth with long abrasion, is to reach far back into time itself.



*Polissoir*

### The Bronze Age

If we fast-forward about five millennia, round barrows begin to appear on Overton Hill and elsewhere on marginal land around Bronze Age fields. Settlements can be identified. One of them, in its associated field system, lies north of Down Barn. It has been excavated and studied in detail. Another lies on the boundary between the old Saxon estates of West Overton and East Overton, now a bridleway. From about 1,500 B.C. to 900 B.C. a mixed agriculture would have extended beyond the downs into areas now long under the plough, but it is on the grassland that fragmentary traces remain. Lynchets reveal the layout of small fields, enclosures and boundary ditches. For a detailed and fascinating account of this and later periods read Peter Fowler's book, *Landscape Plotted and Pieced*.

### The Iron Age

In the last half century B.C. the area appears to have returned to pasture, but it was not depopulated. Hillforts were built and inhabited at Oldbury, Rybury, Barbury and on Martinsell Hills but their inhabitants left few traces here; perhaps the area was disputed grazing land. Perhaps it was grazed in common. The Iron Age has not left us a lot of dateable landscape evidence.

### The Romano-British Landscape

With the coming of the Romans a major reorganization took place. Increased productivity was needed to pay tax. A new pattern of fields, longer and more rectilinear, was paid out on the southern slopes of Totterdown and on Overton Down north of the new Roman road. The remains of the old system were subsumed beneath it in many places, but not everywhere. On northern parts of Totterdown, and in some other places, it remained undisturbed. During the following centuries trade and communications along the valley brought sufficient prosperity to support a number of Romano-British settlements. One of these, to the north of Down Barn and not far from the excavated Bronze Age site, shows on the ground as a series of irregular terraces rising up the north-east slope of Pickledene to the top of Overton Down. It was probably abandoned by the 6th century AD.

### Saxon and Medieval Farming

By the eighth and ninth centuries Saxon settlements were well established above the floodplain in the river valley. A new form of arable came with new technology in a further development of the plough, and strip cultivation was established on the lower slopes

of the downs. With the tenth century charters we have our first record of land tenure and estate boundaries. In the Middle Ages the estates which together made up what has become our modern parish were all in ecclesiastical ownership. Records in the library of Winchester Cathedral first mention the farm at Raddun in the manorial estate of Fyfield in 1248. The farm probably began as a stock enclosure before the first small house was built. Later in the century a larger house replaced the first and was extended in its turn. A stable, an animal shed and a new enclosure were added. Briefly in the 13th century strip cultivation imposed another layer of history over the top of Roman and Bronze Age fields. The farm was isolated but not independent. Among his obligations Richard of Raddun was required to pasture the manorial draught oxen and supply the manor with eggs. Despite the appearance of increasing prosperity the farm had disappeared from the records by 1318. Bad harvests had probably driven it from this marginal land which again returned to grass.

### Historic Routes and Paths

The whole area was once criss-crossed by paths and drove routes, many of them of great antiquity. For millennia sheep were driven to pasture along a network that was essential to the economy of the downs. Sheep grazed the grassland. Their dung fertilized the arable and the easiest way to get it there was by herding and folding. The lines of these ways can be followed in lynchets and hollow ways. In Saxon records they defined estate boundaries, and in places they still do.

Now that the Ridgeway has become a “leisure resource” much is made of its long history but it is only one survivor from a much larger complex of paths.



*The Ridgeway, the present day parish boundary. On the right is one of the early bronze age ‘Seven Barrows’, also used for subsequent burials by the Romans and pagan Saxons who referred to them as Seofan Beorgas.*

In June 1668 Samuel Pepys crossed Overton and Fyfield Downs by way of Green Street on his way from Avebury to Marlborough. He recorded in his diary that the “*life of the shepherds is, in fair weather, pretty.*” Green Street may have been in use since medieval times but it is not an old route by standards hereabouts. It is not even an old name, but a twentieth century one. Its path across Overton Down can be traced in skeins of hollow ways left by wheeled vehicles labouring towards Avebury upslope from the Valley of Stones. It was closed to through traffic in 1815.

The most recent linear features on the downs are the training gallops, swags of brighter green following the contour of the

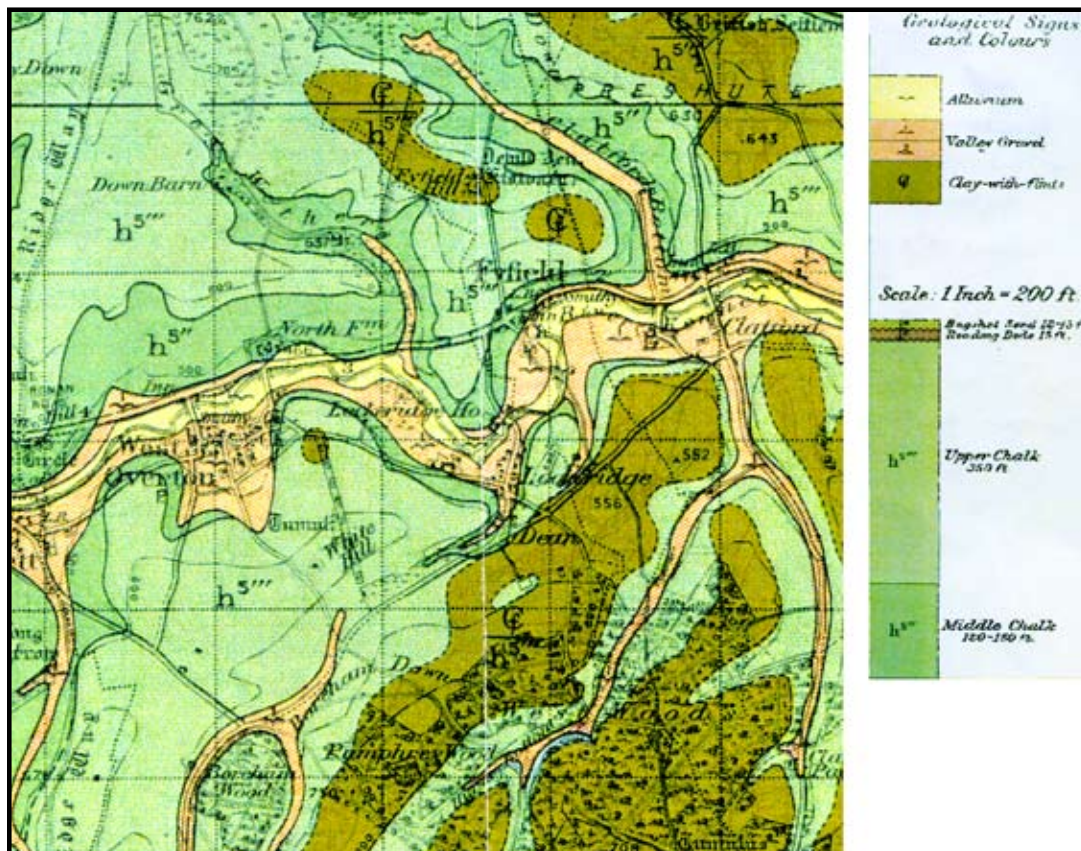


land on Fyfield Down. On Overton Down, perhaps fortuitously, they take the same direction as an early drove route from the Ridgeway. Old lynchets have been smoothed out to make the

going easier. The gallops make the point that this has become a landscape given over to leisure but so far intrusive railings have not made an appearance.

## The Dry Valleys

### Geology and Landform



*Geology map of the area showing dry valleys*

The sarsen-filled valleys are still dramatic even after centuries of clearance and quarrying. The name sarsen may come from Anglo Saxon 'sar sten' a troublesome stone, or from 'saracen' meaning foreign or alien. Locally they are called grey wethers because, in the half-light, they are said to look like sheep. The name recalls a time when flocks were shepherded on the unfenced downs. The stones are not old as stones go but they are unusual. It is rare for rock as young as this to get so hard. From about 65 million years ago the chalk seabed gradually rose to become land and layers of alluvial sand and clay were deposited over it. Sarsens were formed within these layers about 50 million years ago, when the climate was warm and wet, before tectonic movements pushed Britain northwards. The groundwater became saturated with dissolved silica while variations in the acidity of the water caused the silica to crystallize between the grains of sand, cementing patches within the deposits beneath the soil. Ancient, palm-like plants grew in the tropical conditions and sent roots into the still soft stone. Tubular root holes and fossilized roots can still be seen and show how quickly the stone hardened.

The traditional geological theory is that the concentration of sarsens in our valleys came about later, during two and a half million years of successive ice ages. Glaciation (the fully frozen area covered with glaciers and ice sheets) did not extend quite as far south as this. Here, in this periglacial region, extremes of alternating frost and thaw broke up the surface of the land. Slippage of waterlogged earth carried slabs of broken rock over the underlying permafrost into the valleys. Torrents of meltwater,

on the way to the River Kennet, washed away surrounding silt and left the sarsens exposed. The valleys created in this way are typically asymmetric. Stream beds moved gradually towards the steeper slope leaving a gentler gradient on the other side.

A newer theory has it that the sarsens formed in situ, in valleys already existing, where the water table came close to the surface. The sandy deposits at the top of the water table were hardened by silica drawn up into them by capillary action. During the ice ages these valleys were deepened by erosion into their present shape leaving the sarsens behind.

## The Historic Landscape

Sarsens were once much thicker on the higher parts of Totterdown, before they were cleared for cultivation and sarsen trains extended far beyond the remnant areas protected now. In 1644 Richard Symonds's Diary of the Marches of the Royal Army records that the stones "lie so thick as you may go upon them all the way".

When Pepys passed by after admiring Avebury Circle he noted, "About a mile on it was prodigious to see how full the downes are of great stones and all along the valleys stones of considerable bigness most of them growing certainly out of the ground so.... thick as to cover the ground.... which makes me think the less of the wonder of Stonage for hence they might undoubtedly supply themselves with stones as well as those at Avebury." Until recently folklore had it that sarsens grow and Pepys had an ear for a story.





*“.....you may go upon them all the way”*

In the mid 19th century stonemasons working in the High Wycombe area heard of the plentiful sarsen in our valleys and moved to Fyfield. From then till the mid 1930s sarsen became an industrial product. Its hardness made it ideal for kerbstones and tramsetts, and huge quantities were bought by Swindon Corporation for the expanding town. One mason, employing six men, produced over 300 tons of cut blocks in a year. The work was hard and the masons' lives were cut short by lung disease, witness their graves in Fyfield churchyard, but their skill can be seen in the cut blocks of Overton Church and the Meux estate houses along the A4 at Fyfield. Wherever the masons worked, the stones they rejected lie about where they were left, marked with indentations made to take their chisels. One of the last orders

was for four wagon loads of stone to repair the walls of Windsor Castle (the original stone had come from High Wycombe). The site at Totterdown above the Delling was the last place to be quarried. It was abandoned in 1939 and still looks as though the workmen had just downed tools. It is the only place left where you could still go upon the stones all the way.

The lives of the masons are written into the landscape, as are the lives of the farmers. They have left their work in farmyard walls, in cottages, in gateposts and humble kerb stones.

## SETTLEMENT AND BUILDINGS

A row of houses hugs the north side of the A4 at Fyfield reminding us of the former site of the village. Otherwise the area is divided between four main landholdings but with only two farmhouses and their associated agricultural buildings. These are more visible from the valley than from the higher downs. A handsome Victorian barn on Fyfield Down has been converted to residential use.

### Key Issues and Guidelines:

#### Visual

It is of the utmost importance to preserve the open quality of this landscape, its loneliness and remoteness.

- Horizons should not be encumbered with intrusive features. Field divisions should be minimized. In many situations a return to pasture would be welcome, especially as an extension of species rich chalk grassland; the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is now (2010) doing useful research on this topic. Also, there is advice available specifically on horse management within an AONB: [www.southwestlandscapes.org.uk](http://www.southwestlandscapes.org.uk)



*Sarsen gateposts*

#### Historic

- All development and farming activity should respect the underlying archaeology. Our ancient agricultural history is not unique but its preservation in the landscape is exceptional. It should not be seen in isolation but as an extension of the Avebury World Heritage Site (AWHS) even beyond the boundaries of that site and where it has not the protection of Scheduled Monument status.

#### Sarsen Stones

- For centuries the Valley of Stones has been harvested for building material and economic gain. Although the remaining sarsen trains have been thinned out, it is still possible to visualize the pristine landscape of centuries ago. Care should be taken of scattered sarsen features intrinsic to the historic landscape. Residual walls, boundary markers, kerb stones and gateposts bear testimony to the use of this local resource. They are not renewable. Attrition by piecemeal removal should be resisted.

#### The Ridgeway

- Serious erosion to the Ridgeway has been caused by off-road vehicles. Although a Seasonal Traffic Regulation Order is in force from October to April, and has had some success in reducing the problem, it has not resolved it. The parish supports a full-time ban on non-essential vehicular traffic.

#### Sources and further reading.

Avebury World Heritage Site Management Plan:

[www.wiltshire.gov.uk/leisureandculture/museumhistoryheritage](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/leisureandculture/museumhistoryheritage)

Kennet Landscape Conservation Strategy:

[www.wiltshire.gov.uk/environmentandplanning/planninganddevelopment/planningpolicy](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/environmentandplanning/planninganddevelopment/planningpolicy)

English Nature: Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve [www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)

Isobel Geddes: Hidden Depths: Wiltshire's Geology & Landscapes.

N. E. King: The Kennet Valley Sarsen Industry. Wiltshire Archeological and Natural History Magazine vol.65

Peter Fowler Landscape Plotted and Pieced.

[www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk)

[www.upperkennetnews.co.uk](http://www.upperkennetnews.co.uk)



# HORTON DOWN

## OVERVIEW

Horton Down occupies an area of open, undulating downland stretching from the south of Overton as far as the road to Alton Barnes. It is remarkable for its uniformity and its wide views. It is almost entirely arable and may be mistaken for a landscape where hedges have been grubbed out to make way for modern machinery. In fact it has changed little over the centuries. These were the common fields of West Overton Manor, now Manor Farm.

## GEOLOGY AND LANDFORM

Horton Down lies on upper chalk except for a very small part to the south of Boreham Wood which can be considered an extension of Savernake Plateau in geological terms, that is to say clay with flints.

On the Marlborough Downs the Ridgeway forms the western limit of the parish but it leaves us at East Kennett and passes outside our boundary to the west. Nevertheless, visually this is Ridgeway country.

## LANDCOVER

Apart from some grassland on the high ground above Lockeridge the area is arable.

There is some mixed woodland planting, not yet mature, to the west of Lockeridge Dene. A conspicuous belt of trees, known as Owls' Copse, crosses the spur between Overton and Lockeridge Dene. This is thought to be a remnant of Meux Estate planting for sporting purposes. It is now self-seeding with sycamore and ash and in need of maintenance if it is to be perpetuated. Beech clothe the line of the Wansdyke where it crosses the Alton road.

Some recent planting on Wyman's Hill has not proved universally popular. Villagers have been accustomed to pause here and take in the vast unbroken panoramas across Overton to the Marlborough Downs and westward to the sunset and Silbury Hill. It is possible, however, that future generations may find a place for it in their affections as we do now for the Meux Estate belts. Another view to Silbury Hill from the byway at Boreham Down has likewise been lost.

Recent hedgerow repair and replacement has respected the ancient field boundaries and will provide shelter and corridors for wildlife.

## HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Air photography suggests that parts of the high ground south of Overton had been under cultivation in prehistoric times. Before enclosure, formalized in the early 19th century, the three large common fields of West Overton Manor lay here in one continuous block. The fields were Ditch Hedge Field, Double Hedge Field and Windmill Field. These three were subdivided into smaller sections which were worked in tenanted strips. Names reflect their history. A section of Windmill Field near its southern boundary was known as White Barrow Furlong. In dry seasons the position of a long barrow can still be seen as parch marks. Until it was ploughed out in the early nineteenth century it overlooked Lockeridge Dene beyond the modern boundary of the National Trust property. Pre-enclosure maps show a track called Windmill Way following the boundary between the ancient estates of West and East Overton. It is still a right of way between modern West Overton and the Alton Barnes road.



*The ancient boundary taken from the Alton Barnes road*

The Wandsyke cuts across Horton Down for the length of a single field to the north of the road to Alton Barnes. It then skirts Savernake Plateau and the deserted village of Shaw before entering the woods.

## SETTLEMENT AND BUILDINGS

Apart from a couple of houses on the outskirts of Overton there is no settlement, only a few agricultural buildings and the gables of a roofless Victorian barn silhouetted against the skyline near the right of way.



*The Old Barn on Wymans Hill, West Overton*

## Key Landmarks and Landscape Features:

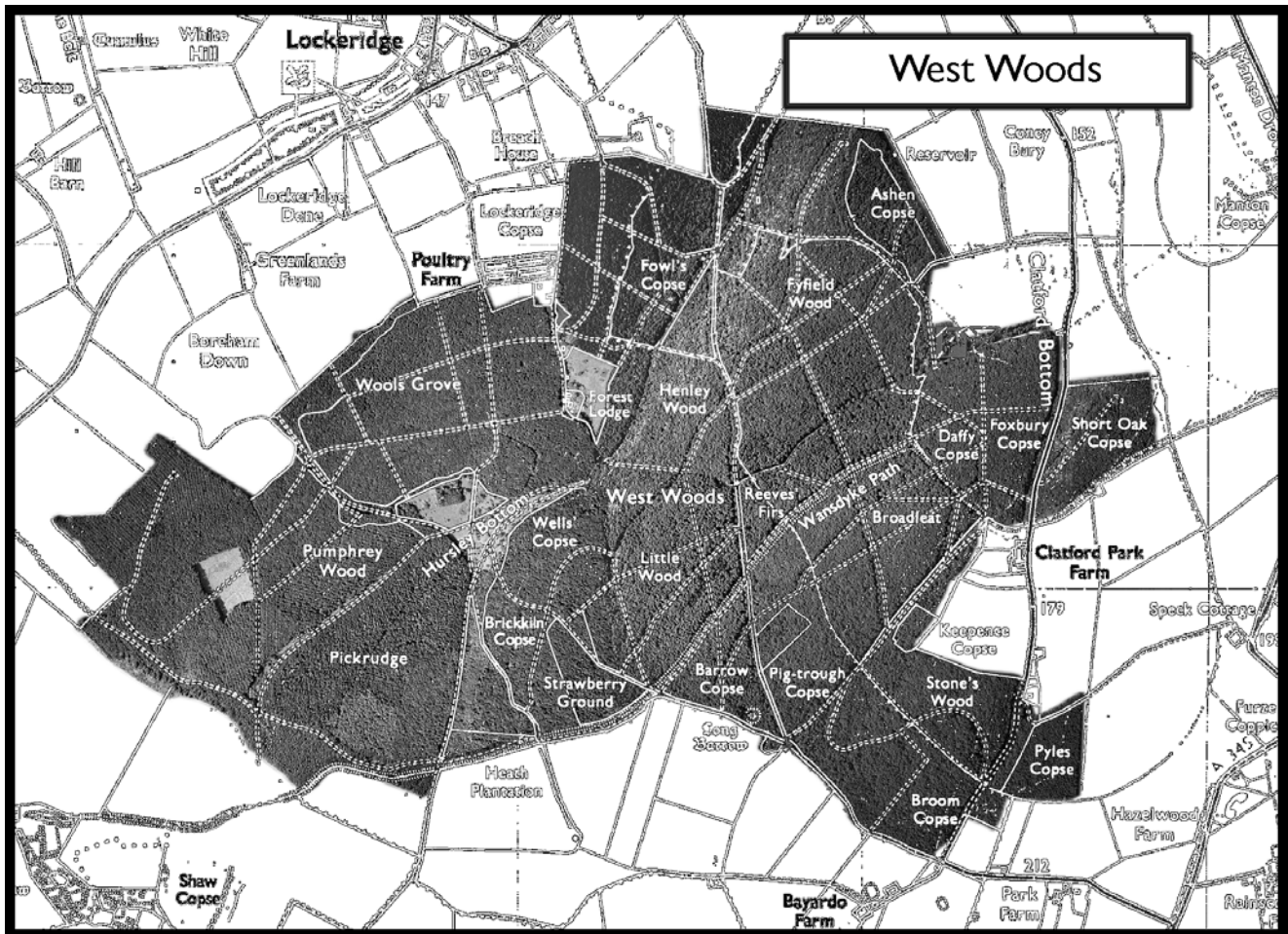
The outstanding feature of this landscape is its openness with its uninterrupted horizons and large fields. The ruined barn emphasizes its emptiness.

## Reference

Peter Fowler. Landscape Plotted and Pieced



# SAVERNAKE PLATEAU (West Woods)



*Map of West Woods*

## OVERVIEW

The Savernake Plateau extends into our Parish in the form of our well-loved West Woods, located above the valley village of Lockeridge. Now owned and managed by the Forestry Commission (FC), it still covers an area of over a thousand acres, mostly surrounded by farmland, and its boundaries are thought to have hardly changed in 4,000 years. People have been coming here since before the Bronze Age. There is a little-known Long Barrow (Neolithic Age) on the southern boundary, and even earlier flint axe-heads etc have been found (now displayed in the Devizes Museum).

The good supply of flints had already tempted our ancestors to visit, and when more sophisticated tools and weapons were invented in the Bronze Age and then the Iron Age, West Woods provided excellent charcoal facilities. Since those early days and throughout its history, the woods have been well managed, yielding wood for the villagers' needs, grazing for livestock, pannage for swine etc, but villagers have also enjoyed recreational hunting for rabbits, foxes and deer.

West Woods was formerly part of the West Bailey of Savernake Forest. The woods, surrounding farmland, occasional farmhouse and woodman's cottage, have had a variety of owners: the Church (the Bishop of Winchester), the Pembroke family, the Duke of Marlborough, the Meux Estate, and the Olympic Agricultural Company (Lord Manton). Since its purchase in 1931, the Forestry Commission has sold off all but the woodland, but the whole area remains rural and quiet, with few developments to break up its essential remoteness.

In this unspoilt habitat many different types of flora and fauna flourish, and local villagers love to walk or ride through its leafy greenness.

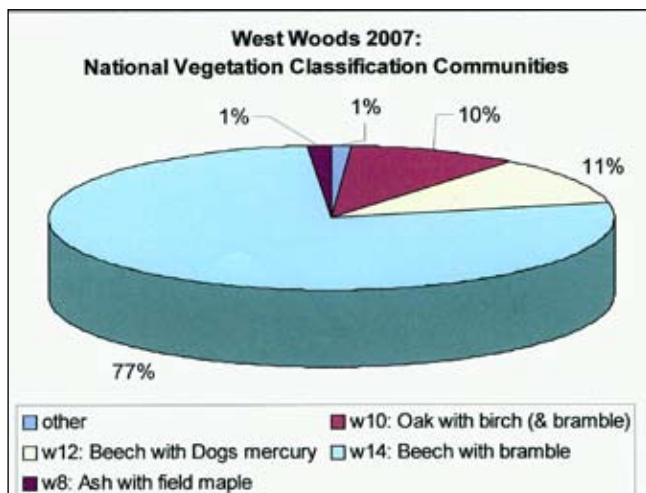
## GEOLOGY AND LANDFORM

The woods lie on a plateau of clay with flints, overlying chalk. Sarsen stones are found throughout. Where the clay with flints is deep, and not influenced by the underlying chalk, the soil is heavy and slightly acidic, giving rise to what the Forestry Commission call W10 type woodland of oak/hazel/bluebell/bramble/bracken. This, however, has largely been replaced by beech plantations (1930s and 1950s), although some relict hazel coppice and oaks persist. Lighter clays support beech/ash/mercury woodland (W12). Running east/west through the middle is a dry valley, leading to Hursley Bottom where the soil becomes very acidic, with heather and bracken in the relict grassland.

## LANDCOVER

This ancient woodland remained mainly oak with hazel coppice, and with typically rich and varied flora, until the 1930s: in 1928, the Olympic Agricultural Company sold it to a consortium of local businessmen who clear-felled the whole wood (to the shock of the villagers!) and then in 1931 sold 1008 acres to the newly-created Forestry Commission (Pickrudge and Pumphrey's Wood, 179 acres, were sold privately in 1917 and then sold on to the FC in 1940). Thankfully almost 90% of the replanting was deciduous,





mainly beech with some ash and sycamore, some red cedar, and the occasional, very striking, scots pine. There is also a small amount of conifer (some diseased), near Hursley Bottom, which the Forestry Commission intends to remove. The original oak and hazel coppice can still be seen on the edges. Throughout the woods there are forest tracks, bridleways and footpaths. There are two main entrances, at Clatford (east) and Lockeridge (north).

Fields, mainly in grazing use, surround the woodland boundaries, and provide the open setting so clearly seen from afar, for example from the Ridgeway on the Marlborough Downs. On the western boundary of this landscape character area, there has been some recent private planting beside the road to Alton and up to the woods, and there is also pressure all over the area, from the recent expansion of equestrian activity, to subdivide open fields with post and rail. Although much mature hedging disappeared after the introduction of modern farming equipment in the fifties, there are still some good mixed native examples left. Unfortunately, equestrian landowners often prefer solid thorn.

## HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

West Woods appears to be nearly all “ancient” woodland (defined as land continually in woodland use) - a complex of contiguous coppices and woods with separate names (see map) and lying in two parishes (Fyfield and West Overton, now combined). Most of the names are self-explanatory, for example: Barrow Copse, Brick Kiln Copse. Some of the enclosure field names we have identified: the Rev. Fowle sold large tracts of Fyfield in the early 19th century (sale maps held in the Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre), Mr Pumphrey was the tenant farmer who built Manor Farmhouse in West Overton in the 18th century, Christopher Keepance and Margaret Stone are in the Parish Records in the 17th century, Peketheket (Pickrudge?) is referred to in 15th century forest rolls, Wools Grove was originally “Wulfsen’s Grove” and not to do with sheep!

Remains of old Saxon boundaries exist, and the unfinished Wansdyke, the date of which is contested but definitely post-Roman (410 AD) and pre-Domesday (1086), marches across the width of the site like a latter-day Hadrian’s Wall.

Farming has “breached” (Breach House and Clatford Park Farm) some original boundaries of the Woods but otherwise today’s map of the area would be entirely recognisable to our ancestors. However a recent archaeological survey using laser aerial (LIDAR) and ground surveying techniques, has revealed ancient enclosures (“celtic felds”) near Hursley Bottom (“horses’ lea”?) similar to those discovered in this parish north of the river. Perhaps there



*View to the north from West Woods*

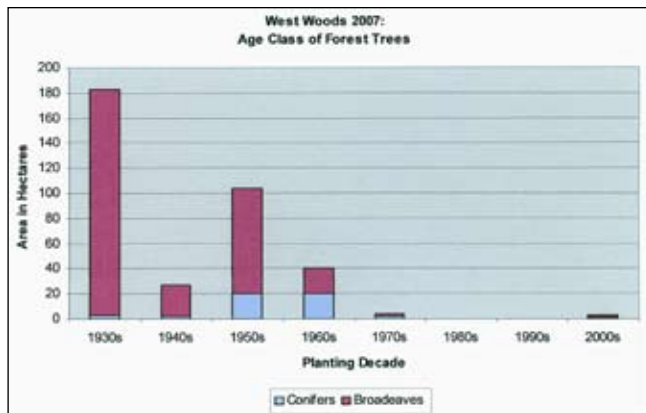
was farming activity after all, and/or partial clearance (“lea” usually refers to cleared woodland), as well as pure woodland management within the current site of the woods. We await further analysis from the Field Group, set up by the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and led by Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society (WANHS), which could add much more information on this aspect of the landscape cover. A link is provided at the end of this section.

## SETTLEMENT AND BUILDINGS

There are six dwellings on the northern fringe of the woods, served by the byway/bridleway leading up from the village. Most prominent is West Woods Stud, with its large acreage divided by post and rail fencing, and the poultry farm beside Lockeridge Copse. Both are modern buildings. The rest, being former forestry workers’ and keepers’ cottages, are of an earlier period - some on sites originally developed as early as perhaps the 12th or 13th century when the Templars came to town and motivated some locals to move up to the woods. These buildings make use of the original sarsen stone and/or the later bricks of the Meux Estate. Greenlands Farm also lies on the north side of the woods, on the western edge of Lockeridge village. The site has been developed for equestrian use, with modern buildings. To the east of the Woods, along the Clatford Bottom Road, there are 3 more cottages - one is thatched and of 18th century origin, thought to be a charcoal burner’s cottage - and two farmhouses, Clatford Park Farm and Bayardo Farm. Our parish also includes the two houses beyond Bayardo Farm leading to the Marlborough/Oare road. On the south-western boundary sits Shaw Farm House, a fine early 19th century building with Victorian additions. Both



the house and the stables are listed, and there are glorious views across to the West. There are two lodges originally serving the two entrances to the farmhouse, and a row of Victorian terraced cottages on the Alton road; all are now in private hands and no longer tied to the farm. The lost village of Shaw (deserted by the late 14th century, soon after the Black Death) is just outside our Parish.



### Key Landmark and Landscape Features:

- The Wansdyke\*
  - Long barrow (Barrow Copse) and other prehistoric and historic features\*
  - Large deposits of sarsen stone in the valley bottom\*
  - Evidence of stonemasons' activities, concrete anchor block, pits, shelter etc\*, south of Forest Lodge.
  - Open views from the woods, mainly to the North and West.
  - Views into the woods from afar, including the Ridgeway.
  - The annual show of bluebells, and wild daffodils
  - Shaw Farmhouse and "Shaw lost village"
- (\*see below for references or links to further information)

### Key Issues and Guidelines

We are lucky in having the Forestry Commission guiding the future of this woodland. Their objectives, as stated in the 2008 Design Plan, are as follows:

- The conservation and enhancement of ancient woodland.
- The maintenance of the visual and cultural amenity values of the woodland (with particular reference to bluebells)
- The diversification of the age/class structure of woodland trees.
- The sustainable production of timber.
- The provision of informal recreational opportunities.
- The conservation of features of heritage interest.

In 2006, the FC drew up a formal Woodland Accord with the North Wessex Downs AONB, which promotes help and understanding between the two bodies.

Our task therefore is to consider the area as a whole in our attempt to retain its many attractions:-

### Visual

The most important aspect to keep in mind is the continuing feeling of remoteness and tranquillity, coupled with the beautiful woodland. This is not Savernake Forest with picnic areas and a grand avenue.

- The Woods are protected by being within the AONB and also under NR3 (designated special nature site), so no commercialisation should be allowed which would endanger the landscape or tranquillity of the area.

- The current pressure for equestrian use of the surrounding fields must be carefully managed, to ensure that no development is allowed that would result in heavy traffic, over-grazing or a plethora of large, unsightly barns. There is now useful advice available for horse management ([www.southwestlandscapes.org.uk](http://www.southwestlandscapes.org.uk))
- Fencing, high hedge-growing and wide tarmac access tracks can all destroy the visual beauty here, and landowners should be made aware of this.
- There is a radio communications mast at Boreham Wood, reasonably well-hidden amongst the trees. No mast should be allowed seriously to break the skyline (as noted in the Kennet Landscape Conservation Strategy).
- The setting of the woods, amongst open fields, must be preserved.

### Historic

In an area of historic importance, West Woods and its immediate environment have survived many centuries unspoilt by development. We await with interest the results of the full archaeological survey now taking place in the Woods, referred to above. A list of archaeological remains, more than simply the Wansdyke and the Long Barrow, should then be available for the Forestry Commission's use in their management planning, for the Local Authority, and for general information.

### Ecological

- The most popular item under this heading must be the bluebells, for which West Woods is rightly famous. The Forestry Commission is acutely aware that there is a fine balance to be made between thinning the now almost overpowering beech plantations and preserving the shade-loving bluebells. There is a case for restraining the beech growth (which is not ancient/indigenous) in order to return to a more natural environment, containing a wider variety of flora and fauna, particularly birds.
- Other flora, including wild daffodil (Daffy Copse), wood anemones, wood sorrel, and primroses, grow alongside paths and tracks. Early purple orchid, meadow saffron and wood vetch grow around the fringes of Hursley Bottom, and Solomon's Seal is also found.
- The very rare dormouse still inhabits these woods, and many other mammals, birds and butterflies. Badgers at dusk, and deer, fox cries and owls, are common sights and sounds. Now the buzzards are becoming equally familiar and red kites have appeared.

**To conserve all this, we must have tranquillity.**





*Bluebells in West Woods*



*In Daffy Copse*



*Autumn colour in West Woods*

### **Sources and further reading:**

Forestry Commission: Survey (J W Spencer, 2001)

Design Plan 2008 (copy held by Parish Council)

Peter Fowler: Landscape Plotted and Pieced, (for parish archaeological history)

Peter Fowler: Lettice Sweetapple, (ditto)

For woodland archaeology and the Accord with Forestry Commission: [www.northwessexdowns.org.uk](http://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk)

For Landscape Conservation Strategy:

[www.wiltshire.gov.uk/environmentandplanning/planninganddevelopment/planningpolicy](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/environmentandplanning/planninganddevelopment/planningpolicy)

For Landscape Group articles on sarsen stone, farming, geology and West Woods: [www.upperkennetnews.co.uk](http://www.upperkennetnews.co.uk)

For on-going Survey information: [www.wiltshireheritage.org.uk](http://www.wiltshireheritage.org.uk)

For article on history of Shaw Village: Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society (WANHS) 2009 Vol 102



# PARISH SETTLEMENT PATTERN AND HIGHWAYS



*View of West Overton from Wyman's Hill*

Intertwined with the geological areas of the Parish are the 'peopled' areas of the wider landscape, the villages and highways.

## SETTLEMENT PATTERN

The villages of Fyfield, Lockeridge and West Overton have been fully described in the Village Design Statement. They run east west along the Kennet valley; each located close to the river, with building sited on slightly higher ground above the flood plain.

**Fyfield** originally was a linear village running alongside the A4 and south to the river. This pattern changed over the years along with the fortunes of the old Roman Road (now the A4). However, when the road was widened in the mid 1930s and replacement housing was built at Priest Acre, an almost circular effect was created round a central field to the south of the main road, although some houses remain to the north, cut off from the rest of the village. The church and housing at Priest Acre are visible from a distance, but the careful barn conversion into modern commercial units on lower ground does not impose on the landscape.

**Lockeridge** still retains a ribbon of old cottages and farmhouses running higgledy piggledy south from the river crossing and then turning south west up the dry valley of the Dene from where access to West Woods and the Downs is gained via a variety of ancient tracks and droving routes. The present village has spread along the lanes to Overton and Clatford but retains a nestling character, hidden from the wider landscape, contradicted only by the imposing façade of Lockeridge House and 20th century housing along Rhyls Lane.

**West Overton**, further west along the river valley, lies in a more open landscape. It is a compact village with a variety of housing built within a criss-cross of lanes and pathways, which lead to the river and the rising downland. The church with its tower, located on higher ground above the river and water meadows on the site of old East Overton, is a visual signature of the parish which can be seen from far and wide.

In the wider landscape few buildings are noticeable save a few outlying farmhouses and their outbuildings

## HIGHWAYS

Other than the A4, the highways in our Parishes do not in themselves impact on the landscape in any major way, but it is from them that most people view the landscape on a day-to-day basis and as such they affect our perception of an urban or rural environment. Visually the highways in this parish fall into two main categories 'open' and 'enclosed' be they busy or quiet.

The 'open' roads are by and large on the higher ground, with low or no hedges at all, so that, travelling through the countryside with the sky in your lap, and with open vistas of rolling grass and arable land, distant tree clumps or belts, the feeling is of space, emptiness and washed-out colour.



*..... the sky in your lap*





*..... tunnelled by overarching trees*

The meadow lanes in the river corridor with their bridges and railings, glimpses of river or floodwater with moorhens and swans or grazing sheep, have a neat manicured feel.

The 'enclosed' highways and lanes are those tunnelled by overarching trees, hedges and ivy; raucously active in early spring, dappled green in early summer, cool dark and quiet by late summer and suffering seasonal falls of twigs, droppings, conkers, beech mast and leaves.

The sweet smell of summer comes to all our roads with the hawthorn and cow parsley adorning every length of verge and hedgerow, followed by mallow and finally the waving, waist-high dry grasses and hedgerow berries, shining against deep blue skies. Later, skeletal trees and clipped hedges increase the bleakness of the winter landscape.

### **Key Issues and Guidelines:**

- Too many traffic signs, concrete kerbstones and black and white marker posts etc detract from rural and open feel.
- Unsympathetic timing and over-enthusiastic trimming of verges and hedges lead to loss of wild flowers and birds. The trimming of verges only to a width adequate for road safety, not the whole way back to the hedge, would help in this regard.
- Some tree disease amongst the avenue of chestnuts and limes on the Overton Road has led to felling, but the currently healthy lime trees now have Tree Preservation Orders on them. The owners of the remaining chestnuts have been asked to monitor them, and advice can be sought from the Conservation Dept, Wiltshire Council (Planning East).
- The increasing width of modern vehicles and lack of passing places on narrow roads lead to erosion of verges. Appropriate Sat Nav software for large vehicles is now being adapted and should be adopted to help alleviate this problem.



*.....skeletal trees and clipped hedges*



# CONCLUSION

The most loved aspects of our landscape are its space, its distant horizons, its views and the vastness of its sky. These are the things people mention over and over again, often with an expansive gesture to show that the landscape is an extension of the mind.

If we have a sense of space we also have a sense of time. The land is traced over with patterns of previous lives. Here we get a little respite from the insistences of our own short time and see ourselves as part of a long continuum.

Our feeling for the landscape is made up of moments touched by private magic and we do not readily find words for it. We become articulate when we speak as farmers, bird watchers, archaeologists, ramblers, horse riders, geologists or star gazers, each of us concerned to protect our own particular enthusiasm. With awareness and a sense of community these separate interests all contribute to the whole.

Awareness shifts; there are signs that it is increasing, although it may be less immediate than once it was. Generations of villagers knew in their bones the footpaths and the contours of the land because they walked to work. Now we walk them with our dogs or with each other or we ride. We know them as lines on a map and we guard them jealously. Long ago our herbs were gathered for their usefulness, and given names like self-heal and lady's bedstraw. Now wildflower meadows come in seed packets. If awareness is more nurtured, more a product of leisure, it is also more easily translated into action.

Awareness does not come in a single, blinding flash. Our own immediate aspirations are not always seen as part of the bigger picture. We install security lights and regret that the stars are not as bright as they were when we were children and we do not always link the two. We want our privacy and our pony paddocks and we enclose our open spaces. We fall in love with a specimen tree, or we want quick results with Leylandii, and do not ask ourselves if a cottage apple or a country hedge would be more at home.

We also act separately and collectively to enhance our landscape. Many contributions enabled the National Trust to buy the hillside above Lockeridge Dene. Overall the length of hedgerow is increasing and is less likely to be cut in bird-nesting season. Recently the sarsen kerb stones in front of the school were saved by local intervention when threatened with standard concrete replacements. Volunteers count water voles!

Larger scale landowners now consider the historic environment and biodiversity. The boundary of the Avebury World Heritage Site has been extended because the importance of the peripheral landscape has been recognized. West Woods are managed for their ecological value, not just for timber. The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) is campaigning for measures to reduce light spillage. Their website shows how quickly our darkness is being lost.

Some good intentions fall by the wayside, literally in the case of the protected wildflower verge on the Alton Road, which is cut along with the rest. Some are in conflict with others: trees and hedges provide cover for wildlife but cause consternation when they spring up in front of a favourite view. Some issues are planning matters: development for equestrian use, commercial and private, is being considered by Wiltshire County Council and the AONB following West Berkshire County Council's lead. The concern is that large fields are fragmented and post and rail fencing cuts across skylines. One person's sport conflicts with another's amenity.

It is all a balancing act. The purpose of this booklet is to make us better informed.

And one last quotation from archaeologist Peter Fowler *"We really must bring respect back once more into our relationship with the landscape. It is not just a factory floor, neither is it just a commercial asset, a tourist attraction, a recreational facility, nor even - and we admit it - just an archaeological site. It is, of course, all those things and a sense of respect for the landscape should be the common ground between all such interests. By 'respect' we mean starting not from particularism, not from self-interest, not from ignorance, but from an informed appreciation that the landscape we live with is what it is because others have created it for us. It has the potential to be valued in different ways because our ancestors have put effort into it."*

**A request:** Please ask permission of the landowner before exploring the places mentioned.



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