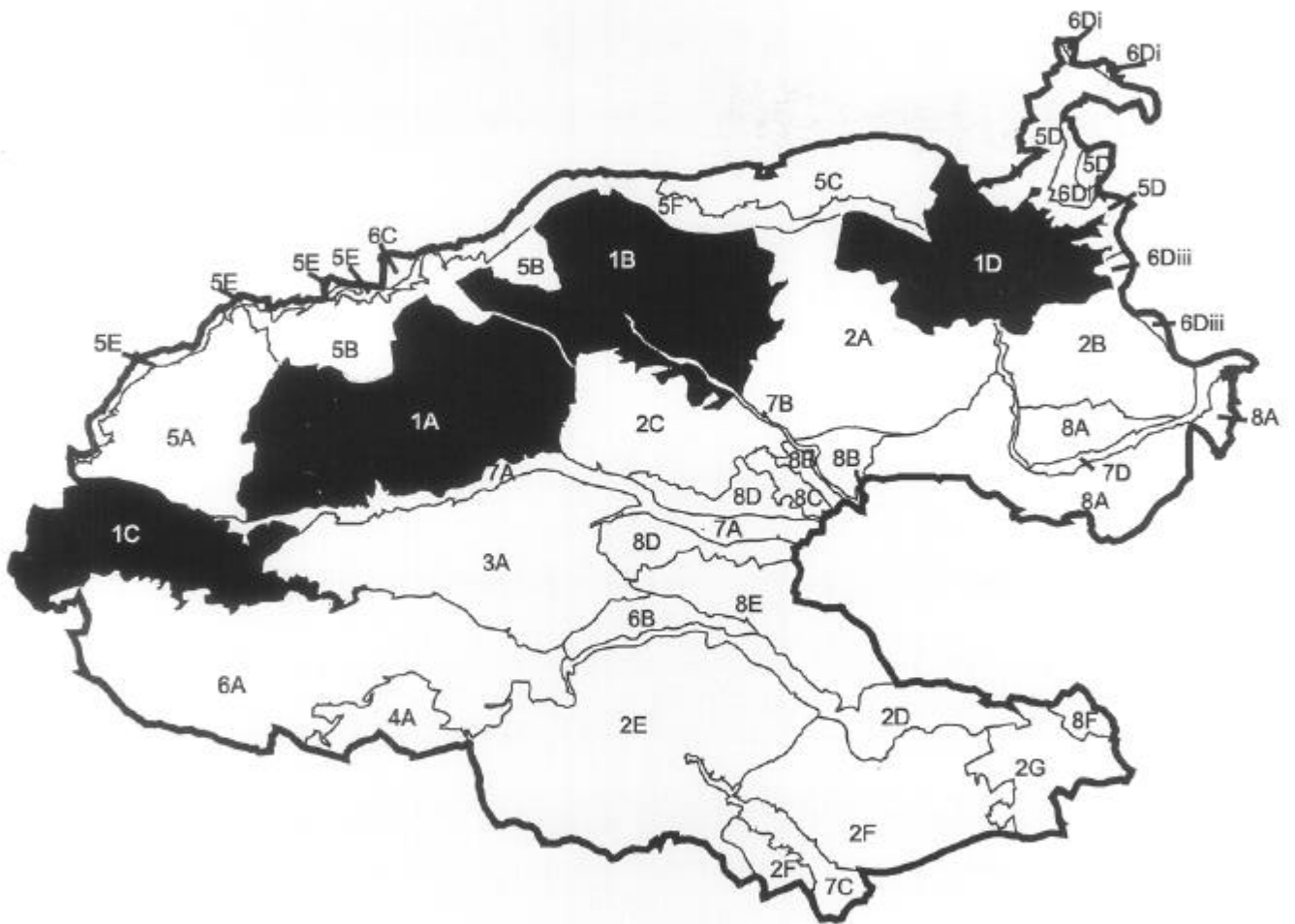


# Landscape Type I - Open Downland



## 8. LANDSCAPE TYPE 1: OPEN DOWNLAND

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### Location and Boundaries

- 8.1. The landscape type encompasses a number of distinct downland blocks from the Marlborough Downs (1A) and Horton Down (1C) in the west running through to the Lambourn Downs (1B) and Blewbury Downs (1D) in the east. Boundaries are mainly defined by topography and the Upper Chalk geology, and in the north relate to the top of the Scarp (landscape type 5). To the south, the edge of the chalk similarly forms a distinct boundary.

### Overview

*The Open Downlands are the remote heart and core of the North Wessex Downs, with the dramatic landscapes created by the underlying chalk rocks being one of the defining features of the AONB. The subtle curves and undulations of the landform are revealed by the uniform clothing of cropped grass or cereals creating a landscape with a simple and elemental quality, accentuated by vast skies. The open, expansive views are punctuated by distinctive beech clumps crowning the downland summits, forming prominent and highly visible landmarks.*

*Sparsely populated, the downlands possess a strong sense remoteness and isolation. Predominantly in arable cultivation these are landscapes of great seasonal variation, with muted browns and greys of the chalk and flinty soils in the ploughed autumn fields, giving way to fresh greens of the emerging crops in winter and spring and sweeping yellows and golds of summer. The characteristic close-cropped springy downland turf of the surviving herb-rich chalk grassland provides an important habitat and this landscape type contains the largest areas of designated chalk grassland in the AONB, with 15 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Under sympathetic management, the arable landscape also supports a diversity of wildlife. Rare and colourful arable weeds such as dense flowered fumitory, slender tare and shepherd's needle survive in less intensively managed field margins and farmland birds that include stone curlews, skylark, grey partridge, lapwing and corn bunting populate the vast skies.*

*The ancient resonance of the Open Downlands emanates from a wealth of archaeology, including dramatic and highly visible prehistoric monuments. Numerous long and round barrows and distinctive sarsen stones create a powerful sense of antiquity. The carved White Horses, etched into the scarp slopes, are highly distinctive features and provide a strong visual link from the past to the present day importance of the Open Downlands for the horse racing industry.*

*Together, the elevation, open and spacious topography, subtly receding horizons and long views all contribute to the sense of remoteness and solitude. The expansive skies and contrasting patterns of weather, clouds and light create an important temporal dimension to landscape character.*

### Key Characteristics

- an elevated plateau formed by the hard Middle and Upper Chalks. Soils are predominantly thin light, free draining calcareous and nutrient poor black or brown soils;
- open, smoothly rolling downland, dissected by a network of dry valleys and long sinuous steep scarps. Strong sweeping skylines;
- a landscape largely devoid of water due to the porosity of the chalk bedrock;
- dominated by intensively managed arable farmland with a few hedgerows and occasional wooded areas. Woodlands are virtually absent apart from the occasional linear shelterbelt and distinctive beech clumps crowning the summits;
- varied field patterns including 'ladder' fields and large rectangular fields;
- fragmented and isolated blocks of chalk grassland survive along the steep scarp slopes and dry valley sides and together these form an important component of the chalk grassland resource of the AONB;
- very sparsely populated - generally restricted to scattered farms and equestrian establishments - contributing to strong sense of isolation;
- varied built character including traditional knapped flint and brick, timber framed weather-boarded aisled barns and large scale modern farm buildings;
- recreational opportunities are characterised by the numerous tracks, byways, green lanes and footpaths plus open access associated with archaeological sites and nature reserves;
- closely associated with the race horse industry, with horse gallops being a distinctive feature;
- strong cultural resonance – visible features from many periods of history, but with particularly strong associations with the prehistoric in the form dramatic visible field monuments;
- remote, isolated settlements characterised by low service levels, resulting in a reliance upon access to the private car with consequent impact on traffic. Population levels increasing slightly;
- overall a very strong sense of remoteness and solitude.

## Physical Influences

- 8.2. **Geology and Soils:** The Cretaceous Middle and Upper Chalk form the main elevated plateau of the Downs. Rising from the steep northern escarpment, the landform dips gently to the south and east and the underlying Lower Chalk outcrops occur in some areas on the edges of the landscape type. Superficial deposits of Clay-with-Flint overlie the Upper Chalk in a limited number of locations on high points and ridges, although this is not a characteristic feature, as in the Downland with Woodland (landscape type 2). Soils are predominantly thin light, free draining calcareous and nutrient poor black or brown soils, with deeper soils in coombes and dry valleys.
- 8.3. **Landform:** The Open Downland are defined by their elevation, rising to heights of between 200m-300m AOD, with notable gently rounded or flat-topped summits. The characteristic landform comprises a high plateau of open, smoothly rolling downland, dissected with a network of dry valleys and long sinuous steep scarps. It is a landscape largely devoid of water due to the porosity of the chalk bedrock.

## Biodiversity

- 8.4. The most ecological significant habitat is the surviving unimproved chalk grassland, which mainly occurs as small fragmented blocks. The dominant habitat is arable farmland. Other habitats, such as woodland and water are virtually absent.
- 8.5. The Open Downland landscape type contains the largest area of designated chalk grassland in the AONB, with some 15 SSSI's covering some 1012.3ha (approximately 5% of the area). The designated chalk grassland is mainly distributed towards the west, although throughout the area chalk grassland survives within small fragmented and isolated blocks on the steep scarp slopes and dry valley sides. This herb-rich turf is a rich ecological resource and supports outstanding populations of downland butterflies including the adonis blue and Duke of Burgundy. Some steep slopes retain tiny patches of woodland (characteristically ash-maple) and regenerating scrub, including distinctive chalkland species such as wayfaring tree, privet, whitebeam, ash and occasionally juniper.
- 8.6. The dominant habitat is open arable farmland with few hedgerows and sparse woodland cover. The farmland is largely managed under intensive systems, although nevertheless may still support a characteristic range of wildlife and in some areas production and biodiversity objectives are being successfully integrated through agri-environment schemes, such as Countryside Stewardship. Rare and colourful arable weeds, such as fumitories, slender tare and shepherd's needle, which are dependent on a regular cropping regime and survive in the less intensively managed field margins. The open downs also supports an important range of farmland birds. Spring-tilled arable crops on stony chalk soils, provide essential breeding sites for stone curlew. Skylark and yellowhammers remain relatively common and widespread, while grey partridges, lapwings, turtle doves and corn buntings can also still be found.

## Historic Environment

- 8.7. The Open Downland landscape of today is a product of 5000 years of human activity. Many of these past layers of human settlement and land use have a strong resonance in the landscape. It is in this landscape type; perhaps more than anywhere else in England, where prehistoric settlement and land use can be most easily appreciated. Evidence of the prehistoric survives in the form of dramatic visible field monuments that contribute much to character of the landscape today and creating a very strong sense of antiquity. The principal surviving historic features are summarised below.
- 8.8. **Prehistoric Monuments:** The western part of the landscape type (Marlborough Downs and Horton Down) is a major site of prehistoric activity, focused on the massive Neolithic henge and stone circles at Avebury. There are numerous long and round barrows. The great majority of the latter are in clusters or groups of three or more. These monuments are typically situated on high ground, along the skyline, often on spurs and are meant to be seen from below. By contrast, the character of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age occupation would appear to have been different on the Lambourn Downs, with far less emphasis on long mounds and communal monuments such as henges.
- 8.9. **Field Patterns:** One of the key characteristics of the landscape type today is the extent of enclosure across the downs. This is largely a legacy of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries when continuing advances were being made in agriculture and farming techniques. The most notable and obvious change was the enclosure of open arable fields and the extension of arable cropping over large areas of former downland. Two types of field pattern seem to have emerged; the first appears to represent the creation of fields by the simple expedient of using existing roads, tracks and paths as their boundaries. This is particularly apparent on the Lambourn and Blewbury Downs. In some cases these 'ladder' fields are associated with tracks leading up to or over the downs - sometimes linking the valley floor to the downland through a series of parallel tracks. The second main field pattern is represented by a formal landscape of large rectangular fields with straight edges (often single species hedgerows). Such fields, particularly prominent on the Marlborough Downs, were carefully planned by professional surveyors and were the culmination of the long gradual piecemeal enclosure, the majority of which was undertaken during the Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815), under the impetus of high corn prices.

- 8.10. **The 'Corn-Sheep Cycle':** Significant agricultural improvements occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At this time corn was the major cash crop on the chalklands - and the whole pattern of farming on the downs was geared to the production of corn crops and the maintenance of the fertility of the thin chalk soils by folding the sheep flocks on them. Yields could only be increased by keeping larger sheep flocks and one of the most important and dramatic advances was made with the invention and rapid spread of artificially watered meadows along the valley bottoms (see landscape type 7) which stimulated early growth providing feed for lambs and ewes.

### **Settlement and Building Character**

- 8.11. The Open Downlands are generally very sparsely populated, containing only scattered isolated farms or small hamlets. Occasionally and notably in the eastern part of the AONB small village settlements shelter in the folds of the downs at valley heads. Equestrian establishments, associated with the racehorse industry are also common within the landscape type. Built form varies considerably and includes traditional knapped flint and brick. Traditional farm buildings including timber framed weather-boarded aisled barns are a feature of the downs, with large-scale modern buildings, for example for grain storage, also prevalent.

### **Recreation Character**

- 8.12. The Open Downland landscape type is characterised by the linear tracks, byways, green lanes and footpaths that cross the landscape, including the Ridgeway National Trail which runs along the northern edge, plus several long distance bridleway routes promoted by the British Horse Society. Together, these provide an extensive network for informal recreation. There are a large number of archaeological sites, which allow open access as well conserving important areas of chalk grassland, and are valuable visitor recreation sites. A number of the chalk grassland nature reserves also provide open access opportunities. Often strategically located along high points on the scarps these sites often provide spectacular views out across the surrounding lower lying landscapes. Much of the arable land is managed through Countryside Stewardship and this may also provide opportunities for permissive access in association with management of field margins, and access to areas of archaeological interest, although its full extent of this access is not known. The open

access legislation of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 provides for open access to downland and may result in recreation opportunities. However, the exclusion of cultivated land means that the impact of this legislation will be limited in the North Wessex Downs, where arable land is the overwhelmingly dominant land use on the downs.

## Social and Economic Character

- 8.13. The Open Downlands landscape type is sparsely populated, with the majority of settlements comprising small remote scattered isolated hamlets and single farmsteads with few villages. In general population levels are increasing slightly - an interesting trend given that many of the parishes in the landscape type have poor facilities with heavy reliance on transport to enable access to basic services. Ultimately, this is based around access to the private car to access shops, banking facilities, healthcare and purchase fuel in the nearby market towns of Wantage, Hungerford or Marlborough. Employment is largely focussed in the urban centres outside the AONB, although farming also remains an important source of local employment. High car ownership is leading to some pressures on the rural lane network and urbanising effects in the form of erosion of verges and kerbing. In summary, the impression of an almost 'empty' uninhabited landscape with very little social or economic activity in its own right apart from the racehorse industry, which has a very visible landscape expression in the form of equestrian centres and gallops.

## Key Issues

- in the past, intensification of farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland/farmland birds), archaeological features and landscape character through the creation of large fields;
- impacts of the intensive agricultural economy on the social character of the AONB - declining employment, fewer larger farms with **pockets of rural deprivation** masked by relative affluence of estates and larger farm units;
- future restructuring within agriculture - which in this landscape type is likely to result in the amalgamation of holdings with large areas being managed as a single block resulting in further **homogenisation of the landscape** plus requirement for large grain storage buildings;
- further **reduction in livestock** (impact of foot and mouth), so that there is no longer the means to maintain existing areas of pasture. Some **marginal areas** are regenerating with scrub;
- **climate change** - potential impacts on chalk grassland habitats and possible future demands for irrigation of arable land - including construction of reservoirs and infrastructure;
- impact of England Rural Development Programme Schemes (ERDP) - woodland planting and **new types of crops**, e.g. energy crops;
- requirements for new **large scale farm buildings** plus a other farm units becoming redundant with potential for conversion;

- future potential demand for **chalk extraction**;
- impact of **tall structures** - communications masts and transmitters plus future renewable energy developments (wind turbines) that will be particularly intrusive on the strong sweeping skylines and could have a major impact on the sense of remoteness.

## Key Management Requirements

8.14. The overall management requirement is to conserve the character of the Open Downlands with their special sense of remoteness and isolation. Key features to be conserved and enhanced are:

- surviving chalk grassland habitats, including opportunities for habitat restoration to extend and link isolated and fragmented sites;
- the unique collection of archaeological sites;
- sparse settlement pattern and absence of development;
- the clear ridges and strong skylines.

## Character Areas

8.15. The Open Downlands landscape type is divided into four geographic character areas. These comprise.

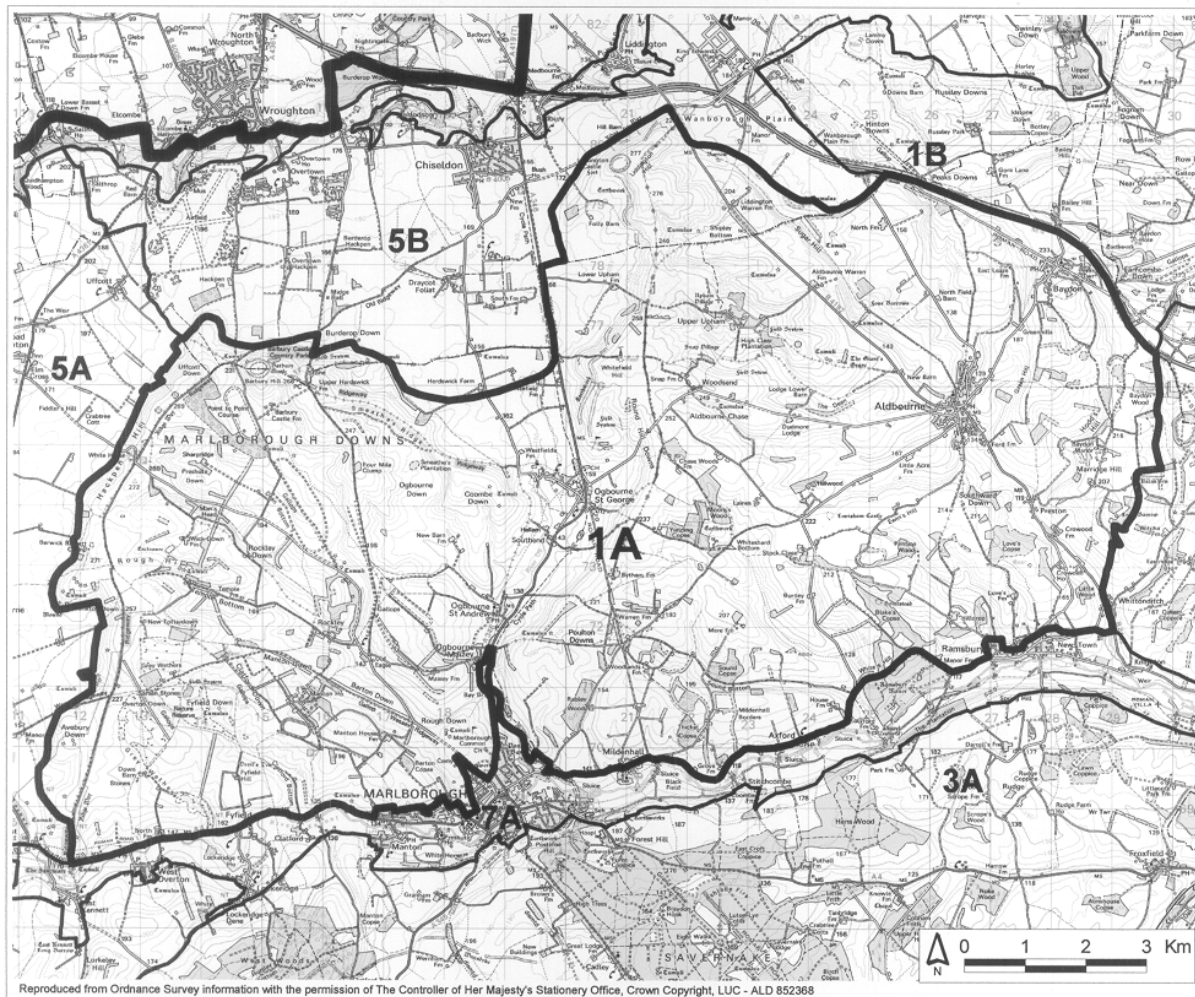
1A: The Marlborough Downs

1B: The Lambourn Downs

1C: Horton Downs

1D: Blewbury Downs

# CHARACTER AREA 1A: MARLBOROUGH DOWNS



1. **Location and Boundaries:** The Marlborough Downs are a distinct topographical unit in the north west of the AONB. The boundaries of the character area are defined to the west and north by the base of a prominent, steep chalk scarp at an elevation of approximately 200m. To the south the boundary is formed by the River Kennet (7A) with the boundary running along a contour on the valley side. The eastern edge forms the divide with the Lambourn Downs (1B) and to the south-east a subtle change in geology with the increase in Clay-with-Flint marks a transition to the lower dip slope of Lambourn Wooded Downs (2C).

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## Landscape Character Description

2. The elevated chalk plateau of the Marlborough Downs forms an open expansive landscape of smoothly rolling downland, mostly under arable cultivation. Internally, the landform is topographically complex and includes the dramatic long sinuous scarps of Hackpen and Smeeths Ridge, interlocking gently rounded summits such as Overton Down and Ogbourne Down, with the intersecting valleys of the Og and Aldbourne creating further diversity. Barbury Hill (268m) and other elevated points along the top of the northern escarpment provide distant views across the adjacent lower lying Vale that extends beyond the AONB boundary.
3. Arable farmland dominates throughout, and is an almost exclusive land use on the high land in the north and west of the area, for example around Upper Upham and Ogbourne Down. This results in a very open landscape with long views, revealing the subtle curves and undulations of the underlying landform. The absence of field boundaries and woodland, combined with the elevation, creates a remote character that varies according to the weather from exposed and bleak to dramatic and exhilarating. To the east of the Og valley land cover is more diverse with scattered woodland blocks within arable farmland including ancient oak and ash woods on the slopes dipping down to the River Kennet creating a more enclosed landscape. The valleys of the Og and Aldbourne also have a more intimate character with their attractive settlements and remnant areas of valley floor pasture and hedged fields. Distinctive features include the beech clumps which crown the open summits as well as linear shelterbelt plantations such as at Mans Head.
4. The Marlborough Downs are a landscape with a very strong cultural resonance visibly expressed by the sarsen stones, round barrows and hill forts. Prominent Bronze Age round barrows occur following the lines of ridges and the scarp top and the Iron Age hill forts at Liddington Castle and Barbury Castle are strategically located along the scarp summit. The sarsen stones, scattered across the landscape at Fyfield Down and Overton Down are an outstanding feature. Surviving areas of permanent pasture are concentrated along the scarp slopes to the north and west of the area, with some sections of the scarp slope beginning to be covered by regenerating scrub. Although unimproved pasture is scarce and fragmented, Fyfield Down (SSSI and NNR) on the western edge of the Marlborough Downs is an important intact area and contains a range of grasslands ranging from acidic on Clay-with-Flints through to neutral and chalk grassland. It is also an important geomorphological site and displays the best assemblages of sarsen stones in Britain, supporting a nationally important lichen flora.
5. Several small attractive linear settlements shelter in the valleys of the Marlborough Downs and are an important feature of the character area. The small villages of Ogbourne St. George, Ogbourne St. Andrew and Ogbourne Maizey are located at regular intervals along the Og valley. Aldbourne nestles at the head of the Aldbourne Valley, while Baydon is on a scarp edge in the north-east part of the Downs. The tiny clustered hamlets of Rockley and Upper Upham shelter in dry valleys. Outside the valleys settlement is very sparse and limited to occasional isolated farms, with a concentration of equestrian establishments and gallops on the western part of the downs. Traditional building materials include brick, flint, sarsen and clunch with roofs of thatch or clay tile.

downs. Traditional building materials include brick, flint, sarsen and clunch with roofs of thatch or clay tile.

- 8.21. A network of relatively straight roads connect the settlements, with the A346 running north-south through the area following the course of a Roman Road and the Og Valley linking Swindon and Marlborough. An extensive network of public rights of way including the Ridgeway National Trail and the Chisledon and Marlborough Railway Path cross the area. Within this network of roads and paths, high summits such as Ogbourne Down remain inaccessible and remote.

#### Key Characteristics

- dominated by the hard rocks of Upper Chalk, with the Middle Chalk in the north west of the forming the escarpment west of Ogbourne St. George. Clay-with-Flint overlies the Upper Chalk on some high summits;
- strongly articulated landform dissected by steep scarps, dry valleys plus valleys of the Og and Aldbourne with the land rising to gently rounded summits. The landform creates a very distinct and dramatic skyline;
- an open expansive landscape dominated by arable farmland and absence of field boundaries allowing extensive views - a more enclosed landscape with woodland occurs to the east;
- notable for the concentration of sarsen stones plus numerous Bronze Age round barrows, many of which survive as highly visible earthworks. Prominent Iron Age hill forts such as Barbury Castle and Liddington Castle are strategically located along the northern scarp and Ridgeway;
- permanent pasture survives in small fragmented sites mainly concentrated along the scarp slopes to the north and west of the area, with some sections beginning to be covered by regenerating scrub;
- Fyfield Down on the western edge of the Marlborough Downs represent a significant intact area of chalk grassland. It is also an important geomorphological site and displays the best assemblages of sarsen stones in Britain, with classic examples of sarsen trains. The rock exposures also support a nationally important lichen flora;
- attractive small village settlements concentrated along the valleys of the Og and Aldbourne - elsewhere settlement is very sparse;
- traditional buildings materials include brick, flint and clunch with walls of thatch or clay tile. A particular feature of the built vernacular is the use of the distinctive blue-grey sarsen stone;
- extensive network of public rights of way, including the Ridgeway National Trail and the Chisledon and Marlborough Railway Path;
- horse gallops and other features associated with the race horse industry are a distinctive feature of the area;
- distinctive beech clumps crown the open summits as well as shelterbelt plantations such as that at Mans Head. To the east scattered woodland blocks occur on slopes that dip down towards the River Kennet.

#### Physical Influences

- 8.22. Hard rocks of the Middle and Upper Chalk dominate the geology of the Marlborough Downs. The Middle Chalk is found mainly in the north-west of the area and with the Lower Chalk forms the steep escarpment that runs west of Ogbourne St. George. The topography is strongly articulated, dissected by steep scarps along dry valleys and rising to gently rounded summits. The elevated plateau is cut by a number of minor

watercourses, providing further structural diversity, notably the River Og and River Aldbourne, which flow southwards through the area draining into the River Kennet. Clay-with-Flint mantles some of the highest points such as Hackpen Hill and Monkton Down. The clays create a richer loamy reddish soil in contrast to the thin calcareous downland soils. Alluvial deposits line both the dry and river valleys.

## Historic Environment

- 8.23. **Sarsen Stones:** An outstanding distinctive feature of the Marlborough Downs is the sarsen stones or grey wethers, existing as blocks of sandstone scattered across the landscape notably in the *Valley of the Stones* on Fyfield Down and on at Overton Down. Some of these rocks have prehistoric cup-mark decorations or grooves made by polishing stone axes. Prehistoric people may have regarded them as mysterious or magical, and during the Late Neolithic many sarsen blocks were removed and incorporated in chambered mounds and stone circles. The stones have been quarried for building material and in this area are a distinctive feature found in gate-posts, boundary stones, milestones, village churches and building cornerstones.
- 8.24. **Early Prehistoric Landscape:** Several Neolithic long mounds are present in the area, and there are standing stones at Down Barn, close to the Avebury monument complex. However, the Marlborough Downs are most notable for their numerous Bronze Age round barrows, many surviving as earthworks although many others have now been ploughed flat. These barrows occur as single monuments but more often as groups, following the lines of ridges and the north-west scarp edge of the Marlborough Downs, where they can be a distinctive visual feature. From the Late Bronze Age, large areas of field systems and associated prehistoric settlements began to appear on the Marlborough Downs. Many of these field systems continued in use throughout the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Concentrations of these fields and enclosures are present on Winterbourne Down, Wick Down, Overton Down, Burderop Down and Fyfield Down. Some of these features are still visible as earthworks, but others have been ploughed.
- 8.25. **Hillforts:** Many later prehistoric linear earthworks are also known, especially along Whitefield Hill, and close to Barbury Castle and Liddington Castle, both of which are Iron Age hill forts. These hill forts are strategically located at the summit of the scarp and command panoramic views and are frequently visible skyline features. They are located along the Ridgeway, which follows the scarp along the northern edge of the area. The Ridgeway formed a significant routeway throughout prehistory and later periods and, as a National Trail is an important recreational route today.
- 8.26. **Roman Roads:** A dominant feature in the landscape is the present-day A345 and A419 (T). This road follows the line of a Roman road which ran from the settlement of Wanborough, near Swindon, via *Cunetio*, near present day Mildenhall to *Venta* (Winchester). Running approximately north-west to south-east across the area is the line of another Roman road, Ermine Street, which linked *Corinium* (Cirencester) and *Calleva* (Silchester).

- 8.27. **Medieval Settlement and Land Use:** Important examples of medieval archaeology include the deserted medieval settlements at Upham and Snap, and the remains of smaller settlements such as Raddun on Overton Down. There is a medieval manor house at Ogbourne St. George. On Fyfield Down there is a good example of low, long and slightly sinuous undulations on the surface of the ground, known as ridge and furrow, which are the fossilised remains of medieval ploughed fields. Ridge and furrow is relatively rare on chalk downland and here the example is associated with a medieval settlement.
- 8.28. **Post-Medieval and Early Modern Periods:** Many gallops and rides were established over the Marlborough Downs. Many downs have pits from medieval and later quarrying, and there are also the remains of craters from First and Second World War munitions.

## Biodiversity

- 8.29. The area to the northwest of the AONB, which comprises the Marlborough Downs, is largely under arable cultivation. However there are nearly 40 grassland sites and 25 woodlands with non-statutory designation in this Character Area. In addition there are 2 sites with statutory designation that are considered to be of national importance; these are Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve (NNR) and Piggledene (SSSI).
- 8.30. Fyfield Down is of particular scientific interest because of its unique combination of geomorphological, biological and archaeological features. The high geomorphological value is due to the site having the finest collection of sarsen stones in Britain. These stones, which are composed of sand particles cemented together to form hard sandstone, are distributed throughout the topographical range of the site. They support a rich lichen flora with many rare and unusual mixtures of lichen species. Many of these lichen species are very rare in southern Britain, and some are found only on this particular type of stone. Fyfield Down also supports a range of grassland communities; the majority of these are neutral, but pockets of both calcareous and acid grass occur throughout the site.

## Key Issues

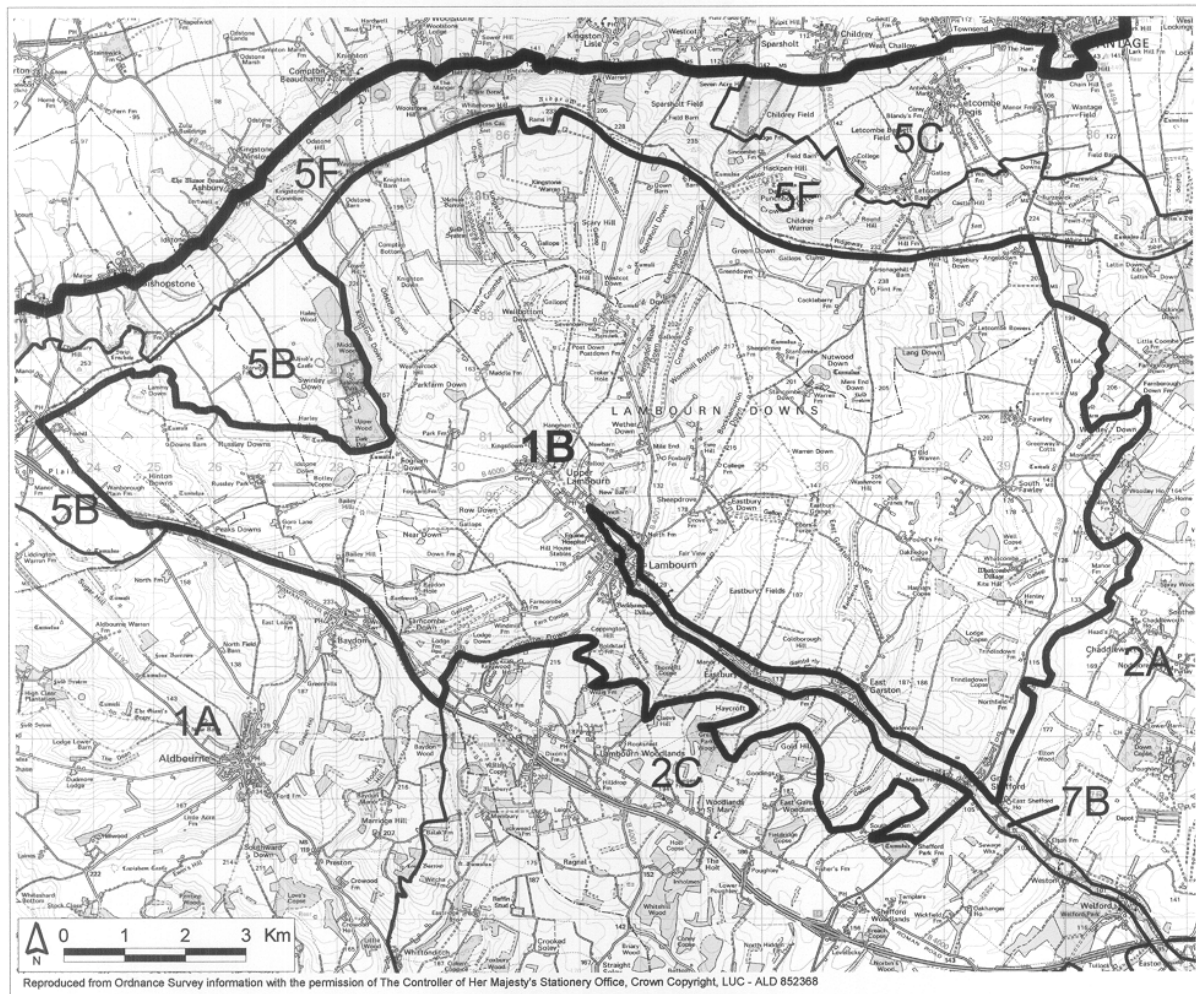
- **loss and fragmentation of chalk grassland** by arable conversion. Current threat of loss, as marginal land comes out of active management particularly in the absence of grazing livestock;
- **loss and damage to archaeological sites**, in the past by ploughing but now by damage from vehicles/trampling;
- **increasing intensification** within this already very large scale landscape with further loss of peripheral features including field boundaries and habitats;
- **inappropriate woodland planting** which would impact on the open, expansive, remote character and views particularly in the western part of the Downs;

- **drainage and cultivation of important floodplain pastures** within the River Og corridor;
- future requirements for visually intrusive **large scale farm buildings**, plus other redundant farm buildings with potential for **conversion** and associated range of issues, e.g. traffic;
- impact of further **tall structures** e.g. communications masts and transmitters plus future renewable energy developments in the form of wind turbines that could have a major effect on the sense of remoteness of the Marlborough Downs;
- future potential demand for **chalk extraction**;
- cumulative impact of **small-scale incremental change**, (e.g. signage, fencing, kerbing of rural lanes) on the remote qualities of the chalk upland landscape.

### Key Management Requirements

- 8.31. The overall management requirement is to conserve the character of the Marlborough Downs with their special qualities of remoteness and isolation and tangible sense of history. Key features to be conserved and enhanced are the surviving chalk grassland habitats, views and archaeological sites, notably the sarsen stones, Bronze Age round barrows and scarp top Iron Age hillforts. The sparse settlement pattern and general absence of development should be maintained, including the clear ridges and skylines. There are particular opportunities to consider restoration of the chalk grassland habitats to extend and link existing isolated and fragmented sites.

# CHARACTER AREA 1B: LAMBOURN DOWNS



- 1. Location and Boundaries:** The Lambourn Downs occupy a central location in the north of the AONB. The northern edge is defined by the contour that runs along the top of the steep scarp slope (5F: Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp). The west edge is defined roughly by the M4 which forms the divide with the adjacent Marlborough Downs (1A). The south and eastern boundaries follows contours at a height of approximately 175m AOD, marking the change of character to the lower and more wooded downs around Lambourn Wooded Downs (2C) and Brightwalton (2A)

## Landscape Character Description

- 8.33. The character of the Lambourn Downs is largely created by the strong structural landform and the spacious rolling topography typical of the Open Downlands. Long views can be gained across a series of subtly receding ridges, which form strong open horizons. Although topographically complex at the local level, the pattern is consistent and repeats across the area creating a landscape of drama and variety.
- 8.34. Large-scale arable farmland is the dominant landcover throughout, and fields are often without physical division, emphasising the scale and structure of the landscape. Where division does exist it is often post and wire fencing which is almost invisible from longer distances and therefore adds little sense of enclosure to the area. Extant hedgerows tend to be single lines of hawthorn with extensive gaps, maintained by intensive flailing. The occasional mature oak and ash trees that occur along boundaries are an important feature. In places the elevation combined with high intervisibility and uniform arable cover, creates an exposed or even bleak character. Woodlands are limited in extent and include thin linear skyline shelterbelts, which are a particular feature in the north west of the area around Kingstone Down and Scary Hill, plus the distinctive hill top beech clumps and small isolated mixed woodland blocks. The only area with a more enclosed wooded character is around the National Trust property at Ashdown Park, where extensive broadleaved woodlands occupy the foot of a steep scarp. The park is also notified as a SSSI for the lichen flora associated with sarsen stones.
- 8.35. The Lambourn Downs have been intensively improved for agriculture, and unimproved pasture is limited to tiny highly fragmented sites, usually on steep slopes. These include a number of small chalk grassland SSSI's in the western part of the Lambourn Downs, for example Croker's Hole which is noteworthy for its thriving population of nationally scarce bastard toadflax, and Seven Barrows which supports a rich chalk flora and a diverse butterfly community. The barrow group at Seven Barrows is a distinctive, albeit subtle landscape feature.
- 8.36. The character area is very sparsely populated. There are two tiny villages at Fawley and South Fawley on the eastern edge. The larger village of Lambourn is located at the head of its valley (7B), although the outer edges of the settlement and the adjacent Upper Lambourn extend into this character area. Elsewhere settlement is limited to occasional isolated farms and race horse establishments. Extensive areas of gallops occur on the downs to the north of the Lambourn Valley and are a distinctive feature of the landscape. Vernacular built form includes flint, red brick and weatherboard and clay tile roofs. Modern large scale farm buildings, associated with arable production including grain stores/silos also feature within the area.
- 8.37. The absence of settlement is reflected in the limited road access. Apart from the two B roads which follow dry valleys and link Lambourn into the Vale landscape to the north of the AONB, the road network is restricted to minor tracks many of which connect farms on the higher downs into the Lambourn Valley. By contrast there is an extensive network of public rights of way through the area.



### Key Characteristics

- part of the main chalk plateau of the AONB, underlain by the hard rocks of the Upper and Middle Chalk which dip gently southwards;
- strong structural landform with a series of flat topped or gently rounded hills and ridgelines forming successive horizons, intersected by wide dry valleys;
- arable farming dominates with large scale fields. Extant hedgerows tend to be gappy and poorly maintained, although occasional mature hedgerow trees are a feature;
- unimproved pasture limited to tiny fragmented sites on steep slopes;
- thin linear skyline shelterbelts, hill top beech clumps and small isolated mixed woodland blocks are a distinctive feature of the area;
- sparsely populated with two hamlets and the outer edges of the larger valley settlement of Lambourn/Upper Lambourn. Elsewhere, settlement is limited to occasional isolated farms and racehorse establishments;
- many gallops and rides established over the downs, particularly to the north of Lambourn Valley;
- vernacular built form includes flint, red brick, weatherboard and clay tile roofs. Modern large scale farm buildings are also dominant;
- limited road access with minor tracks connecting farms. By contrast there is an extensive network of public rights of way;
- prominent barrows located on ridges and hilltops, plus lynchets and banks defining large blocks of later prehistoric field systems, trackways and settlements;
- field pattern including parallel and sinuous boundaries from 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century informal enclosure, and the more regular, straight edged fields of Parliamentary enclosure;
- strong qualities of remoteness and openness.

### Physical Influences

- 8.38. The Lambourn Downs are part of the main chalk plateau of the AONB, underlain by layers of the hard Upper and Middle Chalk which dip gently southwards. They are characterised by a rolling landform, with flat topped or gently rounded hills such as at Green Down and Warren Down and ridgelines forming strong horizons, intersected by convex slopes falling away to form wide dry valleys, as for example at Upper Lambourn. Shallow well-drained calcareous silty soils are found on the slopes and crests, with deeper soils in valley bottoms.

### Historic Environment

- 8.39. **Prehistoric Monuments:** Characteristic Bronze Age remains include a few scattered round barrows on ridges and hilltop locations. There is one barrow group at Seven Barrows on the ridge at Postdown. Linear ditch and bank features, which may date to the late Bronze Age or Iron Age, are also visible as earthworks, with examples on Farncombe Down and at Winterdown Bottom.
- 8.40. **Prehistoric Field Systems:** In the Lambourn Downs, the most visible archaeology, particularly from the air, consists of lynchets and banks defining large blocks of later prehistoric field systems, trackways and settlements. Though some may originate in the



late Bronze Age, they became more extensive over time and apparently continued in use through into the Romano-British period, for some are concentrated around known Roman villas. Particularly extensive groups of these features are located at Woolstone Down, Knighton Down and Woolley Down.

- 8.41. **Medieval Deserted Village and Deer Park:** Although the majority of medieval settlement was concentrated along the valley bottoms, settlement did exist on the downland, as evidenced by the deserted medieval hamlet of Whatcombe in the east of the area. The area also contains some small, irregular copses that are the survivors of medieval and post-medieval assarts. Ashdown Park is bordered by a bank and ditch pale, characteristic of a medieval deer park.
- 8.42. **Field Patterns:** Much of the modern landscape consists of open downland. Some of the boundaries here represent 'ladder' fields, characterised by parallel and sinuous boundaries often running for several kilometres over the uplands. These probably result from seventeenth and eighteenth century informal enclosure, between existing tracks and droeways. More regular, straight-edged fields represent post-medieval formal Parliamentary enclosure.
- 8.43. **Gallops and Rides:** Many gallops and rides were established over the downs in the early modern period and these remain a very distinctive feature of the Lambourn Downs landscape.

## Biodiversity

- 8.44. The Lambourn Downs Character Area is notable for supporting a number of small-unimproved chalk grasslands. Five of these grassland sites are designated as SSSI's and a further 12 grasslands have been given non-statutory designation. The 5 SSSI sites are Cleeve Hill (SSSI), Seven Barrows (SSSI), Westfield Farm Chalk Bank (SSSI), White Shute (SSSI) and Croker's Hole (SSSI). These chalk grassland sites are important for their high floristic diversity, and the presence of nationally scarce plant species, for example Croker's Hole (SSSI), which supports a thriving population of the rare bastard toadflax (*Thesium humifusum*).
- 8.45. In addition to these grassland sites, the Lambourn Downs contains 2 other nationally important sites, together with 21 sites with non-statutory designation, most of these sites are woodland, such as Baydon Hole and Well Copse.
- 8.46. The 2 SSSI's are Parkfarm Down (SSSI), which is an important locality for sarsen stones and its associated lichen flora, and Fogham Chalk Quarry (SSSI) which is important for geological reasons.

## Key Issues

- **loss and fragmentation of chalk grassland** to arable conversion. Only tiny fragmented sites remain many of which are scrubbing over in the absence of grazing;
- increasing **intensification** within this already very large scale landscape including further loss of peripheral features e.g. field boundaries and habitats;

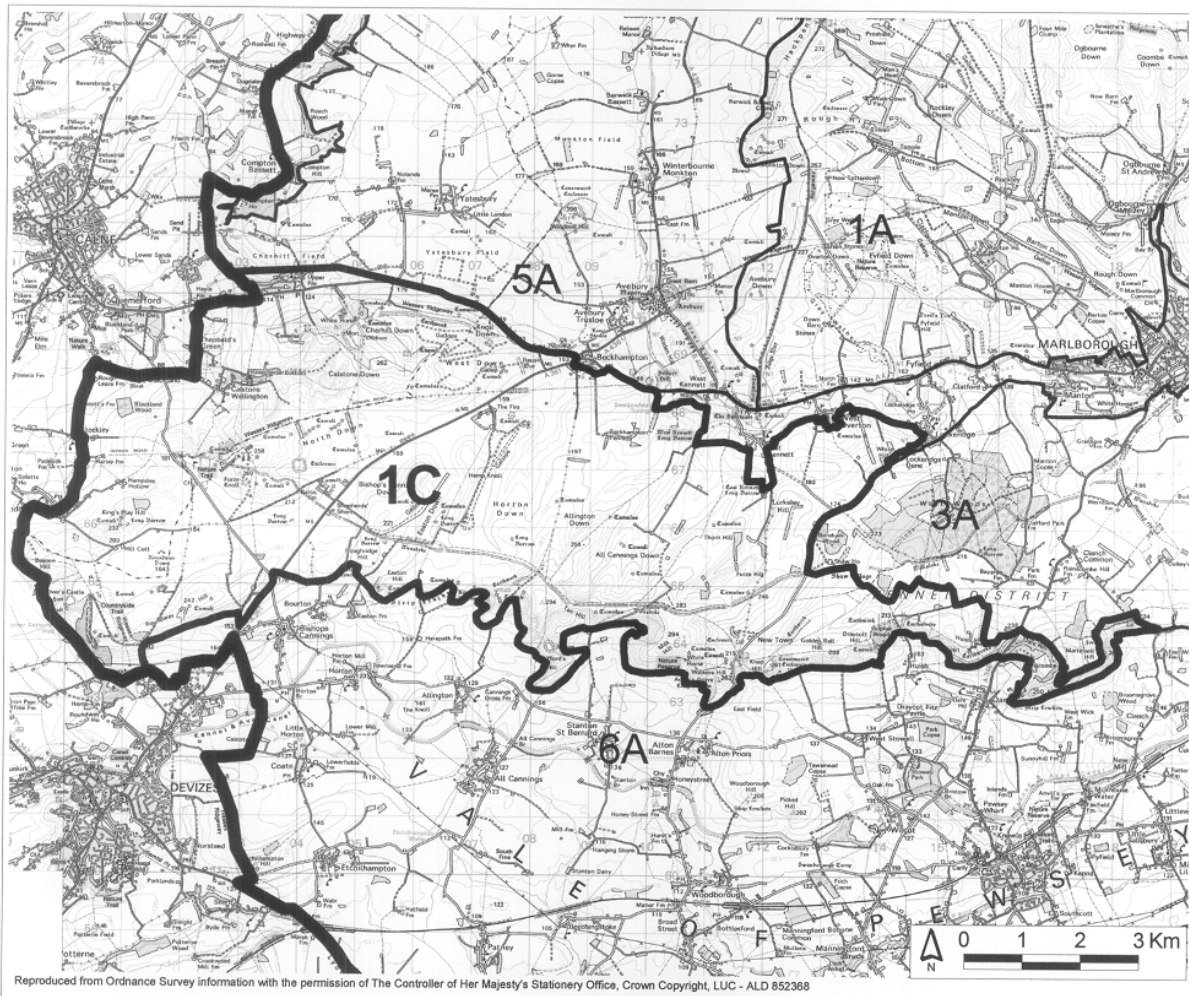
- future requirements for visually intrusive **large scale farm buildings**, plus other redundant farm buildings with potential for **conversion** and associated range of issues, e.g. traffic;
- **damage to archaeological sites**;
- **some inappropriate woodland planting** and **lack of management** of the small woodland copses;
- impact of **tall structures**, e.g. communications masts and transmitters plus future renewable energy developments that could have a major effect on the sense of remoteness of the Lambourn Downs;
- future potential demand for **chalk extraction**;
- **development pressures** including expansion of valley settlements into the higher downland areas;
- cumulative impact of **small-scale incremental change**, (e.g. signage, fencing, kerbing of rural lanes) on the remote qualities of the chalk upland landscape.

## Key Management Requirements

- 8.47. The overall management requirement is to conserve the character of the Lambourn Downs with their special qualities of remoteness and openness. Key features to be conserved and enhanced are the surviving chalk grassland habitats, archaeological sites and views. The sparse settlement pattern and general absence of development should be maintained including the clear ridges and skylines. There are particular opportunities to consider restoration of the chalk grassland habitats to extend and link existing isolated and fragmented sites, plus instigating appropriate management of the small isolated woodland copses that characterise this area.



# CHARACTER AREA 1C: HORTON DOWNS



8.48. **Location and Boundaries:** The Horton Downs represent the western most extent of the high chalk downland, with the AONB boundary wrapping around the base of the steep slopes at Heddington and Roundway, forming a clear landscape divide with the adjacent low lying Avon Vales (Countryside Agency joint Character Area 117). The same scarp slope also defines the southern boundary where the land drops steeply to the Vale of Pewsey (6A). The line of the A4 road following the foot of the slopes that rises from the Avebury Plain (5A), effectively defines the northern boundary. The eastern boundary is the transition to the more wooded Clay-with-Flint capped landscape of the Savernake Plateau (3A).

- 8.49. Horton Downs is commonly described as part of the wider Marlborough Downs, but has been defined separately in this assessment since it forms a geographically discrete area.

## Landscape Character Description

- 8.50. The Horton Downs comprise a relatively simple chalk upland landform of open rolling downland dissected by dry valleys and coombes. It is a large scale landscape of extreme openness with strong ridgelines and wide expansive skies. The southern scarp above the Vale of Pewsey is a dramatic feature with scalloped steep slopes towering above the Plain, crowned by hills with a distinctive rounded profile. The scarp edge hills provide outstanding views out over the Vale, Salisbury Plain and beyond to the more wooded downlands around Chute Forest and into Hampshire. To the west the more highly convoluted indented scarp at Cherhill, with its distinguishing White Horse, is a similarly prominent landform. The sudden and surprising views, such as those obtained from the minor road crossing the downs from Lockeridge, are one of the most distinctive features of the character area offering seclusion within folds in the chalk topography contrasting with panoramic prospects out across the surrounding landscape. On a clear day, views from the summits on the western edge stretch to the Cotswolds, Mendips and the Brecon Beacons.
- 8.51. The landcover comprises an almost uniform arable monoculture, with very few boundary features except occasional roadside fences creating an open, prairie-like landscape with an exposed character. Sparse and infrequent woodland is limited to occasional linear shelterbelts around isolated farm buildings and areas of scrub regenerating along the scarps. The steep scarps retain an important area of herb-rich chalk grassland of exceptional botanical quality. This includes four large SSSI's along the western edge between Calstone and Cherhill Downs and Roundway. The extensive Pewsey Downs SSSI extends along much of the southern scarp and includes neutral and acidic grassland along the Clay-with-Flint capped escarpment top combined with an extremely rich chalk grassland flora. Archaeological sites are coincident with the unploughed areas of chalk grassland and include a concentration of Neolithic long barrows and Bronze Age round barrows, the later being located on hilltops and ridges. The hillforts, strategically located along the scarp summit overlooking the Vale of Pewsey are another prominent feature as are the two chalk cut White Horses. Together these historic features are an important contribution to the character of the area, creating a strong sense of antiquity and to some this represents a magical or mystical landscape.
- 8.52. The absence of development compounds the sense of remoteness and isolation, with buildings confined to a small number of downland farms. There are no larger settlements or villages, apart from the linear settlement at Calstone Wellington at the foot of the western scarp. Within the open horizontal landscape of ridgeline and sky, the radio masts at Morgan's Hill to the west are a prominent vertical feature. The area feels remote and inaccessible with roads tending to pass through the area rather than lead into it. These include the prominent A361 across the downs and the A4, which defines the northern edge of the character area, both of which are visually and audibly

intrusive. There is a large number of rights of way including numerous north-south routes across the downs, a part of the east-west route of the Ridgeway and a path alongside the Wansdyke. The Ridgeway and Wansdyke are both historic features originating on Morgan's Hill on the western edge of the area.

#### Key Characteristics

- dominated by the hard rocks of the Upper Chalk, but with isolated deposits of Clay-with-Flint capping hills in the east, e.g. at Thorn Hill, Golden Ball Hill and Martinsell Hill, supporting contrasting acidic grassland vegetation;
- open rolling topography, permeated by dry valleys. A dramatic scarp towers above the Vale of Pewsey, crowned by a series of distinctive rounded hills;
- large scale remote landscape of extreme openness with strong ridgelines and wide expansive skies;
- important concentration of Neolithic monuments, including distinctive long mounds, e.g. West Kennet, which are an integral part of the Avebury complex;
- large numbers of round barrows located on hill tops and along ridges, plus prominent hill forts located on scarp edge;
- open landscape with field patterns formed predominantly by Parliamentary enclosure. Managed as a uniform arable monoculture within large scale fields and few boundary features except occasional roadside fences;
- sparse and infrequent woodland limited to occasional linear shelterbelts around isolated farm buildings and areas of scrub regenerating along the scarp;
- extensive areas of exceptionally rich chalk grassland on the steep scarp slopes designated as SSSI;
- very sparsely populated with absence of development and settlement confined to a small number of isolated downland farms;
- extensive network of public rights of way including the Ridgeway and a path along the Wansdyke;
- the White Horse at Cherhill is a distinctive landmark.

#### Physical Influences

- 8.53. In common with all the Open Downlands, Upper Chalk predominates. The Middle Chalk occurs in the dry valleys that characterise the central part of the area including the shallow open corridor through which the A361 runs. Lower and Middle Chalk also outcrop along the steep scarp above the Vale of Pewsey and along the western edge and scarp top hills such as Roundway Hill. Isolated deposits of Clay-with-Flint cap hills in the east such as Thorn Hill, Golden Ball Hill and Martinsell Hill, marking the transition to the Savernake Plateau. Landform is typical of the upland chalk with and open rolling topography, permeated by dry valleys often hidden within the expansive landform. It has a pronounced southern scarp, forming a distinctive scalloped edge towering above the Vale of Pewsey. The scarp summit is marked by a series of distinctive rounded hills such as Milk Hill (294m), Knap Hill (261m) and Martinsell Hill (289m), which are significant landmarks with panoramic views across the Vale and beyond. To the west the scarp is indented by long steep coombes and has a more complex, convoluted form as for example around Cherhill and Calstone Down.

## Historic Environment

- 8.54. **Neolithic Monuments:** The Horton Downs character area is particularly notable for its concentration of Neolithic monuments, including numerous long barrows, of which West Kennet, East Kennet, Giants Grave and Adam's Grave are fine examples. Excavations at the West Kennet palisaded enclosures complex provide rich evidence for Neolithic ritual and funerary practices, while two of the three causewayed enclosures, from the AONB are located on Knap Hill and Rybury, overlooking the Vale of Pewsey. Many of these monuments are part of the whole Avebury complex (character area 5A), and should not be considered in isolation.
- 8.55. **Bronze Age Round Barrows:** The area also includes large numbers of Bronze Age round barrows. Some barrows are isolated, but many occur in small groups on hilltops and along ridges where they are highly visible. Many of these monuments have been ploughed flat and although clearly visible on aerial photographs, they are no longer a recognisable landscape feature.
- 8.56. **Early Field Patterns:** There are many enclosures and field systems surviving in the area and visible as slight earthworks. Some of these may be Late Bronze Age in date, although there are also Iron Age and Romano-British enclosures.
- 8.57. **Hill Forts:** Oldbury, Rybury and Martinsell Hill (and possibly Oliver's Castle) are later prehistoric or Iron Age hill forts that occur within the area. These are characteristically located along the top of the southern scarp slope and command panoramic views out over the Vale of Pewsey. The Ridgeway that crosses the area on a roughly north-south axis was a significant routeway throughout prehistory and later periods.
- 8.58. **Linear Earthworks:** Large linear bank and ditches surviving as earthworks are a particular feature of the area. These are likely to be Late Bronze Age or Iron Age, such as those on Tan Hill and Huish Hill. The most substantial of these linear earthwork features is the Wansdyke. This may be based on a later prehistoric feature, but significant portions of the surviving monument are likely to date to the late Roman or Saxon periods.
- 8.59. **The Roman Period:** The most obvious Romano-British feature is the east-west road from that ran between *Cunetio* (Mildenhall) and *Aquae Sulis* (Bath). On Morgan's Hill the road is associated with a linear group of quarry pits. Many of the enclosures and field systems that survive as earthworks or cropmarks are also likely to be Romano-British in date.
- 8.60. **Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Land Use:** Some of the more sinuous field boundaries between West and East Overton represent Saxon estate boundaries. Medieval remains include the deserted medieval village of Shaw, the moated site at Blackland, and cigar-shaped mounds known as 'pillow-mounds', used as artificial warrens to breed rabbits for meat and fur. The more sinuous, narrow fields are also likely to follow early medieval and medieval boundaries.
- 8.61. **Chalk-cut figures:** One of the most remarkable features of the chalk landscape, the date of which is unknown, are the many chalk figures. There are two dramatic White

Horses on Horton Down, one cut into the scarp edge overlooking the Vale of Pewsey and the other located on the western scarp.

- 8.62. **The Modern Landscape:** Today the Horton Downs is characterised by its very open landscape, created by formal, post-medieval Parliamentary enclosure fields. There are also many gallops and rides established over the downs.

## Biodiversity

- 8.63. The Horton Downs are has retained a number of important sites for chalk grassland communities, with 40 grassland sites in the area having non-statutory designation, for example All Cannings Down and Knapp Hill and a further 5 sites with SSSI status.
- 8.64. Important sites for nature conservation are particularly associated with the steep scarps, which have avoided agricultural improvement and exceptional examples of species rich chalk grassland are still present in this Character Area. Pewsey Downs (SSSI) is considered one of the finest examples of chalk downland in southern England. It is a cSAC under the European Habitats and Species Directive and holds a very significant population of the scarce early gentian (*Gentianella anglica*).
- 8.65. The 4 remaining chalk grassland SSSI's are Morgan's Hill (SSSI), and Roundway Down & Covert (SSSI), Calstone and Cherhill Downs (SSSI) and King's Play Hill (SSSI). These unimproved grasslands are important for a number of butterflies such as chalk hill blue, speckled wood and the Duke of Burgundy, as well as many plants such as rockrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), carline thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), meadow saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*), pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), and the nationally scarce round headed rampion (*Phyteuma orbiculare*).

## Key Issues

- **loss and fragmentation of chalk grassland** to arable conversion. Further **reduction in livestock** means that there may no longer be the means to maintain existing areas of pasture;
- increasing **intensification** within this already very open landscape including further loss of peripheral features, e.g. field boundaries and habitats;
- future requirements for visually intrusive **large scale farm buildings**, plus other farm buildings becoming redundant with potential for conversion and associated range of issues, e.g. traffic;
- damage to **archaeological sites**;
- **inappropriate woodland planting**;
- the **A361 and the A4** are prominent features - visibly and audibly intrusive and, in places, impact on the sense of isolation;

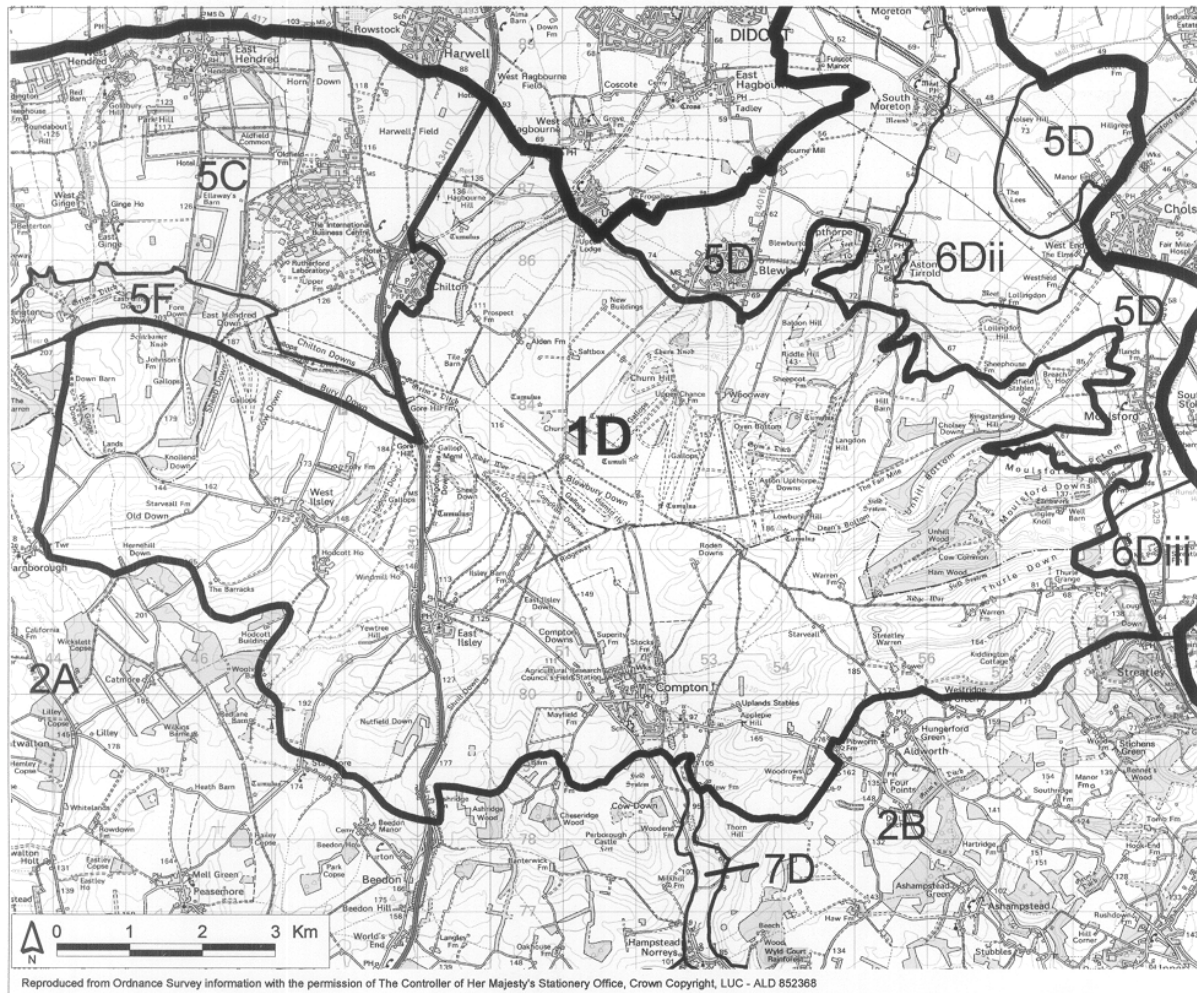


- visual impact of **radio masts at Morgan's Hill** plus future demand for further masts or wind turbines that could have a major effect on the remoteness of the Horton Downs;
- potential future demand for **chalk extraction**;
- cumulative impact of **small-scale incremental change**, (e.g. signage, fencing, kerbing of rural lanes) on the remote qualities of the chalk upland landscape.

## Key Management Requirements

- 8.66. The overall management requirement is to conserve the character of the Horton Downs with their special qualities of remoteness, isolation and openness. Key features to be conserved and enhanced are the surviving chalk grassland habitats, archaeological sites and views. The sparse settlement pattern and general absence of development should be maintained with clear ridges and skylines. There are particular opportunities to consider restoration of the chalk grassland habitats along the western scarp to extend and link existing sites. Where possible, the impact of the A361 and A4 should be managed to minimise visual and audible intrusion; this is a particular requirement in relation to any future road improvement schemes.

# CHARACTER AREA 1D: BLEWBURY DOWNS



8.67. **Location and Boundaries:** The Blewbury Downs represent the eastern extent of the high open downland within the AONB. The character area is defined topographically with boundaries roughly following contours at heights of between 160m and 190m, with the eastern edge including the distinct convoluted scarp slope that rises above Blewbury village. To the south, the high downs are surrounded by the downland with woodland landscapes on the dipslope that grade down towards the Kennet Valley (2A: Brightwalton Downs and 2B: Ashampstead Downs). To the north, boundaries are with the lower Plain (5D: Moreton Plain).

## Landscape Character Description

- 8.68. The Blewbury Downs have a strong structural landform of rolling downland with gently rounded or flat-topped hills, intersected by dry valleys. A steep, deeply convoluted scarp cut through by dry valleys, forms the northern edge allowing long views out including to the development at Didcot on the AONB boundary. The downs are dominated by arable farmland, with little enclosure, apart from occasional post and wire fences creating a large scale open landscape. In contrast the thin soils on the steep slopes of the escarpment are extremely important for the extent of unimproved flower-rich chalk grassland that they retain, including five sites designated as SSSI, supporting an important range of flora and fauna. In addition to the close grazed chalk grassland, these steep slopes also contain a mosaic of chalk scrub, including juniper and small beech hangers and hazel coppice. Broadleaved woodland occurs in long sinuous blocks along the slopes. Isolated Bronze Age round barrows are highly visible along the scarp edge. Other prominent skyline features include an Iron Age hillfort on Blewburton Hill and a folly on Churn Hill.
- 8.69. The character area is more settled than other areas of Open Downland with three substantial villages at Compton, East Ilsey and West Ilsey, all set within dry valleys cutting the plateau top. Each village has its own associated area of downland and a network of radial routes (lanes) connecting into the higher surrounding land. The race horse industry is prominent in the landscape, with numerous equestrian centres plus a large number of gallops clustered along the northern slopes. Communication routes are a significant feature with the strategic north-south route of the A34 severing the area, and east-west B roads and lanes connecting the villages to the higher downs. A railway line (dismantled) crossing the downs from Didcot is also evident, as are many rights of way, including the Ridgeway National Trail.

### Key Characteristics

- underlain by the Middle and Upper Chalk with overlying drift deposits of Clay-with-Flint and a mantling of Boulder Clay to the south;
- characteristic strong structural landform of elevated rolling downland with round or flat-topped hills, intersected by dry valleys;
- a steep, deeply convoluted scarp forms the northern edge allowing long views out including to the development at Didcot on the AONB edge;
- a large scale, open landscape dominated by arable farmland with sparse woodland cover on the tops. Little enclosure apart from the occasional post and wire fences;
- scarp retains important areas of unimproved herb-rich chalk grassland including four SSSIs, plus extensive linear hanging woodlands;
- more settled than other areas of Open Downland with three substantial villages at Compton, East Ilsey and West Ilsey. Absence of settlement on the scarp with large villages set at the base of the slope;
- isolated Bronze Age round barrows in highly visible locations on the scarp edge, plus an Iron Age hillfort on Blewburton Hill and a prominent folly on Churn Hill;
- the race horse industry is prominent with numerous equestrian centres plus a large number of gallops clustered along the northern slopes;

- dominant roads including the A34 and a number of B roads and lanes which connect the villages to the higher downs. A dismantled railway line crosses the downs from Didcot;
- numerous rights of way including the Ridgeway National Trail, following the line of a prehistoric routeway along the scarp top;
- sinuous land boundaries and tracks may date to medieval times but much of the area was probably open grazing and commons until the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when large, regular and straight-sided fields were created as a result of formal Parliamentary enclosure.

## Physical Influences

- 8.70. The Blewbury Downs are underlain by Middle and Upper Chalk, with overlying drift deposits of Clay-with-Flint. The chalk geology creates the characteristic strong structural landform of rolling uplands, with round or flat-topped hills, intersected by dry valleys. The plateau is at a slightly lower elevation compared, for example, to the Lambourn or Marlborough Downs, rarely rising above 200m and dipping gently to the south. Shallow well-drained calcareous soils predominate on slopes and crests, with thicker soils in the valley bottoms.

## Historic Environment

- 8.71. **Early Landscapes:** The Blewbury Downs are intensively farmed and there are few surviving archaeological sites. The Bronze Age round barrows are restricted to isolated examples on ridgelines and hillsides, with occasional small barrow groups, as on the Compton Downs and Lowbury Hill, and just north of Hodcott Copse. The Ridgeway runs roughly northwest - southeast across the area, forming part of an important routeway throughout prehistory and later periods. A Romano-British temple site has been found on Lowbury Hill, and an enclosure and cemetery of this date on the Roden Downs.
- 8.72. **Medieval Villages:** This downland character area is distinctive for the presence of a number of villages. Some villages were laid out in the medieval period along central streets, as at West Ilsley. Others such as East Ilsley were nucleated. East Ilsley was an important local market in the late medieval period, and by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries three or four day fairs were being held there. During these, graziers bought sheep from the local downlands for fattening up for the London market.
- 8.73. **Field Patterns:** Some of the more sinuous land boundaries and trackways may be late medieval, and trackways such as Halfpenny Catch Lane are probably old droveways. Much of the area was probably open grazing and commons until the eighteenth or nineteenth century. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries large, regular and straight-sided fields were created as a result of formal Parliamentary enclosure. In recent decades some field boundaries have been removed to create very large 'prairie' fields.
- 8.74. **The Modern Landscape:** Rides and gallops were laid out over the downland during the modern period and form a prominent feature of the landscape.

## Biodiversity

- 8.75. The steep scarp that forms the northern boundary of the Blewbury Downs supports a number of species-rich chalk grasslands and semi-natural woodlands. There are 21 sites with non-statutory designation, around half of which are woodland and half grassland. Four sites have been designated as SSSI's, all of which support chalk grassland assemblages, notable for their rich plant and butterfly communities. These chalk grassland SSSI's are Lardon chase (SSSI), which represents one of the largest remaining fragments of unimproved chalk grassland on the Berkshire Downs, Aston Upthorpe Downs (SSSI), Moulford Downs (SSSI) and Streatley Warren (SSSI).

## Key Issues

- **loss and fragmentation of chalk grassland** to arable conversion with grassland only remaining on the steep eastern scarp. **Reduction in livestock**, so that there is no longer the means to maintain existing areas of pasture;
- increasing **intensification** within this already very large scale, open landscape including further loss of peripheral features;
- future requirements for new visually intrusive **large scale farm buildings**, plus other redundant farm buildings with potential for conversion and associated range of issues, e.g. traffic;
- **development pressures** within the small villages in the dry valleys;
- damage to **archaeological sites**;
- **management of the characteristic chalk hanger woodlands** of the scarp slope;
- the prominent **A34** and a large number of **B roads** are visibly and audibly intrusive features;
- **high traffic levels** on the rural lane network is a concern - impacting on the rural character of the lanes and raising safety issues;
- future demand for **further masts or wind turbines** that could have a major effect on the sense of remoteness of the Lambourn Downs;
- future potential demand for **chalk extraction**;
- cumulative impact of **small-scale incremental change**, e.g. signage, fencing, kerbing of rural lanes on the remote qualities of the chalk upland landscape.

## Key Management Requirements

- 8.76. The overall management requirement is to conserve the character of the Blewbury Downs with their special qualities of remoteness and openness. Key features to be

conserved and enhanced are the surviving chalk grassland habitats, the linear scarp slope hanger woodlands, archaeological sites and views. The sparse settlement pattern, with villages nestling at the heads of dry valleys and at the foot of the scarp should be maintained. There are particular opportunities to consider restoration of the chalk grassland habitats along the western scarp to extend and link existing sites and to instigate appropriate woodland management for the linear 'hanging' woodlands that characterise this area. Management of rural traffic along the narrow rural lanes and minimising the impact of the A34 are also key requirements in this more settled part of the open downlands.

## Landscape Type 2 - Downland with Woodland

