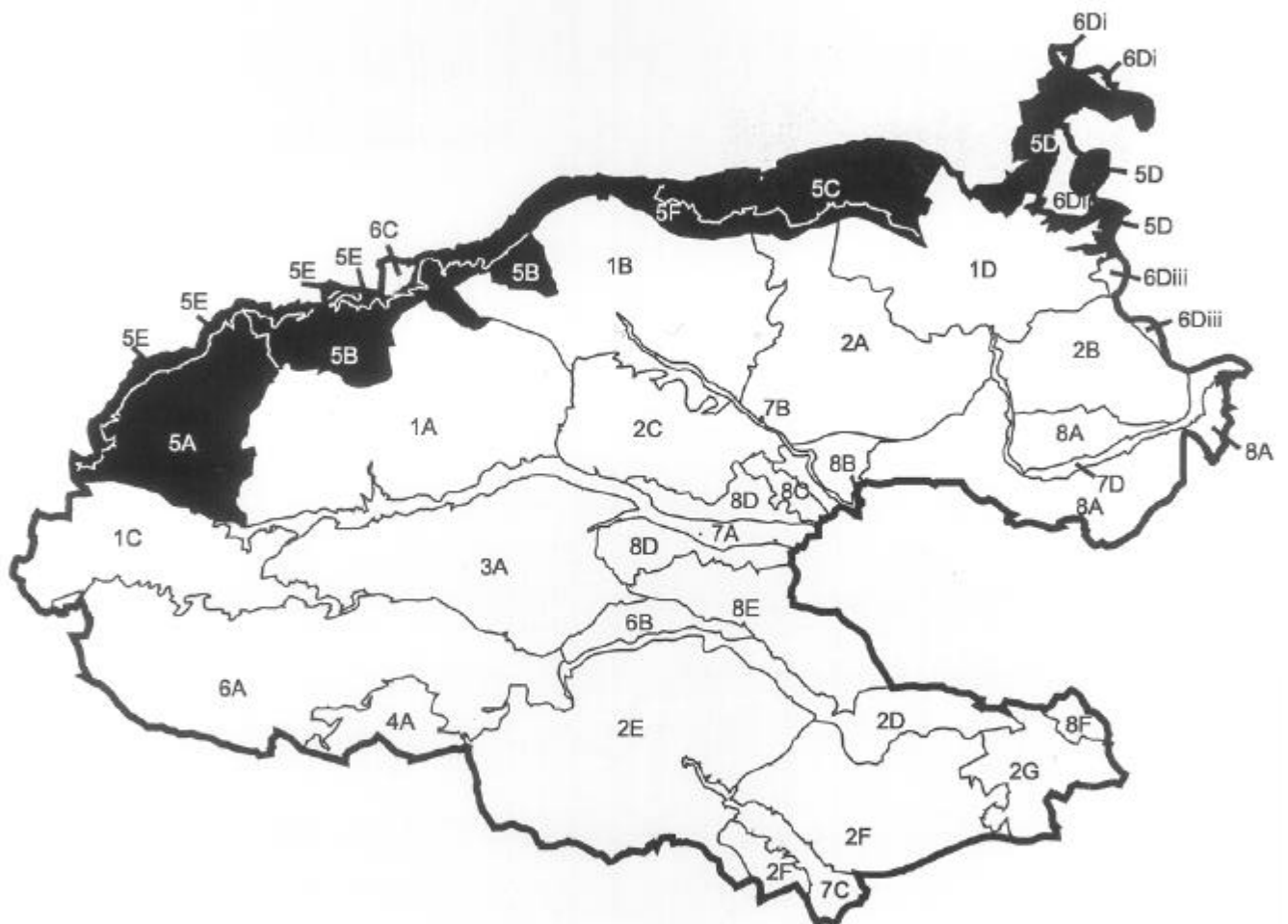


## Landscape Type 5 - Downs Plain and Scarp



## 12. LANDSCAPE TYPE 5: DOWNS PLAIN AND SCARP

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### Location and Boundaries

- 12.1. The Downs Plain and Scarp landscape occurs along the northern edge of the AONB, extending from Cherhill in the west to Chilton in the east. It is largely differentiated by geology, with the Plain being formed by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk resulting in a lower and more level land surface compared with the Upper and Middle Chalk of the Downlands. The base of the dramatic escarpment, which is generally coincident with the AONB boundary, forms the northern edge of the landscape type. Similarly an internal escarpment marking the transition of the Lower Chalk to the harder Middle/Upper Chalk frequently forms the southern boundary, although this is not always a clear physical feature and in places the Plain merges with the high downlands (landscape type 1).

### Overview

*The landscape of the Downs Plain and Scarp extends along the entire northern edge of the North Wessex Downs. It is defined by geology with the plain formed by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, creating a low, level surface extending as a ledge at the foot of the high downs, linked to a distinctive steep escarpment. The scarp slope descends abruptly to the adjacent Vale, except in the eastern part of the AONB where the slope curves to the south and forms the backdrop to the plain. Together, these two interlinked areas of plain and scarp, are described as a single landscape type. It is characterised by two of the most emblematic features of the North Wessex Downs: the prehistoric route of the Ridgeway running along the scarp top; and Avebury World Heritage Site with its unique concentration of Neolithic monuments.*

*The dramatic scarp landform creates a recognisable horizon visible from the lower lying landscapes to the north. The summit of the slope is characterised by Bronze Age barrows clustered along the skyline and Iron Age hill forts, connected by the prehistoric route of the Ridgeway. Waylands Smithy long barrow, Uffington Hill Fort and the enigmatic chalk-cut figure of the Uffington White Horse are among many symbolic landmarks that characterise these highly visible slopes. The long, sleek figure of the Uffington White Horse is undoubtedly Britain's oldest and most famous hill figure (at least 3,000 years old) and may have inspired the subsequent creation of further chalk carvings within the North Wessex Downs. The route of the Ridgeway has been celebrated in art and literature and today, walkers and cyclists continue to enjoy the experience of the Ridgeway National Trail.*

*The steep scarp is cut by springs creating a convoluted edge. The slopes are alternatively under woodland or pasture, with the variation in land cover reflected in their high biodiversity interest, with a notable number of SSSIs. These include an abundance of herb-rich chalk grasslands and linear hanging woodlands clinging to the steep slopes. The presence of parks and designed landscapes is a particular feature, where their positioning on the scarp allows enjoyment of both the extensive views and the water resources, with springs and streams frequently incorporated*

*into landscape schemes. By comparison, the flat level Plains are almost entirely in intensive arable cultivation, with large regular fields bound by close trimmed hawthorn hedgerows, the product of Parliamentary enclosure generally creating a much more uniform, open landscape.*

*To the far west of the plain lies Avebury Plain, one of the most extensively utilised areas in Europe in prehistory. It contains one of the densest concentrations of Neolithic monuments in Britain, including the distinctive stone circle at Avebury, the monumental mound at Silbury Hill and a Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Windmill Hill. Its international importance was formally recognised in 1986 when it was designated as a World Heritage Site.*

*Settlement is characterised by a string of attractive, small, clustered springline villages along the base of the scarp. This distinct pattern of settlement contrasts with the largely uninhabited plain, where former military airfields are often the only significant development.*

#### **Key Characteristics**

##### **Downs Plain**

- underlain by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, a softer clayey substrate compared to the hard Middle and Upper Chalks;
- the Plains appear as an almost flat, level, surface;
- bleak open landscape dominated by arable land, within large fields without enclosure or hedge, scrub or tree cover – notable absence of hedgerow trees;
- Avebury Plain is the landscape setting for the unique complex of Neolithic monuments of the World Heritage Site;
- field patterns are characterised by large, regular fields, primarily the product of Parliamentary enclosure, with more recent boundary removal;
- general absence of settlement, which tends to be concentrated on the scarp;
- airfields and redundant military sites are a particular feature.

##### **Scarp**

- a dramatic landform feature marking the northern edge of the AONB and creating a very visible horizon and skyline from the lower lying clay Vales to the north and west;
- numerous springs issuing at the junction of the greensand and clay create distinctive combs incised into the slope;
- a mosaic of pasture, woodland and parkland in close proximity, forming a richly textured landscape pattern and important ecological resource;
- an abundance of herb-rich chalk grasslands including numerous SSSIs;
- western scarp extensively wooded with linear hanger woods and estate land with many trees;
- parkland and estates are a particular feature of the scarp, where their strategic position offers extensive views. Springs and streams are frequently being incorporated into designed landscape schemes;
- Bronze Age round barrows are characteristically located on the skyline in positions meant to be seen from below. Iron Age hillforts are also a feature of the scarp top;
- the prehistoric route of the Ridgeway running along much of the scarp top remains well used to this day as a National Trail. It links many archaeological sites, which are all important visitor 'honeypots';
- attractive springline villages clustered along the scarp;
- generally, this landscape type has experienced a small decrease in population over

the past 20 years. Parishes are poorly served in terms of facilities, suggesting a high car ownership and high traffic levels on the rural lane network.

## Physical Influences

- 12.2. **Geology and Soils:** The area is underlain by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, a softer clayey substrate compared to the hard pure white Middle and Upper Chalk. Along the northern and western edge the scarp descends to the heavy Gault Clays and Greensands of the surrounding low-lying Vales. Soils reflect the underlying geology and tend to be shallow and calcareous with some heavier clay.
- 12.3. **Landform:** The softer eroded geology has given rise to a lower and more level land surface, which forms a ledge at the foot of the Downs. The Plains generally slope gently towards the scarp but appear almost flat. There are very few valleys on the Lower Chalk Plain and where they exist they are shallow and generally insignificant.
- 12.4. One of the most dramatic landform features within the whole AONB is the steep northern escarpment, which creates a highly visible horizon over much of the lower lying clay Vales to the north and west and signals the edge the North Wessex Downs from a wide area. Numerous springs issue at the junction of the chalk and clay, creating distinctive coombes incised into the slope. The presence of parks and designed landscapes is a particular feature of the scarp, where their strategic positioning allows them to enjoy both the extensive views and the water resources, with springs and streams frequently incorporated into designed landscape schemes.

## Biodiversity

- 12.5. The steep chalk scarp, along with its coombes and valleys, contains a large number of important chalk grasslands. The western part of the scarp is extensively wooded with linear 'hanger' woodlands clinging to the steep ground along the scarp, as well as smaller wooded coombes. Estate land is also a feature of the scarp and these areas, with their trees and hedged fields also create a wooded character. Woodlands vary greatly according to the local conditions and include beech hangers and ancient semi natural ash and hazel coppice with oak, and wet ash-maple woodland on lower slopes. The mosaic of farmland, woodland and remnant areas of chalk grassland habitat, all in close proximity, makes the scarp a rich ecological resource. By contrast, the flat level surface of the Downs Plain has proved attractive for intensive farming and is dominated by open arable areas with very little hedge, scrub or tree cover, and has relatively little ecological interest under present management regimes.

## Historic Environment

- 12.6. **Landscape Development:** Avebury Plain was one of the most extensively utilised areas in Europe in prehistory with a plethora of major archaeological sites and smaller residential community sites. Much of this area was used for arable cultivation in prehistory, resulting in soil depletion by early historic times and thus a change to a primarily pastoral use. It was this that provided the classic sheep-grazed downland.

Arable cultivation only returned to these areas in the post-war years, with the onset of steam, and then mechanised ploughing and fertilisation.

- 12.7. The scarps, however, were unsuited to tillage by view of their steep (up to 30°) slopes, and thin grey rendzina soils. Without agriculture and intensive grazing, many of these areas were wooded until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when they were cleared for timber and for pasture.
- 12.8. **Neolithic Monuments:** The density of major Neolithic monuments around Avebury including the henge, the West Kennet Avenue, Silbury Hill, the Sanctuary and Bronze Age round barrows, is unparalleled in the AONB. The distribution of earthwork monuments suggests that other areas of the North Wessex Downs saw less intensive inhabitation during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Nonetheless, the character of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age occupation would appear to have been different in these areas, with far less emphasis on long barrows and communal monuments such as henges.
- 12.9. **Bronze Age Round Barrows:** Round barrows are a ubiquitous feature; the great majority found in clusters or groups of three or more, typically situated on high ground, along the skyline of the scarp and often on spurs. The barrows are meant to be seen from below.
- 12.10. **Field patterns:** The landscape type is characterised by large, regular sized fields which are principally the product of formal post-medieval Parliamentary enclosure. On the scarp edge, there are some examples of strip lynchets, for example, on Charlbury Hill (5F: Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp). These are the terraces by which cultivation was extended up the hillsides, thereby enabling more land to be ploughed. Unfortunately, such features are difficult to date, although it is clear that the great labour involved in their construction would not have been undertaken without considerable pressure on available arable land and an increased demand for food, for example, during the population expansion of the thirteenth century.

## Settlement and Building Character

- 12.11. The very distinct settlement pattern consists of a string of small clustered springline villages along the base of the scarp. These include a number of attractive estate villages as well as houses and parklands.

## Recreation Character

- 12.12. The many archaeological features and spring line villages within the landscape type are well connected by an intricate network of footpaths, bridleway and byways. These include linear routes, which utilise the slightly lower land on the edge of the high downs, as well as routes cutting up and down the scarp slope connecting the Vales and the downs. The landscape type contains many well-promoted long distance routes, including the Ridgeway National Trail, which runs along virtually the whole of the scarp top, plus the ancient Icknield Way, which runs along the foot of the Lower Chalk, above the point where springs issue onto the Greensand. The landscape also includes sections

of the Thames Valley Cycle Route, the Severn and Thames Cycle Route, the Chiselden and Marlborough Railway Path and the Downland Villages Riding Route (promoted by the British Horse Society). Letcombe Castle, Uffington Castle and Uffington White Horse are amongst the many impressive archaeological features and visitor 'honeypots' to be found in the landscape type. The steep scarp slope also includes numerous areas popular as hang-glider launching sites. Sites with open access include National Trust properties at Hinton Parva, Ashdown Park and Uffington. Other examples of open access land include the Little Wittenham Nature Reserve run by The Northmoor Trust. A Youth Hostel at Wantage Down provides accommodation for walkers and cyclists.

## Social and Economic Characteristics

- 12.13. The spring line villages clustered along the scarp are a distinctive feature of the AONB. Surprisingly, many of the parishes within this Downs Plain and Scarp landscape type have experienced a small decrease in their population over the past 20 years, which is interesting given their location on the edge of the AONB and comparative accessibility to expanding areas such as Didcot and Swindon. The populations of Letcombe Bassett and East Hendred have, for example, experienced out-migration of approximately 15%.
- 12.14. The parishes within this landscape type are quite poorly served in terms of facilities. This may contribute to the fact that many have witnessed a population decline over the last twenty years. Chiseldon, located in close proximity to Swindon, is the only parish experiencing population growth and has the greatest range of facilities. The reliance upon services available elsewhere would suggest high car ownership within the area and high traffic levels. The actual impact on the landscape character is more difficult to assess. The villages appear as highly attractive, small settlements and, with the exception of Chiseldon, new development has been very restricted presenting an 'unspoilt' character. However, this picture disguises underlying trends with villages losing their younger populations as well as their services - so that in the day time the settlements are essentially empty with no internal life. Located on the edge of the AONB connections are mainly with the urban centres of Swindon, Wantage, Didcot and Oxford rather than the market towns within the AONB.

## Key Issues

- in the past, agricultural intensification leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland) archaeological features and landscape character;
- changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some marginal areas on the scarp slope no longer being grazed leading to **scrub encroachment, most notably on the steeper scarp slopes**;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows. This is a particular concern on the Plain, where field boundary loss has resulted in some very large open landscapes;

- **lack of appropriate woodland management** particularly the small ancient and semi natural woodlands of the scarp formerly managed by coppicing;
- **climate change** - potential impacts on chalk grassland habitats and requirement for irrigation of arable land - including construction of reservoirs and intrusive infrastructure. Impact on woodland and parkland with potential increase in non native species and tree loss (drought/windthrow);
- **Intensive recreational pressures** around 'honeypot' sites;
- **vulnerability to large scale development**, particularly tall structures (e.g. masts or turbines) on the scarp summit and re-use of redundant military infrastructure on the Plains, with associated impacts, e.g. traffic generation;
- **pressures for housing** and peripheral development of attractive springline villages along the scarp - potential loss of local vernacular character, and decline in rural services;
- impact of **development of the edge of the AONB**, for example at Wantage, Swindon, Harwell, Didcot - visual impact plus increased pressures on housing, roads, etc.;
- **loss of rural tranquillity**, resulting from the combination of the above.

## Key Management Requirements

- 12.15. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the distinctive and contrasting character of the Downs Plain and associated Scarp. This includes:
- the distinct landform and clear skyline;
  - the mix of landcover including woodland, pasture and historic parklands;
  - the Ridgeway and unique collection of archaeological sites including management of recreational pressure around key sites;
  - attractive spring line villages along the base of the scarp and the contrasting open, uninhabited plain;
  - conservation of existing areas of chalk grassland and opportunities for habitat recreation to extend and link sites.
  - restoration of landscape character by reinforcing the hedgerow pattern and considering opportunities for further woodland planting, particularly on the plain.
- 12.16. Consideration should also be given to the impact of development on the boundary of the North Wessex Downs on views from the higher ground of the Downs Plain and Scarp.

## **Character Areas**

12.17. The Downs Plain and Scarp landscape type is divided into six component character areas. These comprise.

5A: Avebury Plain

5B: Chiseldon - Wanborough Plain

5C: Hendred Plain

5D: Moreton Plain

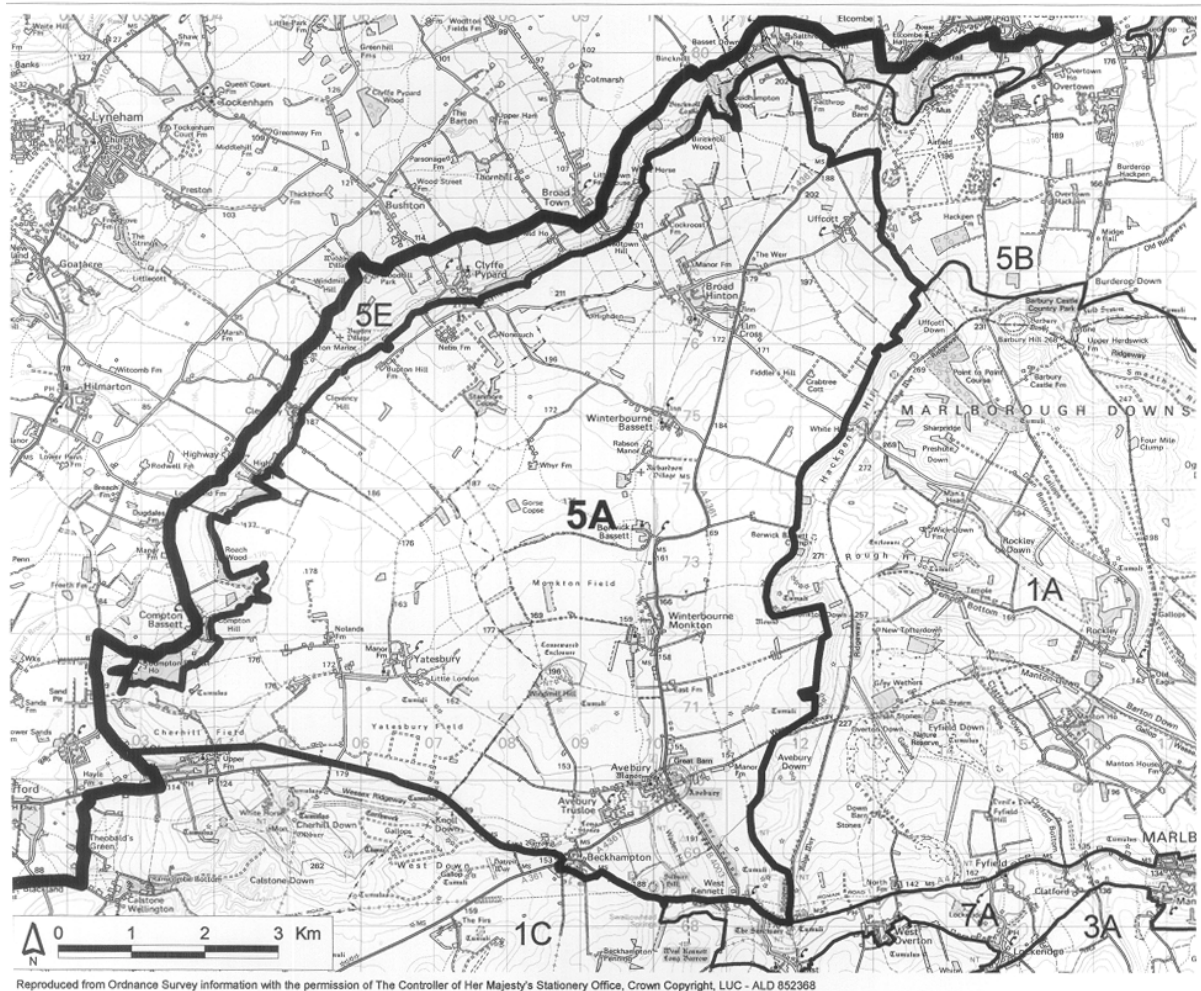
5E: Clyffe Pypard - Badbury Wooded Scarp

5F: Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp





# CHARACTER AREA 5A: AVEBURY PLAIN



- 1.18. **Location and Boundaries:** Avebury Plain is a flat level area on the Lower Chalk in the western part of the AONB. Boundaries are clear and distinct and are formed by the steep slopes of the Clyffe Pypard - Badbury Wooded Scarp (5E) to the west, and to the south by the steep rising scarp topography associated with the change in geology to the Upper Chalk which underlies the Marlborough Downs (1A) and Horton Downs (1C).

## Landscape Character Description

- 12.19. The flat level land surface is intensively cultivated and the area is characterised by expanses of large open arable fields, with boundaries formed by fences or thin lines of trimmed hawthorn, creating long views and a bleak, exposed character. The northern part of the area has a greater degree of enclosure with a stronger hedge pattern plus a number of small copses and shelterbelts. The shallow winterbourne valley contains permanent pasture along the valley floor in association with hedgerows and small copses. Silbury Hill is located in the southern part of the valley at the confluence with the River Kennet, forming a prominent feature.
- 12.20. Central to the character of the whole area are the monuments associated with Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS), which are locally prominent and imbue the wider landscape with a sense of antiquity and historical continuity. They include Avebury Henge and Stone Circles, West Kennet Avenue, Windmill Hill and Silbury Hill. The Sanctuary, Overton Hill, which is an integral part of the archaeological complex and the WHS are included within the adjacent River Kennet Valley (7A).
- 12.21. Settlements are confined to the winterbourne valley. Avebury and Avebury Trusloe are dramatically located within and adjacent to the stone circle creating an important relationship to, and setting for, the monument. To the north are the regularly spaced villages of Winterbourne Monkton, Berwick Bassett, Winterbourne Bassett and Broad Hinton. These typically contain a nucleus of church, rectory, manor house and farm with further buildings extending outwards, with the settlements taking on a more linear form. Building materials include sarsen stone in conjunction with brick to create a distinctive local vernacular style.

### Key Characteristics

- a level flat Plain, cut by the shallow valley of the Winterbourne stream. Windmill Hill and Silbury Hill form visually prominent features in the landscape;
- one of the densest concentrations of Neolithic monuments in Britain forming Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS). The prominent monuments are central to the character of the area and provide a sense of antiquity and historical continuity;
- characterised by expanses of large open arable fields bounded by fences or thin hawthorn hedges allowing long views and creating a bleak character. To the north, a number of small copses and shelter belts plus a stronger hedgerow pattern provide a greater degree of enclosure;
- permanent pasture concentrated along the shallow Winterbourne valley floor and around the archaeological monuments;
- settlements are confined to the Winterbourne valley with regularly spaced villages typically containing a nucleus of a church, rectory, manor house and farm with further buildings extending outwards. Avebury and Avebury Trusloe are dramatically located within and adjacent to the stone circle;
- a distinctive vernacular building style involving 'squares' of bricks and dressed flint nodules, plus use of sarsen stone;
- long views and a sense of openness, with strong associations with the prehistoric period.

## Physical Influences

- 12.22. Avebury Plain is a topographically homogenous area of relatively simple geology formed by the eroded level surface of the Lower Chalk. Although appearing virtually flat the area slopes gently towards the village of Avebury and the Winterbourne stream. The watercourse flows southwards through the area to the Kennet in a shallow open valley. It is joined at Avebury by a further small valley running eastwards from Yatesbury. Soils are mainly thin and calcareous, with some alluvium within the valleys. Windmill Hill is a visually prominent landform and one of the most important sites within Avebury World Heritage Site.

## Historic Environment

- 12.23. **Neolithic Monuments:** The area contains one of the densest concentrations of Neolithic monuments in Britain and its international importance, together with Stonehenge, was recognised by its designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986. Many of the monuments are Guardianship sites in the care of English Heritage, which rate the greatest degree of statutory protection. These include the Late Neolithic henge at **Avebury** consisting of massive banks and ditches with stone circles inside. An avenue of paired sarsen stones leads from Avebury henge to the remains of a smaller (possible) henge known as the Sanctuary, some 2.3 kilometres distant.
- 12.24. The area also contains **Silbury Hill**, the most famous example of a rare class of Neolithic monument known as monumental mounds. The monument comprises a flat-topped conical mound, over 39 m high and with a diameter of over 167 m, surrounded by a quarry ditch. It is located on a slight natural spur on the western side of the Kennet Valley, south of the village of Avebury. Although its exact function is unclear, the site would have had considerable importance to the prehistoric occupants of the area. Other Guardianship monuments include a Neolithic causewayed enclosure, located on **Windmill Hill**, a prominent but low hill north-west of Avebury. The monument comprises a small circular area of some 400 meters diameter, defined by three roughly concentric rings comprising banks and ditches.
- 12.25. **Bronze Age Round Barrows:** Around this exceptional collection of major ceremonial monuments are numerous Bronze Age round barrows, concentrated along ridges or on hilltops. Of particular prominence are the groups on Overton Hill and the Ridgeway, a significant prehistoric routeway which crosses the area.
- 12.26. **Medieval Settlement:** Modern villages such as Winterbourne Monkton are linear settlements spread along the dry valley bottoms, and this is a typical medieval pattern for the area, with Richardson in the Winterbourne Valley, being an example of a deserted medieval village.
- 12.27. **Field Patterns:** Many of the sinuous, long and narrow fields oriented at right angles to the scarp edge, or to the Winterbourne valley, may represent surviving medieval boundaries. In some cases these may represent 'filling in' or informal enclosure between existing tracks or droveways. Some of the few copses that do survive have irregular boundaries indicating late medieval or post-medieval assarts. Over much of the downland areas however, the landscape had reverted to open grazing and common

land. The large, straight-sided and regular fields of the modern landscape are chiefly the product of formal, post-medieval Parliamentary enclosure. Some of these fields have been further expanded in the modern period into very large, 'prairie' fields.

- 12.28. **Modern landscape:** In the post-medieval and modern periods the landscape around Avebury has seen many changes. This includes a small seventeenth century designed parkland around Avebury Manor, and the addition of tree clumps, known locally as 'hedgehogs' on barrows along the skyline of the ridgeway scarp to the east of Avebury. More modern development is represented by the remnants of a Second World War air base at Yatesbury Field.

## Biodiversity

- 12.29. The Avebury Plain Landscape Character Area has retained a number of valuable woodland and grassland sites. There are 11 woodland and 10 grassland sites with non-statutory designation, together with Silbury Hill (SSSI), which is a nationally important area of chalk grassland.
- 12.30. Some examples of non-statutory woodland sites are Home Wood and Stanmore Copse, while grassland sites include Avebury Henge and Beckhampton Chalk.

## Key Issues

- in the past, intensification in farming (arable conversion) leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland and waterside pasture in the valleys) archaeological features and the creation of large 'prairie' fields;
- changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some grassland no longer being grazed, leading to **scrub encroachment on open downland**. Grazed pasture is essential as the landscape setting for the archaeological monuments;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows creating a very open landscape;
- **vulnerability to large scale development** - high visual impact of existing pylons and large scale farm buildings plus potential impact of tall structures (e.g. masts or turbines) which will be very detrimental within this open landscape and on the setting of the WHS;
- **development pressures** within the small valley villages - impact on settlement character, and coalescence of distinct areas;
- localised visual and noise intrusion of **roads** A4, A4361 and B4003;
- **visitor pressures** around Avebury monuments resulting in localised erosion, plus the need resolve issues relating to access, circulation, interpretation, signage - as set out in the WHS Management Plan.

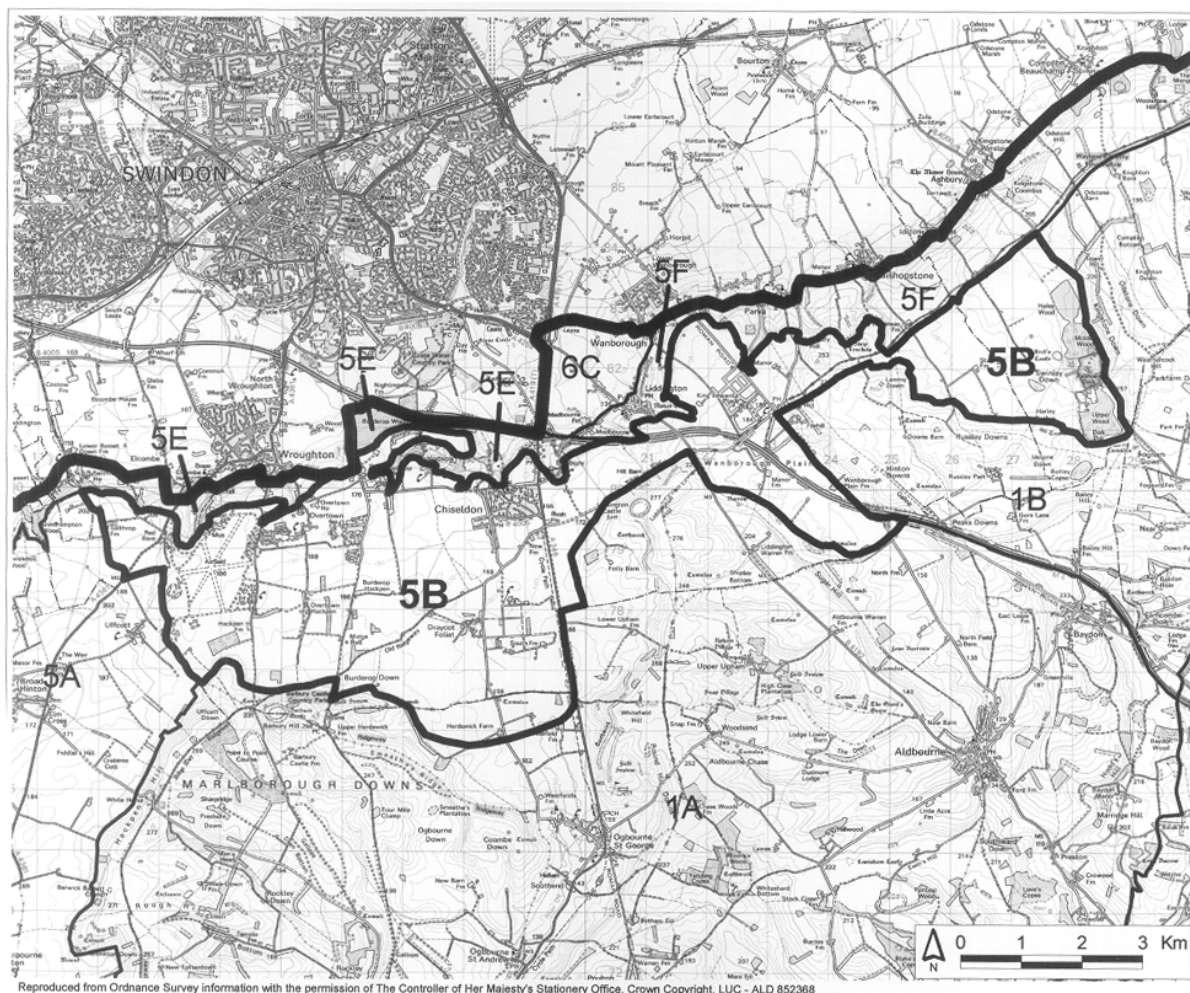
## Key Management Requirements

- 12.31. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the special character of the Avebury Plain as the landscape and setting for the unique complex of archaeological monuments of the WHS. Detailed management recommendations for the WHS are contained in the Avebury WHS Management Plan.
- 12.32. The key features to be conserved and enhanced in the wider landscape include the sense of openness and long views, chalk grassland on the Plain, around archaeological sites and waterside pasture in the valleys, and the historic field patterns and hedgerow boundaries, particularly those around Avebury Village and the Winterbourne Valley. The distinct settlement pattern with an open unpopulated landscape should be maintained.





## CHARACTER AREA 5B: CHISELDON – WANBOROUGH PLAIN



- 1.33. **Location and Boundaries:** The Chiseldon/Wanborough Plain is located on the level ledge of Lower Chalk that extends to the north of the Marlborough Downs (1A). Boundaries are clearly defined by the topography. They are formed in the north by crest of the steep scarp (5D: Clyffe Pypard - Badbury Wooded Scarp).



## Landscape Character Description

- 12.34. The distinct character of the area is largely created by the level uniform land surface. However throughout the area, the backdrop created by the high land of the Marlborough Downs is dominant on the skyline, creating a sense of enclosure and containment. The Plain is almost entirely under arable cultivation in large open fields, with few boundaries, apart from occasional hawthorn hedges and post and wire fences along roadsides. Woodlands are limited to a small number of linear shelter and screening belts planted in discordant regular patterns near Hackpen and Draycot Foliat. The absence of hedgerow enclosure and woodland, combined with the flat landform, creates a high degree of intervisibility with sweeping views through the area. In places the open landscape structure, without local pattern or detail, results in an open character, in stark contrast to the intimate landscape of the scarp and the drama of the downs.
- 12.35. Generally the settlements are located (outside the character area) at the foot of the scarp, with a north south orientation of parish boundaries from the villages up the scarp and onto the Plain. Settlement, within the character area, is limited to the lateral modern expansion of the scarp top village of Chiseldon, with only the small long established hamlet of Draycot Foliat actually located on the Plain. Farm buildings are infrequent and widely dispersed, and are not a characteristic feature of the area, suggesting that the Plains might have been used more as a resource by the villages on the scarp than settled in its own right. Roads tend to be long and straight running in a north south orientation and linked laterally by tracks. The routes of both the Ridgeway and the M4 cut across a small section of Wanborough Plain in the western part of the area. Views to development (Swindon) on the edge of the AONB are a key feature of the area.
- 12.36. Superimposed upon this largely unsettled landscape are twentieth century military developments, including Wroughton Airfield, with its hangers, runway and associated infrastructure, The Ministry of Defence hospital site also near Wroughton, and a First World War camp near Draycot Foliat. These installations are sizeable and, within this open landscape are now dominant features of the area, having a considerable visual impact, particularly in views out from the high downs to the north, for example from Barbury Hill.

### Key Characteristics

- level flat Plain formed by a ledge of Lower Chalk. The high land of Marlborough Downs, to the south creates a dominant skyline feature providing a sense of enclosure and containment;
- almost entirely under arable cultivation in large open fields with few boundaries. Woodland is limited to a small number of linear shelter and screening belts;
- Ermine Way Roman road is preserved in the line of a modern road;
- settlement is limited to the lateral modern expansion of the scarp top village of Chiseldon with only the small hamlet of Draycot Foliat on the Plain and infrequent and widely dispersed farm buildings;
- 20<sup>th</sup> century military installations, including Wroughton Airfield and a First World War camp near Draycot Foliat, are dominant and defining features of the area;

- views to development on the AONB boundary (edge of Swindon);
- in places the absence of landscape structure results in a very open character in stark contrast to the intimate landscape of the scarp and the drama of the downs.

## Physical Influences

- 12.37. The Plain is almost entirely underlain by the Lower Chalk creating a flat open level landform at a height of roughly 180m, with the land surface sloping very gently to the south to the top of the scarp slope. Thin calcareous soils overlie the surface and there are no watercourses. To the south the rising landform of the Marlborough Downs is a dominant feature and where this extends out, for example at Liddington Castle or Hinton Downs, it subdivides and separates the Plain into three distinct areas namely the wide Wroughton Plain and the narrower areas of Wanborough Plain and Bishopstone Plain.

## Historic Environment

- 12.38. **Prehistoric Monuments:** There are many prehistoric monuments overlooking the area (within the adjacent character area 1A: Marlborough Downs) and these sometimes form dramatic visible features in the view from the Plain. However intensive agricultural land use has largely removed evidence of historic land use in the area itself.
- 12.39. **Roman Road:** The line of the Ermine Way Roman road is preserved in the modern road from Swindon to Aldbourne.
- 12.40. **Field Patterns:** Intensive agricultural use has largely removed evidence of the historic land use in this area. Some sinuous land boundaries around Chiseldon may reflect late medieval or post-medieval informal enclosure, but the area was probably mostly open downland grazing until formal Parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, which produced the vast majority of the regular, straight-sided fields visible today.
- 12.41. **The Modern Landscape:** Prominent modern developments include Wroughton Airfield, the remains of a Second World War airbase and the M4 motorway.

## Biodiversity

- 12.42. There Character Area supports one SSSI, together with around 14 grassland and 5 woodland sites with non-statutory designation.
- 12.43. The nationally important site is Ashdown Park (SSSI), which is of national importance for its collection of Sarsen stones and associated lichen flora.

## Key Issues

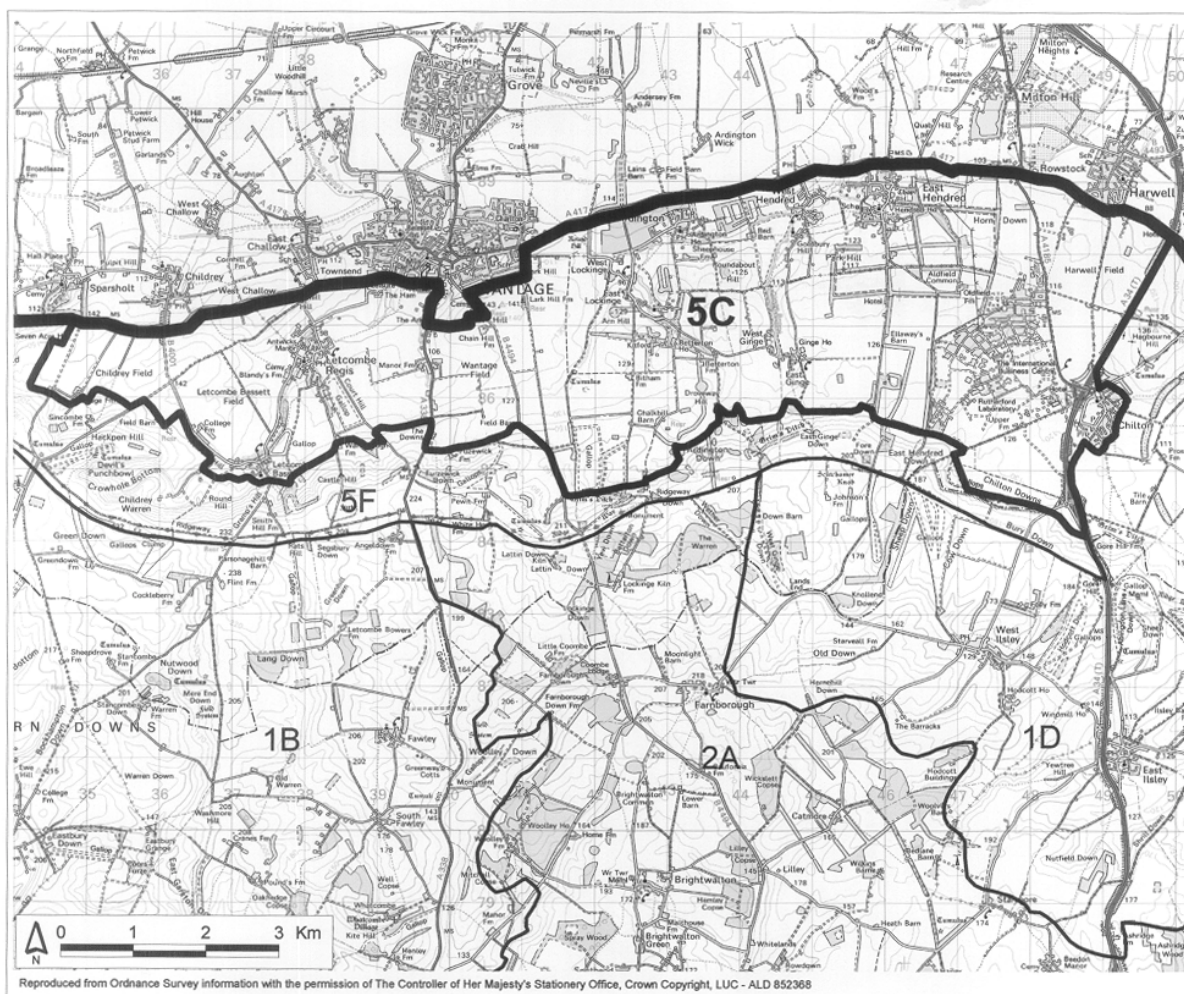
- intensive arable farming - **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity, archaeological features and landscape character with creation of large 'prairie' fields;

- **absence of loss of hedgerow enclosure and woodlands**, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows creating a very open landscape;
- some **incongruous shelterbelt planting** creating a discordant feature;
- **flat, open landscape with particular vulnerability to large scale development** - high visual impact of existing buildings (hangars and associated infrastructure) at Wroughton Airfield, plus the MOD hospital site. Potential future impact of tall structures (e.g. masts or turbines);
- **development pressures** with the lateral expansion of the scarp top village of Chiseldon plus pressures for re-use of redundant military structures;
- visual impact of existing development and vulnerability to new **development on the edge of the AONB**;
- visual and noise intrusion of **roads** (M4).

## Key Management Requirements

- 12.44. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the character of the Chiseldon - Wanborough Plain, with its open expansive views and strong contrast to the adjacent scarp. The area is characterised by the absence of larger settlements and is vulnerable to new/redevelopment of existing sites and development on the boundary of the AONB. Particular consideration should be given to the impact of development on both the character of the area and views gained from the higher ground in this area.
- 12.45. The key features to be conserved and enhanced in the wider landscape include: the distinctive open, sweeping character and long views including the backdrop skyline of the Marlborough Downs to the south, archaeological sites including the Ridgeway, and the historic field pattern, with opportunities for hedgerow boundary restoration.

# CHARACTER AREA 5C: HENDRED PLAIN



- 1.46. **Location and Boundaries:** The Hendred Plain forms a low ledge of Lower Chalk extending in front of the Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp that runs along the northern edge of the AONB. It is a comparatively small area but has a very distinct character forming a transition between the high downs and the clay lowlands of the Vale of White Horse.

## Landscape Character Description

- 12.47. The ledge of Lower Chalk protruding from the higher downs is a distinctive landform feature on the northern edge of the AONB, providing a transitional landscape between the high downs and the clay lowlands. Although essentially a flat level Plain, local variation is created by the numerous valleys that cut through the area. These create a more undulating landform compared to Avebury Plain and Wanborough Plain, for example. In addition the wooded stream sides form a much softer enclosed landscape. At Letcombe, the brook has been dammed to create a lake as part of a designed landscape scheme, and the presence of small parks and mansions at the point where springs emerge is a particular feature of the area. Other examples include Ginge House and Ardington House, with a deer park at East Hendred. These areas are frequently associated with extensive woodland and parkland planting. The narrow linear and small circular plantations, around East Hendred and Lockinge are an unusual feature and create a slightly discordant landscape pattern, particularly in views from the higher land to the south, although at close quarters they create a wooded backdrop.
- 12.48. The majority of the area is under arable cultivation. The landscape consists of large fields with insignificant boundaries, although the shelterbelts and waterside woodlands provide a sense of enclosure. Orchards lie along the northern edge, around East Hendred, and provide further diversity in land cover. The area includes a large number of straight north-south running lanes, byways or tracks which cross the Plain and terminate on the high downs, where they join the Ridgeway. These tracks would have formerly connected the resources of the Vales and the high downs, but today form good routes for recreational access.
- 12.49. The area is well settled and includes the attractive springline villages of Letcombe Regis, East Hendred, West Hendred and Ardington. These have a very varied built character and include blue flint and tile (east) plus stone and clunch (west). They generally have a clustered character, although new development has spread out from the centre. The Estate villages (e.g. Lockinge, Ardington, East Hendred) have a particular unity of character. There are, in addition, a large number of stables and equestrian establishments, as well as isolated large houses and mansions. The most significant development within the area and arguably within the whole of the AONB is the Harwell International Business Centre on a former airfield site.
- 12.50. The boundary of the AONB follows the line of the main A417 road. The accessibility this provides and the proximity to main employment centres means that this area is inevitably subject to development pressures. Harwell and Wantage are both expanding settlements located on the border of the AONB.

### Key Characteristics

- a generally level surface which dips gently to the north. A locally more undulating landscape near West Hendred where the Plain is cut by numerous valleys;
- numerous springs, with small streams flowing down into the River Ock on the Vale;
- largely under arable cultivation within large regular Parliamentary enclosure fields with insignificant boundary features;
- shelterbelts, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century plantations, ornamental and waterside woodlands provide a sense of enclosure. Orchards along the northern edge around East Hendred provide diversity in land cover;
- small landscape parks and mansions, e.g. Lockinge House, are a particular feature of the area;
- a settled landscape with many springline villages e.g. Letcombe Regis, East Hendred, West Hendred and Ardington which generally have a clustered form. Estate villages have a particular unity of character;
- built form varies and includes blue flint and tile (east) plus stone and clunch (west);
- a large number of stables and equestrian establishments and gallops;
- Wantage and Harwell, located on the boundary of the AONB, plus Harwell Business Centre, on a former air field site within the AONB;
- overall, a quiet rural character.

### Physical Influences

- 12.51. The area is almost entirely underlain by Lower Chalk, with Upper Greensand appearing along its northern edge, where the landform drops down to the Vale to the north. The higher land of the Upper Chalk forms a backdrop appearing as a range of higher hills to the south. The plain generally has a level surface dipping gently to the north, although is more undulating near West Hendred where it is cut by a series of small valleys as at Ginge Brook and Betterton Brook. Springs and small streams flowing down into the River Ock on the Vale are a feature. The valley of Ardington Brook, which runs along the northern edge of the character area between Ardington and East Hendred, forms a narrow band of the low lying Vale landscape.

### Historic Environment

- 12.52. **Prehistoric routeway:** The Icknield Way may be later prehistoric or Roman, the line of which is still respected today by minor roads, tracks and field boundaries.
- 12.53. **Saxon and Later Settlement:** Wantage (on the AONB boundary) was a royal manor in the Saxon period, and a Saxon cemetery has been excavated at Arm Hill, just to the south-east of East Lockinge. The villages of West and East Hendred date to at least the medieval period and it was during this period that Wantage became an important local market centre, including a focal point for malting during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The town continued to prosper from trade in cattle, sheep, corn and cheese and during the nineteenth century, foundries and agricultural implement makers were established.
- 12.54. **Field Patterns:** The landscape of the area is essentially open and was probably mostly under open downland grazing until formal Parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth or

nineteenth centuries created the vast majority of the regular, straight-sided fields visible today.

- 12.55. **The Modern Landscape:** Landscaped Gardens and Estates were created around Lockinge House, including ornamental tree plantings such as those on Ardington Down. The area also includes many rides and gallops.

## Biodiversity

- 12.56. There are 4 sites with non-statutory designation in the Hendred Plain Character Area, 3 of these sites are wetland sites, namely Letcombe Cress Beds, Letcombe Reed and Swamp Ginge Brook. The fourth site is a grassland site known as Harwell Grassland. There are no sites considered nationally important in this Character Area.

## Key Issues

- almost exclusively in intensive arable cultivation with of **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland) archaeological features and landscape character with creation of large 'prairie' fields;
- **absence of hedgerow enclosure and woodlands**, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows creating a very open landscape;
- need for management of the **small woodlands** and the linear riparian tree belts;
- management of the numerous **historic parklands and designed landscapes**;
- **open landscape with particular vulnerability to large scale development** - high visual impact of existing buildings including Harwell Business Centre on a former air field site. Potential impact of tall structures (e.g. masts or turbines);
- **development pressures** within the attractive small spring line villages, with expansion from their traditional clustered form;
- development on **AONB boundaries** at Harwell and Wantage - with visual and other associated impacts.

## Key Management Requirements

- 12.57. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the quiet, rural character of the Hendred Plain, which provides a transition between the Vale of White Horse and the high downs.
- 12.58. The key features to be conserved and enhanced include: the pasture and woodlands along the streams with opportunities for reinstatement of pasture, particularly along watercourses; the distinctive settlement pattern with a concentration of nucleated villages along the springline, estate villages, plus widely dispersed large houses and mansions; the historic field pattern, with opportunities for hedgerow boundary

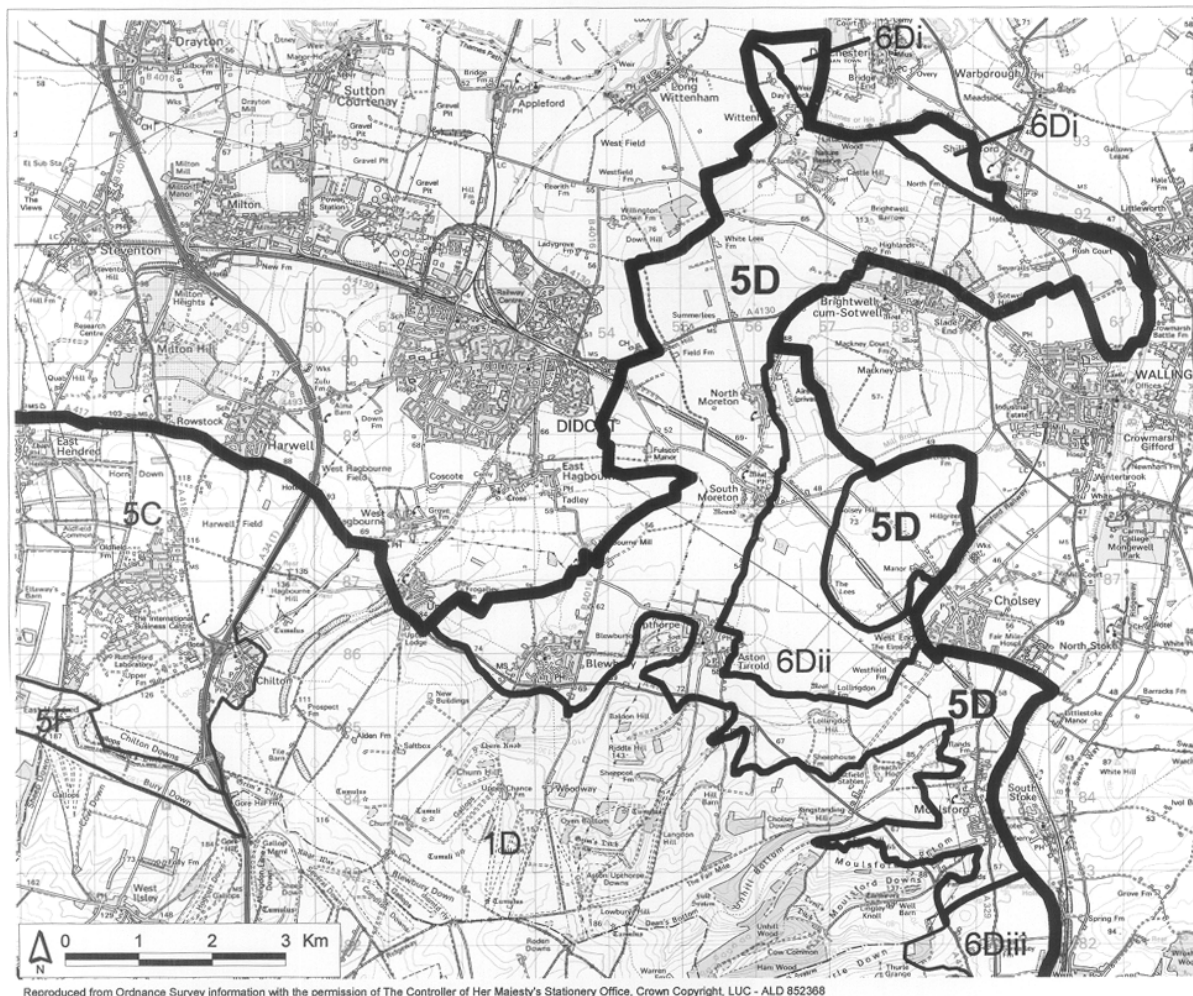
restoration; the historic designed park and gardens; and the strong skyline of the higher hills to the south.

- 12.59. Particular consideration should be given to the impact of new development on the boundary of the AONB (at Harwell and Wantage) on the character of this part of the North Wessex Downs and views from this area.





# CHARACTER AREA 5D: MORETON PLAIN



- 1.60. **Location and Boundaries:** The Moreton Plain character area is located in the northward extension of the AONB, where it extends into South Oxfordshire to the River Thames. The boundaries are largely defined by the AONB boundary. The area wraps around the low lying Vale landscape, associated with the floodplain of the River Thames described in character area 6Di and ii. To the south the higher chalk downs of the Blewbury Downs (1D) are a dominant backdrop and skyline.

## Landscape Character Description

- 12.61. Moreton Plain is a transitional landscape between the chalk uplands to the south and the clay Vale to the north. It is largely underlain by rocks of the Lower Chalk and Upper Greensand, but also includes outliers of the Higher and Middle chalk forming distinctive stranded hills, as for example at Chosley Hill and the Sinodun Hills which, with their open rolling landform, have a similar character to the high downs, although on a much more restricted scale. Throughout the area large fields of intensive arable crops dominate, with a weak or absent hedgerow structure. Tree cover is sparse except on the steeper slopes above the Thames, in the northern part of the area. Distinctive features include the clumps of woodland on prominent hilltops, as at Wittenham Clumps. Generally, this is a very open landscape with 'pockets' of remoteness and extensive views. The adjacent town and chimneys of Didcot, are often a dominant feature, in views gained from higher land.
- 12.62. The villages of North and South Moreton are located on pockets of higher ground and have a loosely nucleated form. Other larger settlements include Blewbury and Aston Upthorpe/Aston Tirrold, both of which are springline villages located at the foot of the scarp. There are many attractive buildings, with materials including thatch, red brick and weatherboard.

### Key Characteristics

- underlain by layers of High Chalk, Middle Chalk, Lower Chalk, and Upper Greensand forming a transitional landscape between the high downs and the Thames Floodplain;
- a varied landform including strong ridges and skylines of downland outliers e.g. at Sinodun Hills, although the scale is reduced compared to the more dramatic 'downs' landscapes to the south;
- large fields of intensive arable farmland dominate the area, with a weak or absent hedgerow structure and a sparse covering of trees, except on the steeper slopes above the Thames to the north of the area;
- open, expansive landscape with 'pockets' of remoteness;
- field pattern includes some sinuous field boundaries of medieval origin between Long Wittenham and Little Wittenham. Elsewhere, most fields are large and regular, created by Parliamentary enclosure, with more recent boundary removal to form open 'prairie' type fields;
- the villages of North and South Moreton are located on pockets of higher ground and have a loosely nucleated form. Larger springline settlements of Blewbury and Aston Upthorpe/Aston Tirrold are located at the base of the scarp;
- built form includes many attractive vernacular buildings, with materials including thatch, red brick and weatherboard;
- clumps of woodland on prominent hilltops as at Wittenham Clumps are a distinctive feature of the area;
- the adjacent town and chimneys of Didcot are often a dominant feature in views due to the open nature of the landscape.

## Physical Influences

- 12.63. The Moreton Plain area has a varied geology, and includes layers of High Chalk, Middle Chalk, Lower Chalk, and Upper Greensand. This geological diversity gives the area its distinct 'transitional' character. Landform is consequently very varied, although the scale is reduced compared to the more dramatic 'downs' landscapes to the south. Soils are distinctive calcareous 'flinty' soils.

## Historic Environment

- 12.64. **Prehistoric landscape:** A Bronze Age round barrow close to Brightwell and a hillfort at Aston Upthorpe are characteristic features in a landscape otherwise devoid of extant prehistoric monuments. Evidence of activity from the late Bronze Age through to the Romano-British period is concentrated north of Little Wittenham and west of Long Wittenham.
- 12.65. **Medieval Settlement and Land Use:** Remnants of medieval ridge and furrow occur to the north of Little Wittenham, and cropmarks of trackways and enclosures around Rise may reflect Romano-British or medieval settlement. There are medieval moated sites at Lollington Farm, at the base of the scarp where there was also a medieval abbey, now ruined. North of Rises, cropmarks of square enclosures, trackways and ridge and furrow mark the position of Littletown, a post-medieval hamlet deserted and destroyed in the nineteenth century.
- 12.66. **Field Patterns:** The landscape is fairly open, with very little woodland. Some field boundaries and trackways are very sinuous, and may have medieval origins, such as those between Long Wittenham and Little Wittenham, and those between North and South Moreton. Elsewhere, most fields are large and regular with straight sides, and are probably the result of formal eighteenth and nineteenth century Parliamentary enclosure. Some very large 'prairie' fields have been created in recent decades.

## Biodiversity

- 12.67. There are 2 sites with non-statutory designation in the Moreton Plain Character Area; these are Didcot Marshalling Yard and Lollington Hill. There are no sites considered nationally important in this Character Area.

## Key Issues

- almost exclusively in intensive arable cultivation with of **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity (e.g. chalk grassland) archaeological features and landscape character with creation of large open 'prairie' fields;
- **loss of hedgerow enclosure** plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows creating a very open landscape;
- denuded woodland cover - need to **maintain distinctive hilltop clumps**;

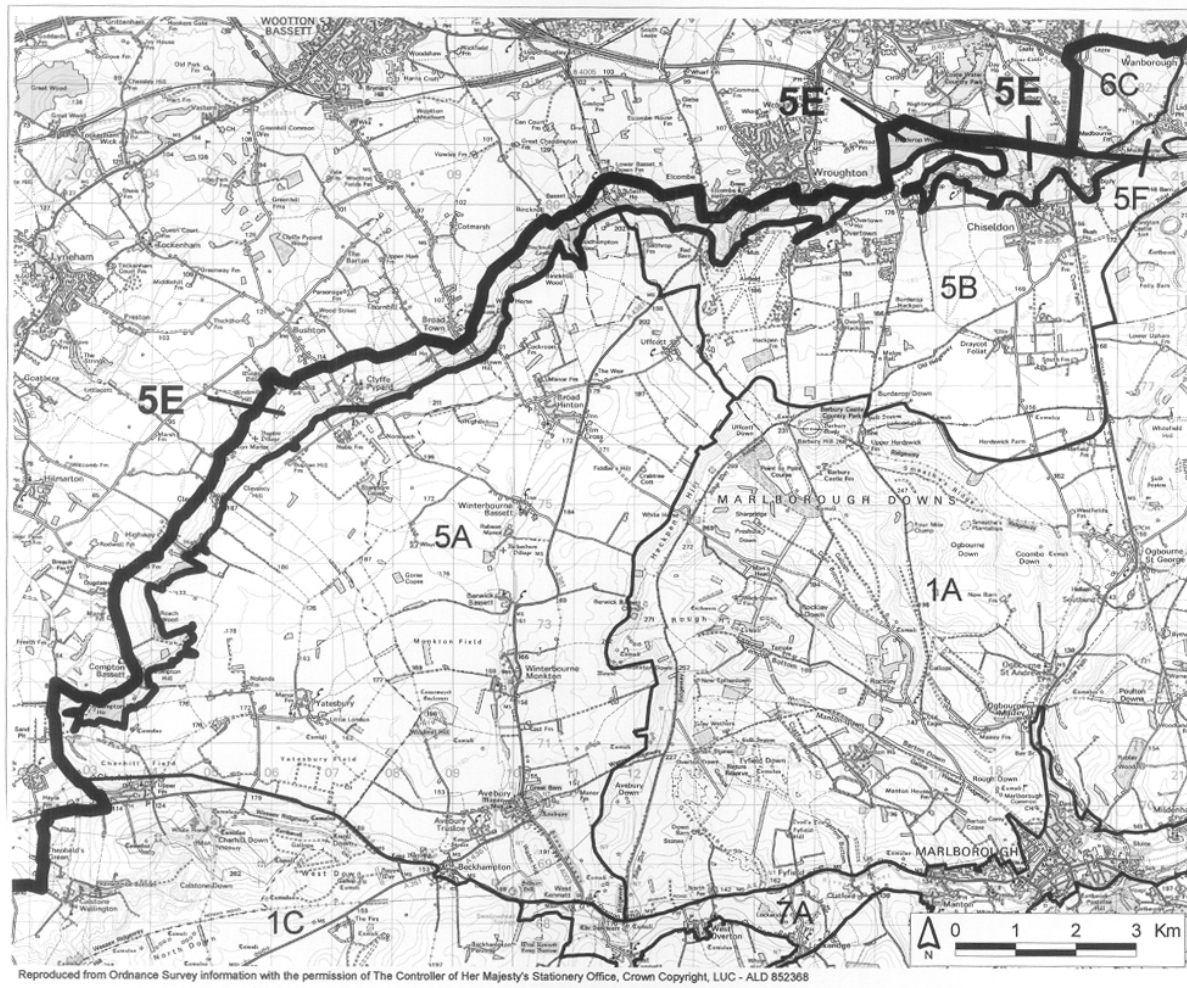
- **open landscape with particular vulnerability to large scale development** - high visual impact of built development and power station at Didcot plus overhead power lines;
- management of **historic parklands and designed landscapes**, e.g. at Sinodun Hills;
- **development pressures** within the villages and impact on settlement character;
- development impinging on **AONB boundaries**, particularly at Didcot and to a lesser extent at Wallingford with visual and other associated impacts.

## Key Management Requirements

- 12.68. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the rural agricultural character of the Moreton Plain, which provides a transition between the chalk uplands and the clay Vale.
- 12.69. The key features to be conserved and enhanced include historic field pattern, archaeological sites, historic gardens and parks, and chalk grassland. There are specific opportunities to extend and link sites of chalk grassland and restore hedgerows. The ridges and clear skylines, e.g. at Sinodun Hills and the backdrop of the high downs to the south, and the characteristic settlement pattern with villages located on high points on the Plain or along the scarp springline should be maintained. Consideration should be given to the impact of new development on the boundary on both the character of the AONB and in views from the higher ground.



# CHARACTER AREA 5E: CLYFFE PYPARD – BADBURY WOODED SCARP



- 1.70. **Location and Boundaries:** The Clyffe Pypard - Badbury Wooded Scarp defines the north west boundary of the AONB. The boundaries are formed by the AONB boundary, which runs along the foot of the scarp, and by contours at roughly 170m along the scarp top at the point where the surface levels out to form Avebury Plain (5A) in the west and Chiseldon - Wanborough Plain (5B) in the east.

## Landscape Character Description

- 12.71. The steep smooth scarp defines the north-west edge of the AONB. It is distinguished by its wooded character, with long sinuous, continuous belts of woodland such as Clyffe Hanging and Binknoll Wood, clinging to the almost vertical upper slopes. These are mainly ancient semi-natural woodlands of hazel coppice and oak as well as distinctive beech hangers. In the western area one of the woods has been designated as an SSSI for its population of nationally and internationally rare mosses. More extensive blocks of ancient semi-natural woodland characterise the scarp around Chisledon, with areas of particular note being the large wet ash-maple woodland at Burderop Wood and the oak with ash-maple coppice at Clouts Wood (both SSSIs). The scarp is distinguished by a large number of estates, such as at Compton Bassett, Burderop, Elcombe and Salthrop, with houses located at the foot of the slope and associated farmland and parkland.
- 12.72. The lower scarp slopes are predominantly in pasture with some areas of arable land occupying shallower gradients. Fields are small and bounded by hedgerows which, together with the parkland and scarp top woodlands, creates a more enclosed intimate landscape contrasting strongly with the open and expansive character and long views from the scarp summit. Numerous springs issue along the escarpment at the base of the chalk creating a system of short but deeply incised valleys appearing as wooded indentations within the lower scarp slopes.
- 12.73. Settlement is a feature of the character area, with settlements located at the point where springs issue midway up the scarp. They include the small hamlets of Clyffe Pypard, Clevancy and the linear settlement of Broadtown, which straggles up the slope. Compton Bassett, at the foot of the slope is a village of more modern houses. The scarp is traversed by numerous narrow rural lanes that cut straight up and down the face. A notable feature is the large number of rights of way, which originate on the lower lying Vale and terminate on the Plain at the scarp top. The wooded skyline is an important landscape feature in views from surrounding lower land, such as around Lyneham (outside the AONB). In this context the masts at Nebb Farm are an intrusive feature.

### Key Characteristics

- steep scarp slope rising abruptly from the lower lying clay Vale, presenting a smooth, profile with local indentations and coombes;
- numerous springs issue at the base of the chalk creating a series of short, deeply incised, often wooded, valleys along the lower slopes;
- almost vertical upper slopes with continuous belts of woodland (e.g. Clyffe Hanging and Binknoll Wood). Mainly ancient semi-natural woodlands of hazel coppice and oak/ash as well as distinctive beech hangers;
- lower scarp slopes predominantly in pasture with some areas of arable land occupying shallower gradients;
- small fields, bounded by hedgerows which, combined with the high woodland cover and parkland, create an enclosed intimate landscape;

- a large number of estates (e.g. Burderop, Elcombe and Salthrop) with houses located at the foot of the slope and associated estate farmland and parkland;
- settlement located at the point where springs issue midway up the scarp, including the small hamlets of Clyffe Pypard, Clevancy, and the linear settlement of Broadtown. Compton Bassett, at the foot of the slope contains more modern residential development;
- crossed by a large number of rights of way which originate on the lower lying Vales and terminate on the Plain at the scarp top, plus distinctive sunken lanes;
- the wooded skyline is an important feature in views from surrounding land.

## Physical Influences

- 12.74. The main part of the slope is formed by the Lower Chalk, with Gault Clay and Upper Greensand. Deposits of Head and Coombe Rocks found at the base of the scarp. The slope has a very steep gradient rising abruptly by 100m from the lower lying clay Vale. It presents a smooth straight slope scored by local indentions and coombes, for example near Compton Bassett.

## Historic Environment

- 12.75. **Landscape Development:** Unusually, Iron Age hill forts are not a feature of the scarp top in this area, and tended to be located further to the south at the second scarp of the Marlborough Downs (e.g. Barbury Castle). A castle, possibly of Medieval age, was established at Binknoll on the scarp edge. Deserted medieval villages include Bupton and Woodhill, located at the foot of the scarp edge defining the north-west edge of this area. Other medieval earthworks survive at Broad Hinton.
- 12.76. **Field Pattern:** The pattern of woodland cover and smaller fields with sinuous boundaries, particularly around Chiseldon, may also relate to Medieval clearance and enclosure.

## Biodiversity

- 12.77. Within this Character Area there are 3 SSSI's, all of which are woodland sites, together with 17 woodlands, 10 grasslands and 1 wetland site with non-statutory designation. The nationally important sites are Burderop Wood (SSSI), Bincknoll Dip Wood (SSSI) and Clouts Wood (SSSI).
- 12.78. Burderop wood (SSSI) for example forms a 48 ha wet ash-maple and acid pedunculate oak-hazel-ash woodland, with a rich ground flora. The site also supports a range of typical woodland birds and invertebrates.
- 12.79. Bincknoll Dip Woods (SSSI) is notable for supporting nationally and internationally rare mosses such as *Barbula glauca*, a species that is found on shaded chalk faces, where earth filled crevices provide a suitable habitat. This inconspicuous species is currently only known from this single location in Britain, and has never been record outside Europe.



- 12.80. Clouts wood (SSSI) lies on the steep scarp of the Lower Chalk south of Swindon and is a good example of mainly ash-maple-hazel and invasive English elm woodland, with a rich ground flora.

### Key Issues

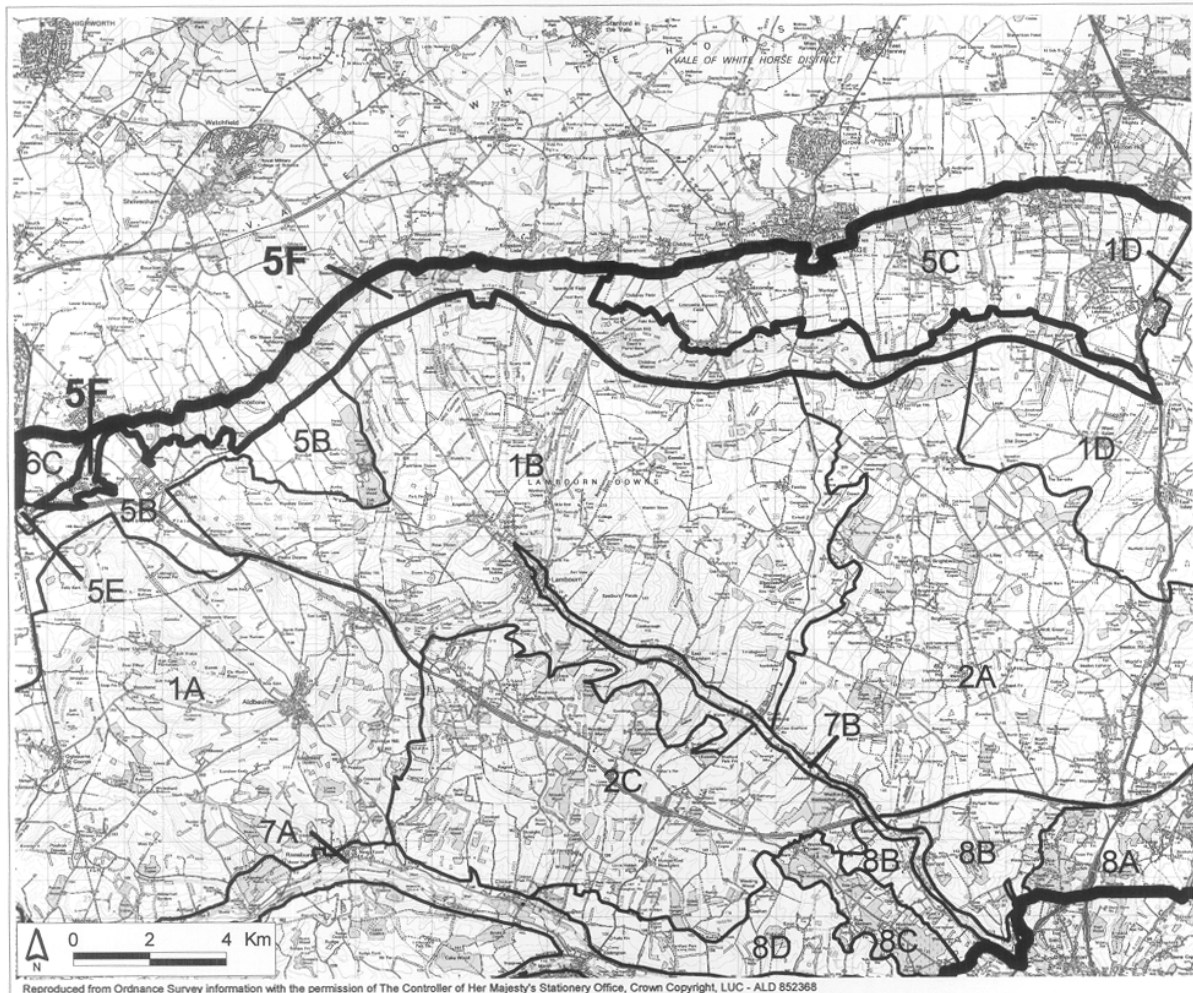
- in the past, intensification in farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity, e.g. chalk grassland and archaeological features;
- changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some marginal areas on the scarp slope no longer being grazed leading to **scrub encroachment** on areas of pasture;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- **lack of appropriate management of woodlands** particularly the small ancient and semi natural woodlands of the scarp, formerly managed by coppicing;
- **vulnerability to large scale development**, particularly tall structures (e.g. masts or turbines) on the scarp summit and impact on views, e.g. masts at Nebb Farm;
- **pressures for housing** within the attractive scarp slope villages with some modern sprawl along roads up and downslope and loss of local vernacular character;
- impact of development of the **edge of the AONB**, for example at Wroughton and Swindon - visual impact plus increased pressures on housing, roads etc.;
- management of **historic parkland and estate landscapes**.

### Key Management Requirements

- 12.81. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the enclosed, intimate wooded character of the scarp.
- 12.82. The key features to be conserved and enhanced include the historic field pattern, with opportunities for hedgerow restoration, chalk grasslands with opportunities for habitat restoration, and the archaeological sites, historic designed park and gardens and estate landscapes. The strong wooded skyline, which is a dominant feature, and the pattern and character of scarp slope woodlands should be maintained, with opportunities for re-introduction of management being apparent. The characteristic settlement pattern with springline villages on the scarp face and the sunken lanes that cut up and down the scarp should be maintained. Consideration should be given to the impact of new development beyond the AONB boundary on both the character of the AONB and in views from the higher ground.

## CHARACTER AREA 5F: LIDDINGTON – LETCOMBE OPEN SCARP

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- 1.83. **Location and Boundaries:** The Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp is a distinct and consistent landform feature forming a long sinuous character area rising abruptly from the Vale of White Horse. The northern edge is largely coincident with the AONB boundary except for a few areas such as around Wanborough (6C) where the clay Vale intrudes into the AONB at the foot of the scarp and to the west at Letcombe where the scarp turns inward and a level area of Lower Chalk and Greensand forming Hendred Plain (5G) extends in front of the scarp. The southern boundary relates to the crest of the scarp. For part of its length the boundary is drawn so that it includes the line of the Ridgeway, which runs along the summit.

## Landscape Character Description

- 1.84. The scarp is the defining edge of the AONB and is a highly visible feature from Swindon and Wantage and the adjacent low lying clay Vales. The strong landform dominates skyline views and provides a dramatic backdrop from these areas signalling the presence of the North Wessex Downs. The steep gradients limit extent of arable cultivation so that a mix of grazed pasture within small hedged fields dominates. The area is characterised by its openness and the large blocks of woodland and hangers that characterise the scarp further west (5E) are largely absent. Woodland is confined to small areas of natural regeneration, and those associated with the parks and estates that are a feature of the area.
- 1.85. The scarp face is scored by dry coombes, one of the most spectacular being 'The Manger', cut into White Horse Hill. This is a classic example of a distinctive chalk karst landform and the site is designated as an SSSI. In addition to its physiographic features, the site also contains a high proportion of the remaining unploughed chalk grasslands along the escarpment. Other fragments of botanically rich chalk grassland occur along many of the steep slopes of the coombes, including the SSSI at Hinton Parva. A further distinctive and highly visible feature is the chalk cut Uffington White Horse, which for many symbolises the chalk downland of the AONB. There are a number of important prehistoric monuments along the scarp top including Wayland's Smithy, Neolithic long mound – a site redolent with local myth and legend and Iron Age hillforts at Uffington and Woolstone. These strategic sites are linked by the prehistoric route of the Ridgeway, which runs along the entire length of the character area.
- 1.86. The shelter and access to water provided by the scarp make it attractive to settlement, and the small clustered spring line villages, such as at Liddington. Bishopstone, Ashbury and Letcombe are a distinctive feature. Numerous lanes cut up and down the scarp face, often deeply incised and overhung by steep earth or grass banks. To the east, the line of the Ridgeway marks the crest line. Overall the scarp with its varied landform, sheltered coombes and mix of villages, parklands and open pastures has a very attractive rural character.

### Key Characteristics

- steep scarp slope presenting a smooth, nearly vertical, face in some areas, while in others it is deeply convoluted. A strong horizon and skyline in the view from the lower lying Vales;
- numerous springs issue at the junction of the chalk and clay creating tiny incised coombe valleys running down to the Vale to the north;
- grazed pasture within small hedged fields forms a more open landscape compared to the wooded scarp to the west;
- unimproved herb-rich chalk grassland survives in fragments along the scarp and coombes;
- woodland is confined to small areas of natural regeneration, plus woodlands associated with the parks and estates;
- highly distinctive White Horse chalk cut figure at Uffington;
- Neolithic chambered long mound of Wayland's Hill plus isolated Bronze Age round barrows in prominent locations on the scarp edge;
- The Ridgeway, a prehistoric routeway, follows the top of the scarp and remains well used as a recreational route today;

- attractive clustered spring line villages, such as Liddington, Bishopstone, Ashbury, and Letcombe, are a distinctive feature;
- numerous lanes cut up and down the scarp face, often deeply incised and overhung by steep earth or grass banks;
- overall, an attractive character due to the varied landform, sheltered coombes and mix of villages, parklands and open pastures.

## Physical Influences

- 1.87. The upper and middle part of scarp is formed by the Lower Chalk, which gives way to Gault Clay at the foot of the slope. Deposits of Head and Coombe rock frequently fill indentions on the lower slopes. In places, the slope presents a smooth near vertical face, while in other areas it is deeply convoluted by coombes, which run almost parallel to the scarp face. Numerous springs issue at the junction of the chalk and clay creating tiny incised valleys running down to the Vale to the north. In the eastern section there are also smaller dry coombes that run back to the Plains to the south creating further complexity in the landform.

## Historic Environment

- 1.88. **Prehistoric Landscape:** The most important site within this area is Wayland's Smithy, a Neolithic chambered long mound. The Ridgeway follows the scarp along the southern edge of the area, with the scarp top providing an important strategic routeway throughout prehistory and later periods. Linear earthworks such as those south of Bishopstone may be late Bronze Age or Iron Age. Uffington Castle and Woolstone Hill are Iron Age hill forts, and the distinctive chalk cut figure of the Uffington White Horse may be later prehistoric in date, although this is still not certain. The linear earthwork of Grim's Ditch, probably of Saxon origin, runs along the northern edge of the scarp.
- 1.89. **Medieval Settlement and Land Use:** There were manor houses in Beauchamp, Ashbury and Bishopstone, the latter having shrunk from a larger medieval village. Abandoned tofts and crofts survive as earthworks, and on Charlbury Hill there are medieval strip lynchets. Many of the sinuous, long, narrow fields orientated at right angles to the scarp edge in the western half of the character area, may represent surviving medieval boundaries. In some cases these may represent 'filling in' or informal enclosure between existing tracks or droveways in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

## Biodiversity

- 1.90. The steep scarp slope supports 3 chalk grassland sites of national importance. This includes part of The Coombs, Hinton Parva (SSSI), White Horse Hill (SSSI) and Hackpen, Warren and Gramp's Hill Downs (SSSI). In addition to these SSSI's the area also contains in excess of 10 grasslands with non-statutory designation.
- 1.91. Hackpen, Warren and Gramp's Hill Down (SSSI) is an amalgamation of 3 discrete, adjacent tracks of unimproved chalk grassland, which in total represent an extensive area of some 73 ha. The site supports a rich grassland flora together with 11 species of butterfly.

## Key Issues

- in the past, intensification in farming leading to **loss of environmental assets** including biodiversity, e.g. chalk grassland and archaeological features;
- changes in farming practices - including loss of livestock with some marginal areas on the scarp slope no longer being grazed leading to **scrub encroachment on important areas of pasture**;
- **loss of hedgerows boundaries** and particularly mature hedgerow trees, plus **poor management** of remaining hedgerows;
- localised erosion around archaeological sites;
- **vulnerability to large scale development**, particularly tall structures (e.g. masts or turbines) on the scarp summit;
- **pressures for housing** and peripheral development of attractive springline villages and loss of vernacular character;
- management of **historic parkland and estate landscapes**.

## Key Management Requirements

- 1.92. The overall management objective is to conserve and enhance the attractive, open character of the scarp.
- 12.93. The key features to be conserved and enhanced include the historic field pattern, with opportunities for hedgerow boundary restoration, archaeological sites, historic designed park and gardens and estate landscapes, and chalk grasslands with opportunities for habitat restoration to extend and link existing sites. The strong skyline, which is a dominant feature from the lower lying Vales should be conserved. The characteristic settlement form and pattern of the springline villages, and the character of the rural lanes that cut up and down the scarp including attractive sunken lanes should be maintained. Consideration should be given to the impact of new development beyond the AONB boundary on both the character of the AONB and in views from the higher ground.