

theme 4 Historic Environment

AONB Special Qualities: Historic Environment



Medieval and post-medieval settlements with historic buildings like churches and tithe barns



Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments such as stone circles, barrows and chalk figures



Country houses, landscaped gardens and medieval deer parks



Post-medieval infrastructure including windmills, canals, railways and WW2 airfields

Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman relicts such as field systems, castles and the Roman town of Cunetio





“What is truly remarkable about the White Horse is not that people at some time in the ancient past took the trouble to cut it into the hillside ... but that continuously for over twenty centuries others have made the effort to maintain it. Whatever religious or ritualistic significance the White Horse may have had to its creators has long since faded away. For most of its existence ... the White Horse has been preserved simply because people liked it.”

Bill Bryson (Introduction to 'The English Landscape', 2000)

5,000 years ago

evidence of human influence on the area appeared with the creation of barrows at Avebury

3,000 years ago

the Uffington White Horse was carved into the chalk of the North Wessex Downs



A Landscape Woven with Time

The cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs AONB makes a powerful and fundamental contribution to the present-day landscape and to our own lives

5.1 The North Wessex Downs is an ancient man-made landscape. This cultural heritage makes a powerful and fundamental contribution to the present-day landscape and to our own lives, as Bill Bryson neatly describes. Evidence of human influence on the area extends back at least 5,000 years when the long barrows at Avebury were constructed.

5.2 In the 3,000 years since the Uffington White Horse was carved, the landscape of the North Wessex Downs has constantly evolved to serve the changing needs of the successive generations of the people who have lived and worked here. What we see today is a rich and many-layered patchwork of features that record different stages in its evolution. Together they contribute an irreplaceable sense of time and personality to the present day scene. Past human influence is etched in every facet of the landscape – in the shape of fields and woods, the alignment of tracks and lanes, the form and texture of villages and hamlets. In years to come, the landscape of the North Wessex Downs will continue to evolve, but hopefully in ways that will allow the ingrained reminders of its past to add meaning and value to the lives of its future residents and visitors.

5.3 The importance of the historic environment is clearly recognised in the planning system. The National Planning and Policy Framework (NPPF) confirms that the significance of heritage assets lies in their interest and value not only to people today, but also to future generations¹. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. The significance of an asset derives not only from physical presence, but also from its setting – in other words, its relationship to nearby historic places and within the wider landscape.

Many of the area's archaeological sites have national or even international recognition

Features of the North Wessex Downs

5.4 A wide range of features of differing scale, visibility and significance make up the historic environment. Many of the area's archaeological sites have national or even international recognition. The landscape that includes the complex of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments around Avebury (and including Silbury Hill, West Kennet long barrow, the causewayed enclosure on Windmill Hill, dozens of Bronze Age barrows and many other important sites) is of such global significance that it has been inscribed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site.

5.5 There are 479 Scheduled Monuments in the North Wessex Downs AONB; one of the densest concentrations in the country. These include:

- ▶ Neolithic long barrows of Waylands Smithy high on the chalk ridge overlooking the Thames Valley and Adam's Grave above the Vale of Pewsey;
- ▶ Bronze Age barrow cemeteries such as the Lambourn Seven Barrows;
- ▶ the Uffington White Horse and its adjacent Iron Age hillfort, (one of a string of major late prehistoric defensive sites that occupy prominent positions on the higher downs);
- ▶ the small Roman town at Cunetio near Mildenhall and Roman villas such as Littlecote; and
- ▶ the medieval motte and bailey castles at Hamstead Marshall and Marlborough College.

5.6 One Registered Battlefield is included within the AONB: Roundway Down, near Devizes. This site was the location of a major encounter fought in July 1643 when a Parliamentarian army was heavily defeated by a significantly smaller Royalist force.

5.7 In addition to designated archaeological features, the local Historic Environment Records (HERs) maintained by the County Councils in Hampshire and Oxfordshire and the unitary



authorities in Wiltshire, Swindon and West Berkshire, contain records of more than 11,000 sites, monuments and finds of archaeological and historic interest within the boundary of the North Wessex Downs. Even though they may not yet have been designated as scheduled monuments, many of these sites are of national importance. Many others are of local significance and make a real contribution to local distinctiveness and sense of place. The information contained on the HERs is a vital part of the jigsaw of information that allows us to understand how our communities have developed and our landscapes have evolved over more than six millennia.

5.8 Another important part of the local heritage is the extensive network of footpaths, bridleways and byways, including the ancient ridgeway paths along the Marlborough Downs to the Chilterns and beyond. These historic communication routes are a characteristic feature of the AONB and are now a valuable recreational resource.

5.9 The built environment also makes a fundamental contribution to the landscape. The North Wessex Downs contain 4,069 Listed Buildings. More than 250 of these are listed at Grade I or II*, the two highest levels of importance. Buildings protected through

listing take many different forms and reflect nearly a thousand years of human settlement. As well as grand country houses, the market towns in the AONB are enriched by the town houses of wealthy merchants and its villages by many splendid medieval parish churches. Listed buildings in the North Wessex Downs also include: some spectacular and very early barns; locks and other structures associated with the Kennet and Avon Canal; milestones, roadside pumps and signs related to turnpike roads; and pillboxes built as part of the planned defence of Britain in the early phase of the Second World War.

5.10 The North Wessex Downs AONB includes 15 Registered Parks and Gardens. One of these, Highclere Park, is registered at Grade I, and four examples, Tottenham House, Purley Hall, Ashdown House and Inkpen House, are registered as II*. Although not on the national Register, many other areas of designed landscape, including historic parkland, gardens and cemeteries add significant local value, especially within and around some of the AONB's towns and larger villages.

Page 51 White horse at Uffington, David Newham/Alamy Stock Photo
Page 52 Archaeological dig, Oliver Cripps
Page 53 Silbury Hill, David Hall

i NPPF paragraph 184.



Page 54 Ashdown House in Berkshire, Peter Orr; Savernake Forest, David Hall; Cottages at Great Bedwyn, Stan Green
Page 55 Church at Aldbourne and Denford Millhouse, both Stan Green

5.11 As with the archaeological resource, many local buildings and structures remain unprotected through the Listing mechanism. Nonetheless, they contribute to the landscape or to our understanding of historic events or processes. Some of these lie within the 109 Conservation Areas designated by local authorities in settlements of particular historic character or significance. Many others, especially isolated structures or farm buildings, receive little or no formal protection.

5.12 A further heritage asset, often overlooked in terms of importance to the historic landscape, is managed woodland, including deer parks, hunting forests, irreplaceable ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees. These areas, managed sensitively, play a significant role in protecting archaeological earthworks from damage by cultivation.

Historic Landscape Character

5.13 Defining and mapping the Historic Landscape Character Areas for the North Wessex Downs has provided new insights into the evolution of the landscape and the historic processes that have influenced the countryside. Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) is a way of analysing and recording how several millennia of human interaction with the land produces the rural landscape of today. It is nationally recognised as a means for understanding and managing the entire landscape and not just the isolated archaeological sites and buildings traditionally protected by scheduling or listing.

5.14 Better appreciation of how the landscape has evolved in relation to its underlying geology and changing socio-economic circumstances is vitally important. The methodology brings together a wealth of information, including semi-natural and living features (woodlands, hedges, etc.) as much as archaeological features, with a clear recognition of the dynamic nature of the landscape, interpreting landscape on the basis of its 'time-depth' – the natural and cultural history that has produced the landscapes we find in the AONB today.

5.15 The main aims of the HLC process are to gain a fuller understanding of the whole AONB landscape, to raise awareness among local communities, visitors and the wider population of the unique cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs, and to provide a tool for the integrated management of the area's historic environment. The resource informs planning decisions, provides a framework for policy making and research and improves the county-based Sites and Monument Records (SMRs) and Historic Environment Records (HERs).

5.16 Whilst confirming that the landscape of the North Wessex Downs has always been predominantly rural, the HLC process has begun to show how its detailed character has changed over time. One of the most significant statistics concerns the loss of open chalk downland. Of the 18% of the area that could be characterised as unploughed pasture in the 19th century, just 3% survives today.

5.17 The rate of agricultural change is also illustrated by the fact that around 75% of pre-18th century field enclosures have been lost during the 20th century. In addition, some two-thirds of medieval 'assart enclosures' (woodland clearances) have been lost or significantly modified in the same period.

Settlement Pattern

5.18 The pattern and distribution of settlement within the North Wessex Downs has evolved over millennia of human occupation. However, most of the current towns, villages, hamlets and farms are likely to have originated in medieval or post-medieval times. Some of the most characteristic features of the Open Downland and Downland with Woodland Landscape Character Types are the long linear settlements of the river valleys – the main concentrations of population in otherwise open uninhabited downland. Characteristically, these are loosely strung along a road on the first contour above the winter flood level, with the winterbourne or river forming an integral feature of the village. Examples are at St Mary Bourne in Hampshire, Collingbourne Kingston in Wiltshire and Hampstead Norreys in Berkshire.

The landscape of the North Wessex Downs AONB has always been predominantly rural

5.19 The pattern in the Lowland Mosaic Landscape Character Type is distinctly different. This reflects its medieval origins in a network of hamlets, and lines of houses and villages along roads. Some villages have a clear nucleus, typically associated with a village green or church, while others have a more dispersed pattern, typical of post-medieval squatter settlements. This pattern is also reflected in the Downland with Woodland Landscape Character Type, which has small clustered hamlets and villages sheltering in folds in the chalk, as in the Chutes in Wiltshire, or exposed on ridgetops, as at Faccombe in Hampshire. Evidence from the Domesday Survey of 1086 suggests that the creation of many of these settlements were during the Early Medieval (Saxon) period.

5.20 Another distinct settlement type of the North Wessex Downs is the string of attractive, small, springline villages that developed along the base of the lower north-facing scarp. Examples are Clyffe Pypard, Clevancy, Liddington, Letcombe, Ashbury and Bishopstone.

AONB Special Qualities: Historic Environment

- 5.21 **Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual and funerary monuments** including Knap Hill and Windmill Hill causewayed enclosures; West Kennet and Wayland’s Smithy chambered tombs; Silbury Hill; Avebury stone circle and its surrounding ceremonial landscape; Bronze Age round barrows including Seven Sisters and Seven Barrows groups.
- 5.22 **Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman defences and settlements**, including Oldbury, Barbury Castle and Uffington Castle; Cunetio (Mildenhall) Roman town, Littlecote villa and the Roman road through Savernake Forest; Fyfield and Overton Down field systems; Wansdyke, Grim’s Ditch and Devil’s Ditch linear earthworks.
- 5.23 **Medieval and post-medieval settlements and buildings**, including castle earthworks, tithe barns, parish churches, and the layouts and historic buildings of Marlborough, Hungerford, Ramsbury and many smaller villages.
- 5.24 **Country houses and landscaped parks and gardens** such as at Basildon Park, Highclere Castle, Tottenham House and

Ramsbury Manor and Savernake Forest, many originating as medieval deer parks.

- 5.25 **Post-medieval buildings and infrastructure** including the Kennet and Avon Canal; extant and former railway lines and tunnels; watermills, windmills and pumping stations; water meadows; 18th/19th-century planned farmsteads; First and Second World War airfields, pillboxes, ammunition dumps and practice trenches.



Only 3% of the open chalk downland that existed as unploughed pasture in the 19th century is left today

Around 75% of the area’s pre-18th century field enclosures were lost during the 20th century





Page 56 Waylands Smithy, NWD AONB
Page 57 Avebury stone monuments, David Hall

Historic Environment: Key Issues, AONB Strategic Objectives and Policies

The historic environment in the North Wessex Downs AONB faces a range of challenges which this Plan will address through the implementation of key objectives and policies

5.26 Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the AONB's Historic Environment Special Qualities:

- a) Lack of knowledge about the broader historic landscape of the North Wessex Downs – the landscape speaks eloquently of its cultural history, but this needs to be better understood and more closely applied to management objectives.
- b) Many undiscovered archaeological sites, especially in wooded areas.

- c) Insufficient understanding of the historical evolution of individual settlements and how this should influence their future development.
- d) The need for a more consistent approach to the designation and management of Conservation Areas, in particular the systematic use of Conservation Area appraisals and management plans.
- e) Development pressure threats to the historic fabric and visual character of traditional market towns.
- f) Impact on archaeological sites, their settings and integrity, of inappropriate development, including siting of large agricultural buildings, renewable energy infrastructure, road infrastructure, traffic and signage.
- g) Poorly sited and designed new development that fails to reflect the historic form of settlements and building groups, their character and setting.
- h) Infilling and over-expansion on small plots, which may erode the traditional mixed character of individual settlements.
- i) Loss of local vernacular architecture and traditional farmstead layouts, especially through the insensitive conversion of traditional agricultural buildings.
- j) Loss of grazing animals, which is threatening the important archaeological sites with damage from uncontrolled scrub encroachment.
- k) Poorly managed recreational access to sensitive archaeological/cultural sites, including damage caused by inappropriate, irresponsible or illegal use of off-road motorised vehicles.
- l) Continued deep ploughing over archaeological sites and remains, and damage from burrowing animals.
- m) Impact of planting trees or biomass crops either directly on archaeological features, or on the character of the historic landscape through poor design and siting.
- n) Impact of modern farming practices on the character of the historic landscape.

5.27 AONB Strategic Objectives for 2019-2024: Historic Environment

S.09 Promote wider use and understanding of Historic Landscape Characterisation to inform and guide strategic planning, development decisions, land management practices and other forces for change.

S.10 Protect archaeological and historic features, sites and their landscape setting against inappropriate development and management practices.

S.11 Support the inclusion of measures in neighbourhood plans to conserve and to enhance the character of settlements.



5.28 AONB Policies: Historic Environment

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| HE 01 | Support efforts to ensure that sites, features and landscapes of historical importance are appropriately identified, recorded and managed. |
| HE 02 | Encourage voluntary-sector research and collaboration on poorly understood aspects of the local historic environment. |
| HE 03 | Encourage all stakeholders to use the English Heritage at Risk Register to focus on archaeological sites, historic buildings and conservation areas in special need of action. |
| HE 04 | Work closely with the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Partnership and other groups to develop shared objectives and deliver joint actions in support of the World Heritage Site Management Plan. |
| HE 05 | Promote the production and publication of 'local lists' of heritage assets. |
| HE 06 | Support initiatives that seek to provide long-term sustainable management of important heritage assets for social and economic benefits. |
| HE 07 | Identify and promote opportunities to include the historic environment in community-generated Village Design Statements, Parish and Neighbourhood Plans, etc., linked where appropriate to Conservation Area Appraisals. |
| HE 08 | Promote and encourage the use of Historic Landscape and Historic Settlement Characterisation to inform land management, policy making and planning decisions. |
| HE 09 | Support more and better explanation, interpretation and promotion of the historic environment for residents and visitors. |
| HE 10 | Support collaborative historic environment activity involving professional and voluntary sectors, such as research and advice from historic environment experts. |