

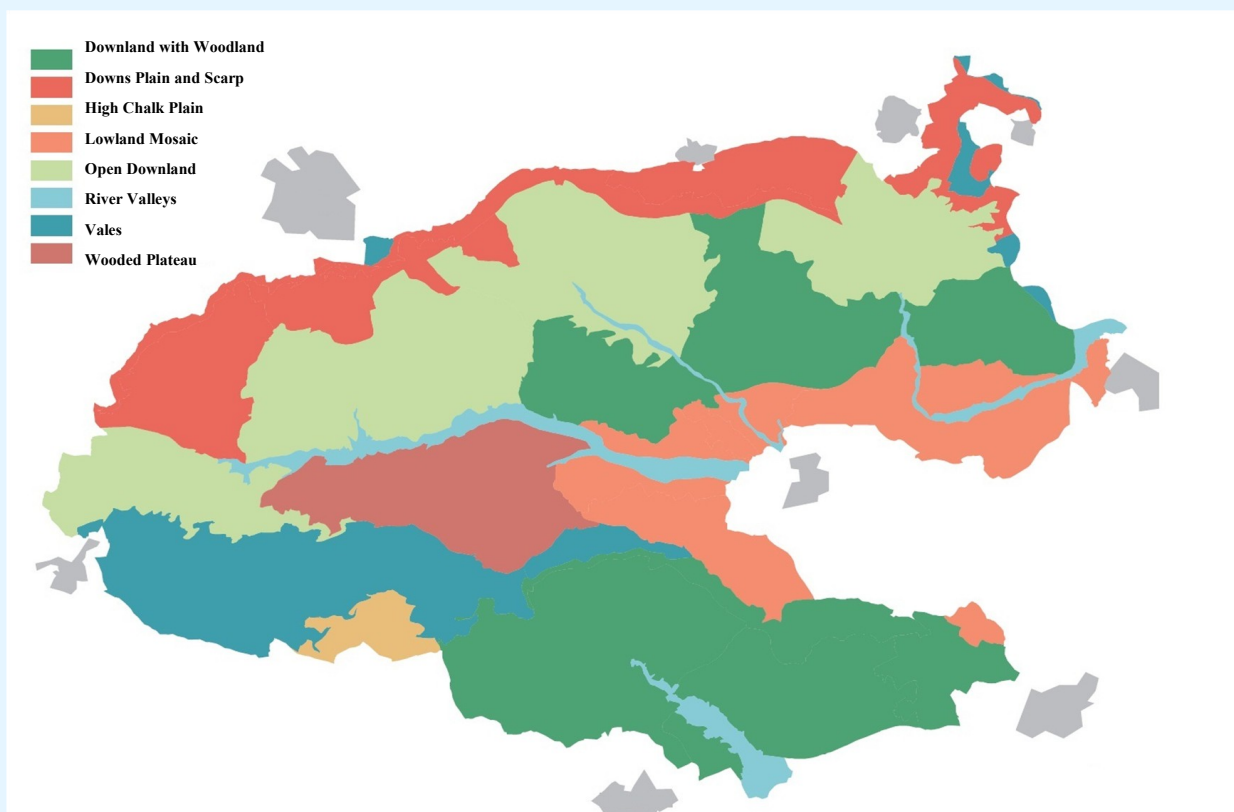
# Factsheet

## Landscape Types in the North Wessex Downs

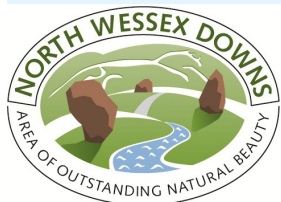
Although almost entirely a chalk landscape, the North Wessex Downs' character differs markedly across the area, depending on local surface geology, soils, landform, land use, vegetation and settlement patterns.

A landscape assessment for the North Wessex Downs was published in 2002. This identifies the overall diversity of the landscape, recognising eight Landscape Character Types across the North Wessex Downs, each with their own distinct sense of place. The eight types are described in as follows.

### Landscape Character types of the North Wessex Downs



The landscape of the **Downs Plain and Scarp** extends along the northern boundary of the North Wessex Downs. The plain is formed by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, extending as a wide ledge at the foot of the high Open Downland. The distinctive northern scarp plunges down from the chalk plain to the Vale of White Horse, creating a dramatic recognisable horizon when viewed from the north. This area is characterised by: the Ridgeway – running along the top of the scarp; the Uffington White Horse on the scarp face; and Avebury on the open Downs Plain. The Downs Plain is characterised by vast arable fields, lack of surface water and a general absence of settlement.







The **Open Downland** forms the backbone of the North Wessex Downs as an elevated plateau of the Hard Middle and Upper Chalks. The landscape is of open, smoothly rounded downland dissected by dry valleys and long sinuous steep scarps and is devoid of surface water. Tree cover is limited to distinctive beech clumps crowning summits and occasional linear shelter belts.

This is a remote, tranquil landscape of panoramic views where the sky forms a key part of the landscape, including the effect of cloud shadows on the ground and the wind creating swells through the crops. The dominant land use is of vast sweeping arable fields with small remnant patches of chalk grassland on steeper slopes. Settlement is extremely sparse and limited to scattered farmsteads and racing stables.

#### Downland with Woodland

This landscape is distinctly different from the Open Downland. It is of lower elevation and has a thick capping of clay-with-flints over the chalk. It has softer contours and considerably greater woodland cover.

The scale is smaller, with field patterns a mixture of small irregular medieval enclosures and larger regular Parliamentary enclosures. Hedgerows and a mosaic of woodland cover, notably on the clay summits and as sinuous hangers along steeper slopes, create a sense of containment. There are also considerable areas of wood pasture and parkland. Agricultural land use is more varied, with an intermixing of arable and pasture. Small villages nestle in sheltered valleys or are strategically located on ridge tops, with widespread scattered traditional farmsteads.

#### Wooded plateau

Centred on the woodland tracts of Savernake Forest and West Woods, the extent of this largely wooded area reflects the bounds of the medieval royal hunting forest of Savernake. Throughout this gently dipping plateau, a thick covering of clay-with-flints and Tertiary deposits mask the solid chalk and results in damp and heavy soils.

Today, the Forest consists of extensive tracts of semi-natural ancient woodland, wood pasture with majestic veteran trees, and 18th and 19th Century Beech plantations, as well as more recent coniferous plantations. Reflecting its origins as a royal hunting forest, the countryside remains undeveloped, with settlement limited to villages in the valley of the River Dun – Great and Little Bedwyn.

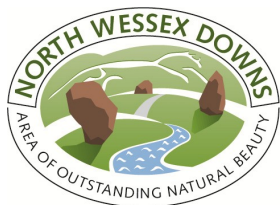
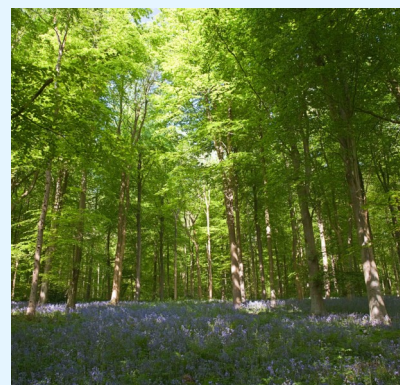
**Open Downland**



**Downland with woodland**



**Wooded plateau**



Photos : David Hall (left to right)  
Broad Town  
Alton Barnes  
West Woods

Landscapes  
for life  
.org.uk

THE NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION  
Areas of Outstanding  
Natural Beauty





### High Chalk Plain

This is the northernmost tip of Salisbury Plain. The open rolling landform of the Upper Chalk creates a bleak, spacious landscape under arable production and devoid of settlement, with long views and a strong sense of remoteness and isolation. A dramatic escarpment forms the northern boundary, as at Pewsey Hill and Fyfield Down, and provides panoramic views across the Vale of Pewsey to the north.

### Vales

The Vale of Pewsey separates the two main upland chalk blocks that dominate the North Wessex Downs. The towering shapes of the adjacent chalk scarps contain and enclose this Greensand vale. Numerous springs issue from the chalk and Greensand boundary where the water table comes to the surface, their streams meandering across the Vale floor.

Rich loamy and alluvial soils create a productive agricultural landscape with a mix of arable, orchards and pasture now replacing a once predominantly pastoral scene important for dairying – hence the saying ‘chalk and cheese’, identifying the very different landscapes of the downs and the vale. The concentration of settlements is a defining feature of the Vale, including compact nucleated villages and hamlets, with widespread scattered farmsteads. The ‘Vales character type also occurs at the north-eastern edge of the North Wessex Downs, with the sections of the Thames valley floor that lie within this AONB. The eastern part of the Thames valley floor here lies within the adjoining Chilterns AONB.

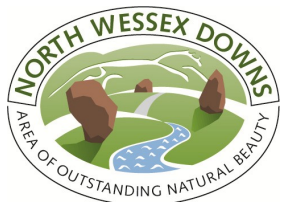
### Pewsey Vale



### River Valleys

The chalk rivers that cut through the chalk uplands form very distinct linear landscapes, characterised by a rich mix of grazed pastures, water meadows, wetland and woodland. The valleys are enclosed by steeply rising slopes, limiting views and creating an intimate and enclosed character.

Historically, the main settlements of the chalk were concentrated in these river valleys. These settlements took a long linear form, following the bottom of the valley, and this remains the dominant pattern to this day. The chalk uplands (in other character areas) are also cut by numerous dry valleys, which sometimes contain ephemeral ‘winterbournes’ only flowing when the chalk water table rises to the surface during the winter and early spring.



Landscapes  
for life  
.org.uk

THE NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION  
Areas of Outstanding  
Natural Beauty





### Lowland Mosaic

This is the lowest part of the 'bowl', curving around Newbury and the lower Kennet valley. This landscape, of largely Medieval origins has a varied geology of clays, silts and sands giving rise to a diverse mix of soils and, in turn, a mosaic of ancient semi-natural woodlands, plantations, remnant heathland and more open farmland areas.

This is a small-scale and intimate landscape, where lanes are frequently overhung by deep grassy and wooded banks, heightening the sense of seclusion. There are some limited longer views, as at Bucklebury Upper Common. The network of ancient semi-natural woodland, connecting hedgerows, areas of parkland, including wood pasture and veteran trees, create considerable ecological interest.

Former Medieval deer parks are a particular feature, as at Englefield, Highclere and Hampstead, with a number of these having been re-fashioned in the 18th Century as formal designed landscapes. This is one of the most densely inhabited areas of the North Wessex Downs, with large manor houses, a network of hamlets, and lines of houses and villages that have grown along the network of lanes.

### Summary of Landscape types

Downs Plain and Scarp  
Open Downland  
Downland with woodland  
Wooded plateau  
High Chalk Plain  
Vales  
River Valleys  
Lowland Mosaic

*Ashdown House*



*The Ridgeway*

