

## Chapter 5 Theme 4: Historic Environment

*“What is truly remarkable about the White Horse [at Uffington] 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 – through plague, war and famine... the White Horse has been preserved simply because people liked it. I think that is splendid.”*

Bill Bryson (Introduction to ‘The English Landscape’, 2000)

6.1 The North Wessex Downs is an ancient landscape, shaped by human hands. 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.

6.2 In the three thousand years since the Uffington White Horse was sculpted, the landscape of the North Wessex Downs has been continually shaped 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 demonstrate the different stages in its evolution. Together these features contribute an irreplaceable sense of time and character 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, even the courses of streams and rivers. In years to come, the landscape of the North Wessex Downs will continue to evolve, but, it is to be hoped, in ways that will allow the underlying reminders of its past to add meaning and value to the lives of its future residents and visitors.

6.3 The importance of the historic environment is clearly recognised in the planning system. The National Planning and Policy Framework (NPPF) confirms that significance of heritage assets lies not only in their interest and value to people today but also to future generations.<sup>1</sup> 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.

6.4 Heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource. They deliver wide social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits. Change is inevitable and so in the face of mounting threats, careful management is needed. There is a deficit in the understanding not only the historical evolution of individual settlements and how this should influence their future development, but also in the overall quantity of archaeological assets in the NWD, particularly in woodland areas.

### Features of the North Wessex Downs

6.4 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 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 on the World Heritage List by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site.

6.5 There are 478 Scheduled Monuments in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, one of the densest concentrations in the country. These include:

- Neolithic long barrows at Waylands Smithy high on the chalk ridge overlooking the Thames Valley and at Adam’s Grave above the Vale of Pewsey
- Bronze Age barrow cemeteries such the Lambourn Seven Barrows and the Windmill Hill complex (barrows comprise over 60% of the scheduled monuments in the NDWNL)
- the Uffington White Horse and its adjacent Iron Age hillfort, (one of a string of major late prehistoric monuments that occupy prominent positions on the higher downs)
- the small Roman town at *Cunetio* near Mildenhall and Roman settlements such as Maddle Farm and the villa at Littlecote
- the mediaeval motte and bailey castles at Hamstead Marshall and Marlborough College.

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

6.7 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. Whilst these features may not be designated as scheduled monuments, many of these sites are of national importance. Many others are of local or regional significance and make a substantial 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 several thousand years.

6.8 Another important aspect 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 and trade routes are a characteristic feature of the North Wessex Downs and, in addition to being a legacy of human activity, they are now a valuable recreational resource.

6.9 The built environment also makes a fundamental contribution to the landscape. The North Wessex Downs contain 4,088 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 National Landscape are peppered with town houses of wealthy merchants and the villages are host to splendid mediaeval parish churches. Listed buildings in the North Wessex Downs also include very early farm buildings and barns, as well as locks and other structures associated with the Kennet and Avon Canal. Listed milestone markers, roadside pumps, and signs related to turnpike roads tell the story of moving about the post mediaeval landscape, and pillboxes built during the early phase of the Second World War illustrate the North Wessex Downs' part in the planned defence of Britain against expected invasion.

6.10 The North Wessex Downs include 15 Registered Parks and Gardens. One of these, Highclere Castle, is registered Grade I, and four examples, Tottenham House, Purley Hall, Ashdown House and Inkpen House, are registered as II\*. Many other areas of designed landscape, including historic parkland, gardens and cemeteries, whilst not on the National Register, nonetheless add significant local value.

6.11 As with the undesignated archaeological resource, many local buildings and structures remain unprotected through the listing mechanism. Even so, they contribute both to our understanding of historic events or processes, and to the overall narrative of the National Landscape. Some of these lie within the 109 Conservation Areas designated by local authorities in settlements of particular historic character or significance. Many others, however, particularly isolated structures or farm buildings, receive little or no formal protection.

6.12 A further heritage asset, often overlooked in terms of importance to the historic landscape, is managed woodland. This can include deer parks, hunting forests, irreplaceable ancient woodland, as well as ancient and veteran trees, historic pollard trees and coppice stools. These areas, managed sensitively, can play a significant role in protecting archaeological earthworks from damage from cultivation.

## Historic Landscape Character

6.13 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 individual and often isolated archaeological sites and buildings traditionally protected by scheduling or listing.

6.14 A greater appreciation of how the landscape has evolved in relation to its underlying geology, human interventions and activities, and changing socio-economic circumstances is vitally important. The HLC methodology brings together a wealth of information, including semi-natural and living features (e.g., woodland, hedges, waterways) 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 North Wessex Downs today.

6.15 The HLC process facilitates a fuller understanding of the whole protected landscape, not only raising awareness of the unique cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs among local communities, visitors and the wider population, but also providing 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, whilst improving the county-based Sites and Monument Records (SMRs) and Historic Environment Records (HERs).

6.16 HLC has confirmed that the landscape of the North Wessex Downs has always been predominantly rural, but it has also illustrated 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 19th century, barely 3% survives today.

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

## Settlement Pattern

6.18 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 mediaeval or post-mediaeval times. Some of the most characteristic features of the 'Downland' and 'Downland with Woodland' landscape character areas 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.

6.19 The pattern in the 'Lowland Mosaic' landscape character area is distinctly different. This reflects its mediaeval origins in a network of hamlets, 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-mediaeval squatter settlements. This pattern is also reflected in the 'Downland with Woodland' landscape 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 Facombe in Hampshire. Evidence from the Domesday Survey of 1086 suggests that the creation of many of these settlements was during the Early Mediaeval (Saxon) period.

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

### National Landscape Valued Qualities: **Historic Environment**

- 6.21 **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, and Bronze Age round barrows including Seven Sisters and Seven Barrows groups.
- 6.22 **Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman defences and settlements**, including hillforts at Oldbury, Barbury Castle and Uffington Castle, the Roman town of *Cunetio* (Mildenhall), Littlecote villa, the Roman road through Savernake Forest, Fifield and Overton Down field systems and the linear earthworks of the Wansdyke, Grim's Ditch and Devils Ditch.
- 6.23 **Mediaeval and post-mediaeval settlements and buildings**, including castle earthworks, tithe barns, parish churches, and the layouts and historic buildings of Marlborough, Hungerford, Ramsbury and many smaller villages
- 6.24 **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 mediaeval deer parks.
- 6.25 **Post-mediaeval buildings and infrastructure** including the Kennet and Avon Canal, extant and former railway lines and tunnels, watermills, windmills, pumping stations, water meadows, 18th–19th-century planned farmsteads, and First and Second World War airfields, pillboxes, ammunition dumps and practice trenches.

### **Historic Environment: Key Issues, Priorities and Policies**

6.27 **Key issues** with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Historic Environment Valued Qualities:

#### ***Development pressure issues***

- Inappropriately sited or poorly designed new development that fails to reflect the historic fabric and visual character of traditional market towns and villages.
- Insensitive conversions, inappropriate siting of agricultural buildings or infrastructure for renewable energy and transport.
- Erosion of traditional mixed character of settlements from infilling and over-expansion on small plots
- Negative impacts to buried and undesignated archaeology from planting trees or biomass crops directly on archaeological features.
- Limited consistency in the designation and management of Conservation Areas, in particular the systematic use of Conservation Area appraisals and management plans.

#### ***Land management practices***

- A decline of traditional agriculture and industry leading to changes in land and woodland management
- Loss of grazing animals, threatening archaeological sites with damage from uncontrolled scrub encroachment
- Uncontrolled or inappropriate scrub management makes archaeology more vulnerable to burrowing animals.
- Deep ploughing over archaeological sites and remains
- Some modern farming practices impact on the overall character of the historic landscape.
- Inappropriate tree planting and wetland creation as a response to national targets and green finance incentives threaten both archaeological sites and visual landscape character.

#### ***Poor understanding and limited engagement***

- Poor or incomplete understanding of some aspects of heritage in the North Wessex Downs, particularly woodland
- Limited data for condition monitoring of sites at risk

- Narrow audience demographic engaged with heritage in the landscape.
- Insufficient accessibility to the heritage of the wider landscape to enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the North Wessex Downs.
- Inappropriate or illegal use of off-road motorised vehicles, which places sensitive sites at risk.

#### 6.27 Historic Environment Priorities

- Increase the knowledge and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs heritage and culture by local residents, visitors and the wider public, and bring a love of heritage to wider parts of society.
- Seek new discoveries of unknown heritage assets and improve understanding of those already identified, to reveal the significance of the historic environment and cultural heritage of the National Landscape
- Develop a better understanding of the current condition of heritage assets of the National Landscape, beyond the Heritage Risk Register
- 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.
- Secure greater protection for archaeological and historic features, sites, and their landscape settings in the face of inappropriate development or management practices.

#### 6.28 NWDNL Historic Environment Policies

- HE 01** Encourage and facilitate work to improve the condition of assets in order to remove them from 'At Risk' status and explore the designation or greater protection of new assets through work with local Historic Environment Records and Historic England
- HE 02** Encourage and support collaborative activity on poorly understood aspects of the local historic environment, involving professional and voluntary sectors, such as research and advice from historic environment experts and use of citizen science.
- HE 03** 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** Encourage the production and publication of 'local lists' of heritage assets.
- HE 06** Encourage owners of designated heritage assets to create Conservation/ Heritage Management Plans and manage/restore assets appropriately.
- HE 07** 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, better, and joined-up explanation, interpretation and promotion of the historic environment for residents and visitors.

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<sup>i</sup> (9) NPPF paragraph 184.