

North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment

Landscape Character Assessment

LCT 3

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

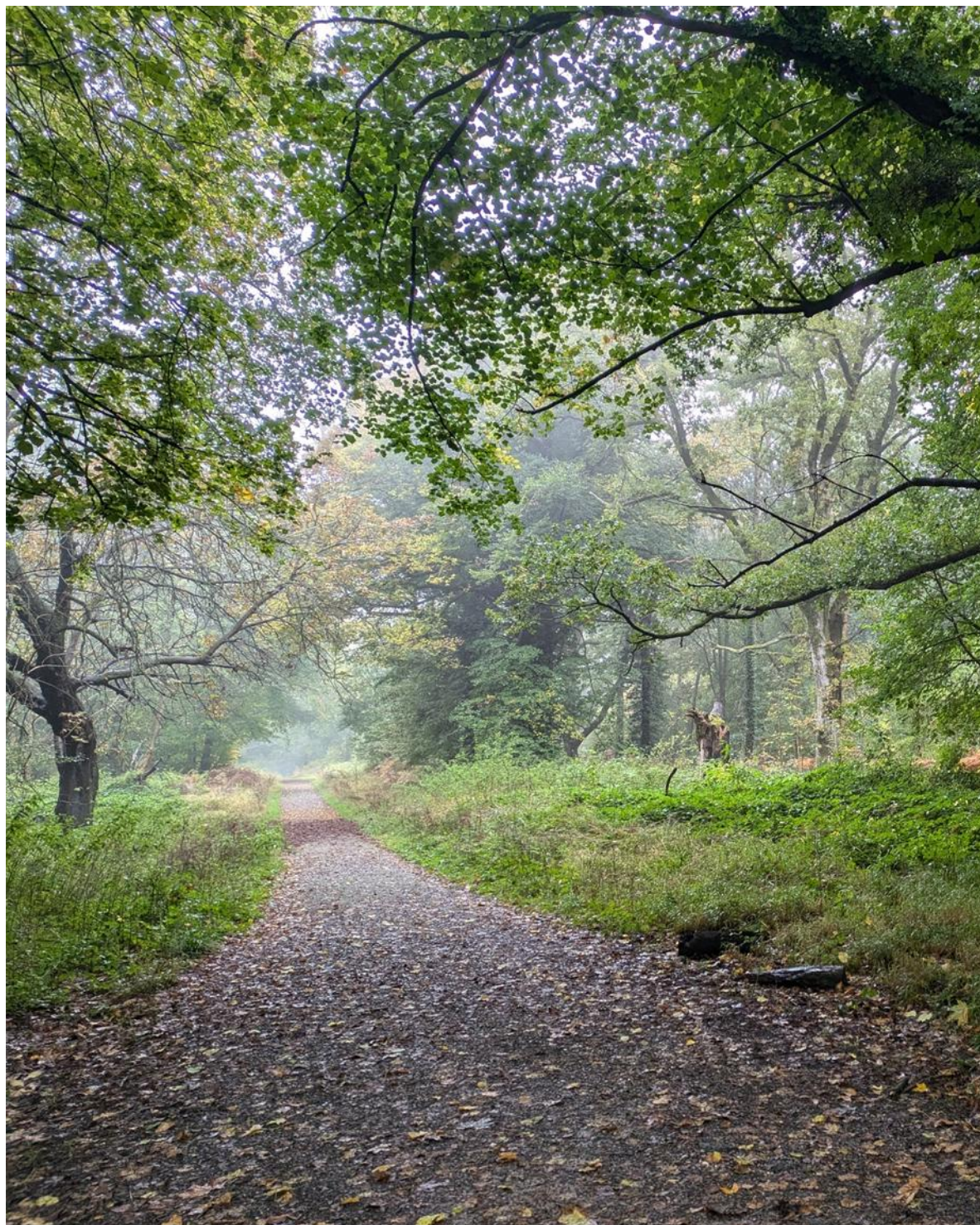
Draft report

Prepared by LUC

July 2025

LCT 3 Wooded Plateau

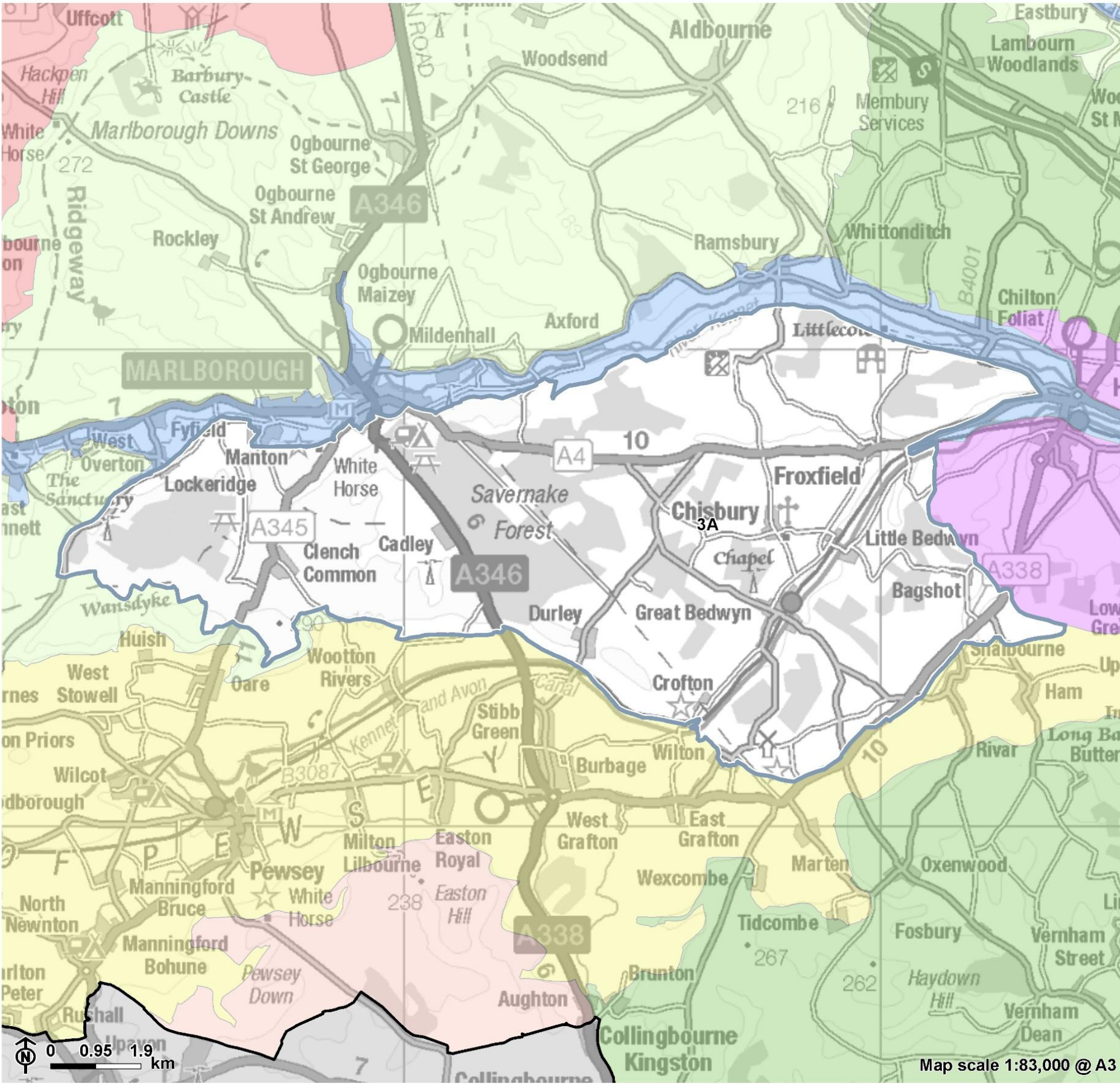
Figure 5.62: Savernake Forest



Location and overview

5.249 The Wooded Plateau LCT occurs in one location and is defined as a single character area: the Savernake Plateau. It lies in the west of the National Landscape. The boundary is defined to the north by the valley of the River Kennet (LCA 7A) and to the south by the low-lying Vale of Pewsey (LCA 6A), where the wooded plateau terminates as a steep scarp. The west and eastern boundaries are less clearly defined, in terms of landform or physical features but are determined by a change of geology, with the Middle and Upper Chalk of Horton Down (LCA 1C) becoming prominent to the west, and to the east descending to the Lowland Mosaic (LCT 8).

Figure 5.63: Location of LCT 3 Wooded Plateau



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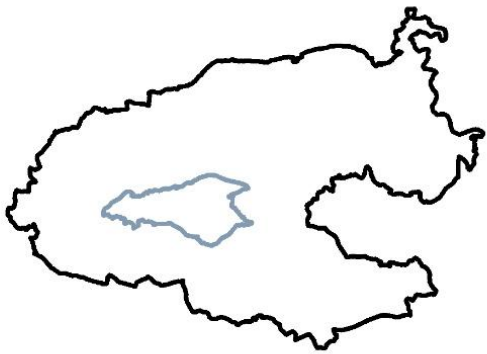


LCT 3 - Wooded Plateau

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Landscape Character Type

- 3: Wooded Plateau
- 3A: Savernake Plateau



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5.250 The Wooded Plateau is an attractive, intimate rural landscape, with qualities of peacefulness and seclusion in contrast to the remoteness and isolation of the adjacent open chalk downs.

5.251 The landscape type forms a single character area, the Savernake Plateau, distinguished by its dense, continuously wooded character. Its boundaries approximately represent the bounds of the medieval Royal Forest of Savernake. Throughout this area, a thick covering of Clay-with-Flint drift deposit masks the solid chalk resulting in rich, damp and heavy soils. The plateau dips gently down to the east towards Froxfield, where it is crossed by the narrow meandering valley of the River Dun, a route subsequently exploited by the Kennet and Avon canal. The waterway is an important feature of the landscape, with a wealth of associated industrial archaeology, including the distinctive brick-built Bruce Tunnel.

5.252 Distinctive, visible archaeological elements are features of the plateau and provide evidence for the past use, organisation and management of the landscape. The Wansdyke, one of the best-known Saxon land boundaries in the country, cuts roughly east west through the area, in some places up to 26 metres wide. Other Saxon survivals include the Bedwyn Dyke fragmentary earthwork, and royal estate at Wootton Rivers. The Forest had been established by the time of the Domesday Survey as a Royal Hunting Forest and today remains the dominant feature of the landscape. Extensive areas of ancient woodland are designated as an SSSI consisting of relict oak wood pasture and 18th and 19th century beech plantation. It is especially notable for its magnificent veteran trees which support an outstanding lichen flora and rich invertebrate fauna, including nationally scarce butterflies and moths. The forest also encompasses Tottenham Park, a 18th century parkland with its majestic avenue, woodland rides, follies and formal planting forming a classic designed landscape.

5.253 There are few settlements within the area, reflecting the extensive woodland cover and patterns of land ownership. Those settlements that do exist are located in the east of the area in the valley of the River Dun, including Great Bedwyn and Little Bedwyn, the former with a surviving village wharf onto the canal. The brickworks at Great Bedwyn provided the source for distinctive rust-coloured bricks that characterise many of the local buildings. Flint churches are prominent landmarks.

LCT 3 Wooded Plateau: Key Characteristics

- High chalk plateau overlain by deposits of Clay-with-Flints. Clays, sands and gravels of London Clay, the Reading Beds, Bagshot Beds and Plateau Gravel are also found to the east.
- Extensive and continuous woodland cover including the ancient wood pasture, semi-natural woodland blocks and beech and oak plantation of Savernake Forest and West Wood, designated as a SSSI.
- Attractive woodland-farmland mosaic surrounds the Forest, with areas of more open arable land.
- Historic parkland and formal designed landscapes of Tottenham Park and Littlecote Park, with their built features, permanent pasture, parkland trees, avenues and rides.
- Small areas of remnant chalk grassland confined to scarp slopes. Relict areas of heathland commons on more acidic clays and gravels.
- Savernake Forest is an extensive woodland established as a Royal Hunting Forest.
- Distinct pattern of settlement comprising a remote uninhabited western plateau and a concentration of villages in the east of the area, in the valley of the River Dun. Building materials include some timber framing, with the main material being red brick.
- The Kennet and Avon Canal and associated industrial archaeological sites are an important feature.
- An extensive network of Public Rights of Way allows good access to the many attractions of the Forest.
- A quiet, rural and secluded character.

LCT 3 Wooded Plateau: Evaluation

Forces for change

5.254 The following are identified as forces for change common to the Wooded Plateau:

- Forestry England adopted a new management plan in spring 2023, Our Shared Forest: Savernake Forest Land Management Plan. The new plan will change the management of the Forest. It sets out a vision to create a more open woodland with associated grassland and heathland clearings, restore ponds and wetlands, and maintain and enhance recreational access and facilities.
- Changes in management for the River Kennet Catchment area aimed at improving the quality of the chalk streams that run through the character area including the Dun, Shalbourne, and Inkpen Stream.
- Tottenham House and Savernake Forest Registered Park and Garden is on the Heritage at Risk Register, although a process of conservation and repair has begun under a new private owner.
- Development pressure from adjacent settlements, particularly Marlborough to the north would impact the rural character and tranquil nature of the landscape.
- Pressure for renewable energy development including solar PV panels would change the appearance of the woodland-farmland mosaic.
- The Wooded Plateau landscapes are susceptible to the impacts of climate change, including:
 - Deciduous woodlands are facing decline due to warmer winters, altered rainfall patterns, drier summers and increased frequency of extreme events. There may be a shift in vegetation type and composition, increased competition from invasive species, greater numbers of insect and mammal pests, a greater risk of infection by various soil and waterborne pathogens, and a greater risk of wind-throw and loss of mature trees. It could also lead to the die-back of certain hedgerow tree species, and increased storm activity may lead to the loss of mature and veteran trees within hedgerows.
- Drier and hotter summers increase fire risk affecting grassland habitats and the recreational resource of the landscape.

- Hotter temperatures may result in increased competition from invasive species and greater numbers of insect and mammal pests. This could impact the choice of crops grown outside the woodlands, and change the appearance of the landscape.
- More extreme weather events leading to a greater risk of wind-throw and loss of mature trees, which could affect the ancient woodlands. Potential windthrow and loss of the characteristic beech clumps a crowning feature of the open downland landscape

Landscape guidelines

5.255 The following are identified as guidelines for protecting and enhancing valued characteristics of the Wooded Plateau, taking into consideration the forces for change which are affecting, or which are expected to affect, this landscape:

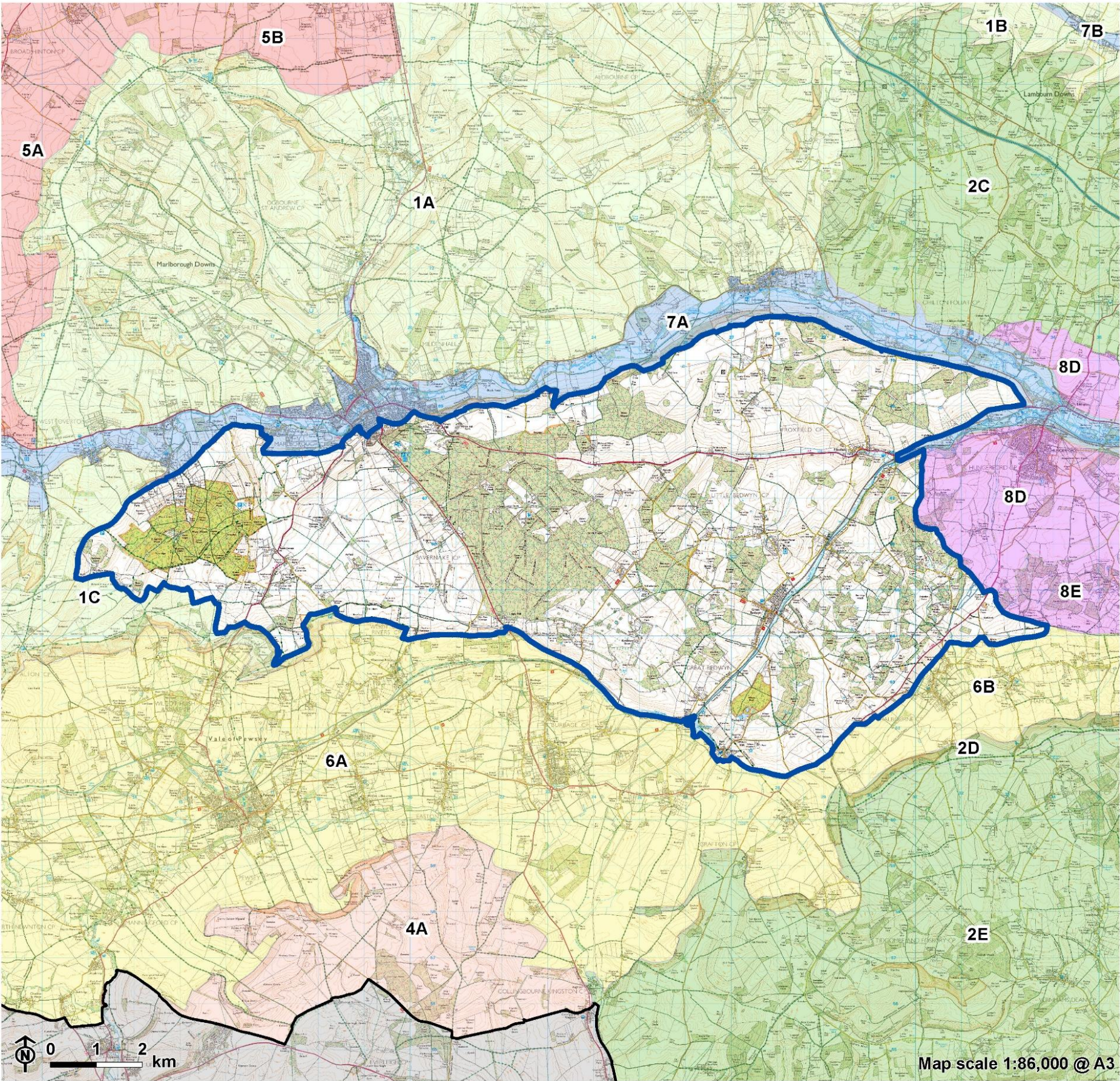
- Adopt and implement Forestry England's Our Shared Forest: Savernake Forest Land Management Plan.
- Focus on replanting areas of coniferous woodland when they reach their natural lifespan to improve biodiversity and ecosystem health. Expand the extent of existing woodland through targeted restoration projects.
- Encourage the appropriate management of woodland, including to reduce the impacts of pests and diseases and to increase its age structure and structural heterogeneity (including creation of glades). Consider the promotion of natural colonisation adjacent to existing woodland, allowing locally native species to develop resilience to the pressures of climate change through natural processes.
- Retain the sparse settlement pattern. Consider the cumulative impact of incremental changes to the small villages through extensions, which may change the character of the settlements.
- Consider the visual and landscape impacts of new solar farms. Use existing and newly planted hedgerow boundaries with appropriate species to screen ground-level features of solar renewable energy developments. Where possible continue the existing land use underneath the solar PV panels.

LCA 3A: Savernake Plateau

Figure 5.64: Ancient woodland in Savernake Forest



Figure 5.65: LCA 3A: Savernake Plateau: Location

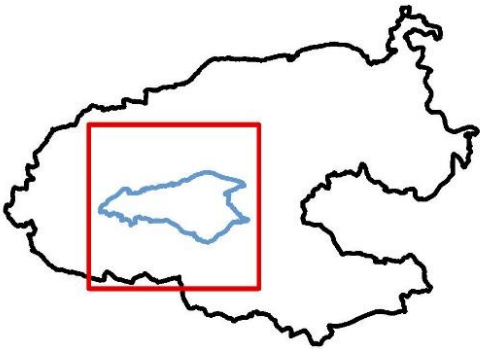


North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape



3A: Savernake Plateau

- North Wessex Downs National Landscape
- Landscape Character Area**
- 3A: Savernake Plateau
 - 1A: Marlborough Downs
 - 1B: Lambourn Downs
 - 1C: Horton Downs
 - 2C: Lambourn Wooded Downs
 - 2D: Walbury Hill - Watership Down Scarp
 - 2E: Chute Forest - Facombe
 - 4A: Salisbury Plain
 - 5A: Avebury Plain
 - 5B: Chiseldon - Wanborough Plain
 - 6A: Vale of Pewsey
 - 6B: Shalbourne Vale
 - 7A: Kennet Valley
 - 7B: Lambourn Valley
 - 8D: Hungerford Farmland
 - 8E: Highclere Parklands



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Figure 5.66: Kennet and Avon canal near Crofton



Figure 5.67: Moasiac of arable farmland and woodlands



LCA 3A: Savernake Plateau: Description

5.256 The LCA location is the same as described for the Landscape Character Type).

Natural Influences

Landform, geology, water and soils

5.257 The plateau is comprised almost entirely of the Upper Chalk, which is overlain across much of the area by Cretaceous deposits of Clay-with-Flint. Further to the east, clays, sands and gravels of London Clay, the Reading Beds, Bagshot Beds and Plateau Gravel are found. The superficial deposits mask the underlying chalk, creating damper heavier soils which support woodland cover and contribute to the distinct landscape character.

5.258 The plateau dips gently to the east towards Froxfield, where it is crossed by the River Dun, a route subsequently exploited by the Kennet and Avon Canal. The landform of the higher land is typical of the underlying chalk with rolling downland dissected by small valleys. The highest point in the area is Martinsell Hill, to the west, on the boundary with the Horton Downs character area (LCA 1C), which reaches a height of 289 metres AOD. The hills to the east of the area are generally lower, descending to heights of around 150-160 metres AOD.

Biodiversity

5.259 The Wooded Plateau contains a diverse range of habitats, predominantly, as the name suggests, extensive woodland habitats. These comprise a large ancient forest, formal historic parks and estates plus many areas of farmland/woodland mosaic. Remnant chalk grassland areas are small, scarce and found only along the scarp slope of the southern boundary. The Kennet and Avon Canal, with its associated wetland habitats, crosses the eastern part of the area.

5.260 The nationally important Savernake Forest SSSI forms an extensive tract (900 ha) of ancient woodland consisting of relict oak wood pasture and eighteenth and nineteenth century beech and oak plantation. The trees were originally planted in an open parkland pasture setting but are now mixed with more modern broadleaved and coniferous plantation. The wood has over 1,000 years of documented history and contains well over 500 species. With its magnificent ancient oak and beech trees, it is especially notable for its outstanding lichen flora and diverse plant communities, including species with

nationally restricted distributions such as the scarce narrow lipped helleborine and green-flowered helleborine. The rich invertebrate fauna includes several rare insects, including nationally scarce butterflies and moths. The Forest also supports a diverse assemblage of birds and has mammal residents including dormice which are a UK BAP priority species.

Cultural Influences

Land use and field patterns

5.261 The farmland between the extensive woodlands is predominately under arable cultivation, with smaller areas of pasture on the steeper slopes on the southern scarp boundary and the banks of the River Dun.

5.262 South and south-west of Marlborough, and around Rudge and Froxfield, the largely open, modern landscape of large, regular fields is mostly the product of formal Parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prior to this, some areas may have been open grazing or commons. West of Hungerford some more sinuous boundaries may reflect late medieval or early post-medieval informal enclosure. South of Lockeridge, the woods show some signs of assarting, probably post-medieval in date. South of Bedwyn and west of Shalbourne, lots of small copses also show signs of assarting, and the fields are smaller and more irregular. This may reflect informal late medieval or post-medieval enclosure.

5.263 The Kennet and Avon Canal and a now dismantled railway from Marlborough to Andover were important nineteenth century communication routes which exploited the pass through Savernake Plateau from Crofton to Hungerford.

Historic features

5.264 There are a few visible monuments on the Savernake plateau including a Neolithic long barrow in the West Woods and several Bronze Age round barrows on hilltop ridges or higher ground, including two small groups in Savernake Forest and on Bedwyn Common. Linear earthworks visible on Postern Hill, south of Marlborough, may be late Bronze Age or Iron Age in date and a prominent earthwork enclosure at Chisbury also has possible Iron Age origins. Wansdyke in the west is one of the best known of early land boundaries in the country. The earthwork, in places some 26 metres across, runs roughly east-west across the area, before petering out to the west of Cadley. It is thought to have been built around AD 500 as a defence against Saxon attacks

from the north. The Bedwyn Dyke that survives as fragmentary earthworks may also be Saxon, and some modern field and wood boundaries and roads appear to follow its original course. Chisbury was re-used as a Saxon burgh and was later the centre of a royal estate. Along with the Saxon royal estate at Wootton Rivers, it is likely that these formed the basis for the creation of a Royal Forest at Savernake.

5.265 The Savernake Plateau reflects the approximate bounds of the royal forest of Savernake which was at its greatest extent in the 12th century. This was an area circumscribed by defined boundaries, which was the preserve of the king for hunting, particularly deer and wild boar, and was subject to special forest laws, outside the common law. Forest Law, even when not enforced to extremes, inhibited agricultural expansion during a period of population expansion - and the restrictions imposed upon landowners and commoners was a source of much grievance throughout the early medieval period. It was not until the land was returned to common law - a process known as deforestation - which in the case of Savernake occurred in the mid sixteenth century, that changes took place in the landscape which give the area so much of its character today.

5.266 A new great park at Savernake was created in the early eighteenth century, which over the years became a classic 'polite' landscape with wooded rides, follies and plantings and avenues, many of which are still visible today. In the nineteenth century much of Savernake Forest was owned by the Marquis of Ailesbury, and in 1825 Tottenham House was extended and refurbished and the landscape gardens around it enhanced. The pleasure gardens, parkland and forest are now designated as a Grade II* Registered Park and Garden. In 1861 Mary Caroline, the Marchioness of Ailesbury, founded the grandiose St Katherine's church for Savernake estate workers. By the late-19th century the Savernake estate was heavily in debt, and most of the woodlands were eventually handed over to the Forestry Commission. Tottenham House became a school. The estate was bought in 2014 and is being restored to a family home.

5.267 Although only visible in parts, the Icknield Way, the Roman road from Wanborough to Venta (Winchester), ran NW-SE across the area, through the settlement at Cunetio (Mildenhall).

Settlement pattern

5.268 There are few settlements within the Savernake Plateau, reflecting its extensive woodland area and patterns of land ownership. The majority of settlements are located in the east of the area, in the valley of the River Dun

and within the ancient forest. Great Bedwyn and the smaller village of Little Bedwyn are both situated adjacent to the canal. Further up the slope are the smaller hamlets of Chisbury and Froxfield. A number of the settlements are grouped around small greens. There is some timber framing, but the main building material is brick, with a former brickworks at Great Bedwyn, providing a local source and resulting in the distinctive rust-brick buildings of this village. Sarsen stones occur as lintels and gate posts and in foundations, while weatherboarding occurs in areas where woodland is more prevalent, for example in and around Savernake Forest. The flint churches are prominent landmarks.

Principal settlement

5.269 Great Bedwyn is focused on the historic crossroads of the High Street, Farm Lane, Church Street and Brook Street, and lies on the western banks of the River Dun. A Roman road crossed the parish, and Bedwyn is named in the will of King Alfred the Great. The Conservation Area covers this crossroads. The Kennet and Avon canal and Reading to Taunton railway follow the valley of the River Dun, and their introduction increased development in the village. The village vernacular is a mix of thatched and tiled roofs houses built from red brick or dressed ashlar stone. In the 20th century in-fill housing has expanded the village north-east, between the railway line and Brown's Lane.

Figure 5.68: Local vernacular of red brick, thatch or tile roofs



5.270 Great Bedwyn is situated in the shallow valley of the River Dun, surrounded by rolling chalk downland, ancient woodland and mature hedgerow boundaries. The varied topography allows for occasional long-range views between woodland blocks to the distant downlands to the north and south.

Figure 5.69: The setting of Great Bedwyn in the Dun valley



Communications and infrastructure

5.271 Excellent recreational opportunities are provided by Savernake Forest and other large areas of publicly accessible woodland. An extensive public rights of way network allows good access to the woodlands, which are significant attractions offering opportunities to view the magnificent bluebell display in West Woods during May or to walk along the Grand Avenue laid out by 'Capability' Brown in the Savernake Forest. There are picnic sites within these woods and a campsite at Savernake Forest. A section of the Kennet and Avon Canal provides attractive walks and opportunities for coarse fishing and other attractions such as the Crofton Beam Engines. Other recreational routes that run through the area include sections of the Severn and Thames National Cycle Route, the Wiltshire White Horse Trail and a British Horse Society promoted Bridleway (the Downland Villages Riding Route).

Perceptual Influences

5.272 The Savernake Plateau is the most wooded area within the National Landscape. The extensive woodlands create a feeling of enclosure throughout the area with short range, sheltered views framed by large areas of woodland with mature oaks and many mature hedgerows with hedgerow trees. Occasional long-range views are available especially along the southern edge across the valley featuring the Kennet and Avon Canal.

5.273 The enclosed character results in limited views of modern infrastructure, resulting in a tranquil landscape. There is a generally good experience of dark night skies, although some light pollution spills into the area from Marlborough to the north-west and around the railway at Great Bedwyn.

LCA 3A Savernake Plateau: Evaluation

Savernake Plateau valued qualities

5.274 The key valued qualities identified for LCA 3A Savernake Plateau are:

- Distinctive mosaic of woodland and farmland pattern with hedgerows and smaller woodland blocks, which creates a clear sense of place.
- Extensive ancient woodland concentrated at Savernake Forest, which is partially nationally designated for its outstanding lichen flora, fungi, rare invertebrates and breeding bird community.
- Sense of time-depth within Savernake Forest due to its history as a royal hunting forest, and later historic parkland and formal designed landscapes at Tottenham Park.
- The settlement pattern of a remote uninhabited western plateau and small hamlets and villages in the east provides a clear sense of place. Traditional building materials include thatch, red brick, flint, chalk and weatherboard. Distinctive sarsen stones occur as lintels and gate posts and in foundations.
- Historic importance and recreational use of the Kennet and Avon Canal.
- Strong recreational access through areas of open access at West Woods, The White Horse National Trail, National Cycle Routes and numerous woodland walks and recreational paths.
- A quiet, tranquil landscape with generally enclosed views due to the woodland coverage.

Savernake Plateau local forces for change/issues

5.275 As there is only one LCA within the Wooded Plateau LCT, all the forces for change are covered at LCT level.

Savernake Plateau strategy and local guidelines

5.276 As there is only one LCA within the Wooded Plateau LCT, there is no additional local guidance.