North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment

Landscape Character Assessment

The Front End

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Final report
Prepared by LUC
August 2025

Version	Status	Prepared	Checked	Approved	Date
1	Report set up and pilot	A Thompson / A Knight	R Swann	K Ahern	28.11.2024
2	Draft report	A Thompson / A Knight	A Knight	K Davies	23.06.2025
3	Final report	A Knight	A Knight	K Davies	01.08.2025

EMS566057 FS566056 OHS627041

Land Use Consultants Limited
Registered in England. Registered number 2549296. Registered office: 250 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8RD. Printed on 100% recycled paper

Contents

Table of Figures

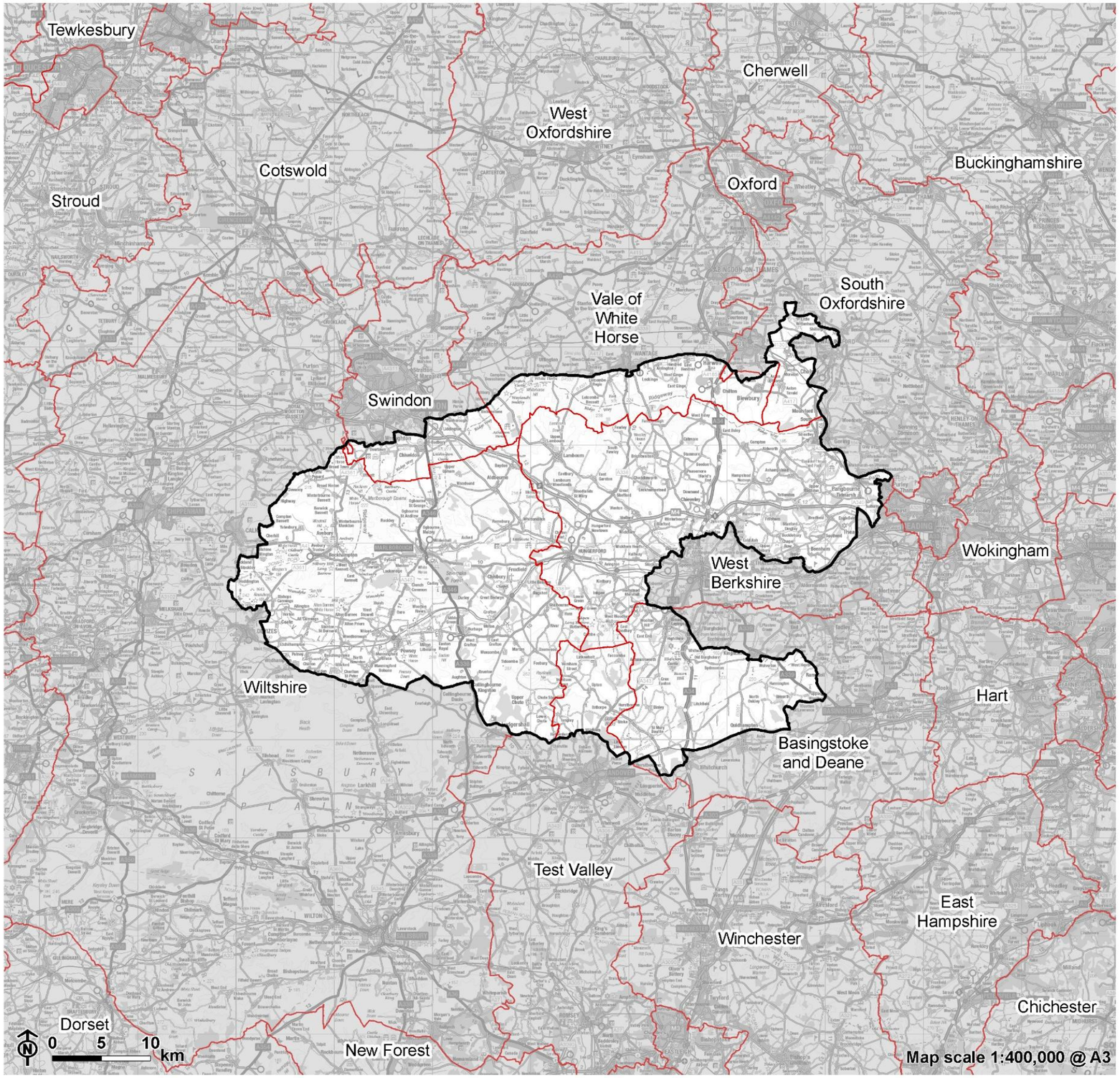
Chapter 1
Introduction

A Nationally Significant Landscape

1.1 The North Wessex Downs is a landscape of national significance as recognised by its designation as a National Landscape. It is one of 46 National Landscapes in England and Wales and is of equivalent importance in terms of landscape quality as a National Park.

1.2 The North Wessex Downs was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1972 (officially renamed a National Landscape in 2023). The designation gives coherence to one of the most continuous tracts of chalk downland in England. It covers 1,730 square kilometres and is one of England's largest National Landscapes. From its western tip at Calne in Wiltshire, it stretches across the South West and South East of England in a broad arc through Swindon, Berkshire and Oxfordshire. It adjoins the Chilterns National Landscape along the River Thames before sweeping south, encircling Newbury, to encompass the northern reaches of the rolling chalk hills of the Hampshire Downs. It then continues towards Devizes across the high chalk upland of Salisbury Plain and the low-lying Vale of Pewsey. The extent and location of the National Landscape is illustrated in Figure 1.1

Figure 1.1: Location of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 1.1: Location of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape

North Wessex Downs National Landscape
Local Authority

1.3 The underlying chalk geology is the uniting theme of the North Wessex Downs and has a profound effect on hydrology, biodiversity, patterns of land use and settlement. The chalklands are etched with the impact of human use over the millennia. The archaeology of the National Landscape is immensely rich, with many of its monuments ranking among the most impressive in Europe, including the World Heritage Site at Avebury. The National Landscape is sparsely populated (approximately 125,000), with the settlement largely located within the river valleys. This concentration of habitation has left intervening open uninhabited downlands. Thus 'pools of tranquillity' with a strong sense of remoteness are an important feature of the National Landscape - a very special perceptual characteristic within the densely populated part of Southern England.

1.4 The North Wessex Downs is a landscape of great diversity with significant variation and contrast. The landscape varies from the high open arable sweeps of the Marlborough Downs with their characteristic beech-top knolls and incised by narrow sheltered chalk river valleys, to more intimate well-wooded areas, such as the area around Chute Forest and Savernake Forest. In the eastern part of the National Landscape the land is lower, overlying Thames Basin gravels and London Clay with a characteristic rich mosaic of woodland, pasture, heath and common land.

Background and Purpose of the North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment

1.5 LUC was commissioned in June 2024 to review and update the 2002 North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment. This will provide up to date evidence on the landscape character of the National Landscape, with advice on the management of change across the various landscapes and opportunities for restoration and enhancement. The updated assessment will also provide a basis for the updated Management Plan (2025-2030).

1.6 A Landscape Character Assessment can help provide a framework for more tailored landscape studies and sensitivity assessments and has wider applications around land management and land use change.

1.7 This document can be used to consider landscape character when considering any type of change. This includes opportunities for conserving existing character, strengthening, and enhancing character as well as opportunities to create new character.

The role of Landscape Character Assessment

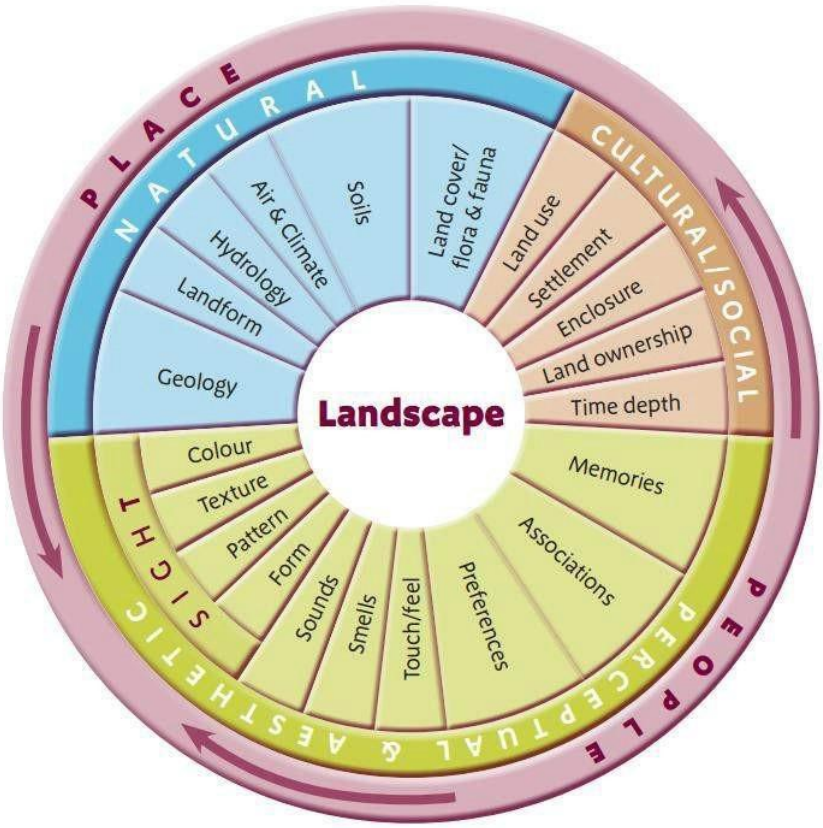
1.8 Landscape character is defined as

“a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse” (Natural England, 2014) **[See reference** 1**]**.

1.9 Landscape character assessment is the process of identifying and describing such variations in character across a landscape. It seeks to identify and explain the unique combination of features and attributes (characteristics) that make different landscapes distinctive. The landscape is the result of the interaction between people and place which gives an area a local identity. The ‘landscape wheel’ below illustrates how the different natural, cultural, and perceptual attributes of a landscape combine to produce character. The process of Landscape Character Assessment is described in “An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment” (Natural England, October 2014).

1.10 Understanding the character of place and evaluating an area’s defining characteristics is a key component in managing growth sustainably and ensuring that the inherent character and qualities of the landscape can continue to be appreciated. Understanding of character can be used to ensure that any change or development does not undermine whatever is valued or characteristic in a particular landscape and help guide positive change that conserves, enhances, restores, or creates local character.

Image 1.1 The 'Landscape Wheel' (Natural England 2014)



Policy context

1.11 The European Landscape Convention (ELC) came into force in the UK in March 2007. It establishes the need to recognise landscape in law; to develop landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and planning of landscapes; and to establish procedures for the participation of the public and other stakeholders in the creation and implementation of landscape policies. The ELC definition of 'landscape' recognises that all landscapes matter, be they ordinary, degraded, or outstanding:

"Landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors."

1.12 The ELC puts emphasis on the whole landscape and all its values and is forward looking in its approach, recognising the dynamic and changing character of landscape. Specific measures promoted by the ELC of direct relevance to this study include:

- The identification and assessment of landscape; and

- Improved consideration of landscape in existing and future sectoral and spatial policy and regulation.

1.13 This Landscape Character Assessment builds on the 2002 North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment and has regard for landscape studies for the seven Local Planning Authorities which lie within the National Landscape. The updated Landscape Character Assessment helps to reaffirm the importance of landscape, coordinate existing work and guide future work to protect, manage and plan the landscape.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

1.14 The revised NPPF, published in December 2024, states at paragraph 187 that:

"Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan).
b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland…"

1.15 Paragraph 189 goes on to state:

"Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads."

1.16 The NPPF is supported by Planning Practice Guidance which recognises the role that Landscape Character Assessment plays in helping to understand the character and local distinctiveness of the landscape.

Statutory framework

1.17 The statutory framework for the protection of land in England as National Landscapes (still referred to as AONB within the legislation) is set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act) **[See reference 2]**. The objectives of AONB designation are to ensure that the statutory purpose set out in Section 82 of the CRoW Act is achieved, i.e. the conservation and enhancement of an area's natural beauty.

1.18 Section 85 of the CRoW Act was amended by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) 2023, which introduced a new duty that means relevant authorities 'must seek to further the purposes' of the Protected Landscapes.

Relationship to published landscape studies

1.19 Landscape Character Assessment can be undertaken at a variety of scales and levels of detail. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment is part of a hierarchy of landscape character assessment with information cascading down from the national to local level.

National level

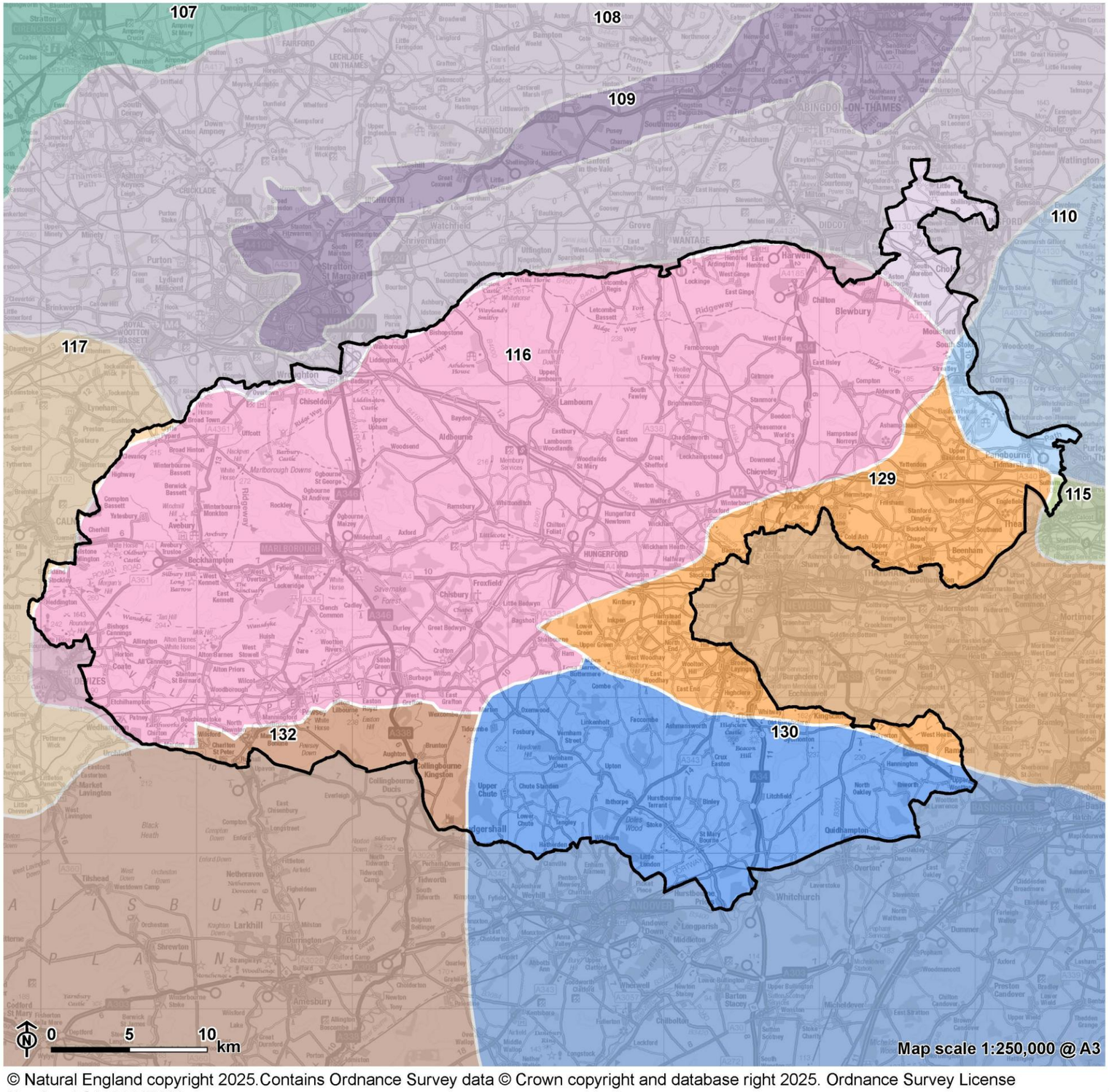
1.20 At a national level, England is divided into 159 distinct National Character Areas (NCAs). Each is defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity, history, and cultural and economic activity. There are descriptive profiles available for each NCA setting out information on landscape character, changes in the landscape and an assessment of ecosystem services delivered.

1.21 There are six NCAs which are wholly or partly within the National Landscape:

- NCA 108 Upper Thames Clay Vales
- NCA 110 Chilterns
- NCA 116 Berkshire and Marlborough Downs
- NCA 129 Thames Basin Heaths
- NCA 130 Hampshire Downs
- NCA 132 Salisbury Plain and the West Wiltshire Downs

1.22 National landscape character areas within and surrounding the North Wessex Downs are illustrated on Figure 1.2

Figure 1.2: National Character Areas



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 1.2: National Character Areas

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

National Character Area

- 107: Cotswolds
- 108: Upper Thames Clay Vales
- 109: Midvale Ridge
- 110: Chilterns
- 115: Thames Valley
- 116: Berkshire and Marlborough Downs
- 117: Avon Vales
- 129: Thames Basin Heaths
- 130: Hampshire Downs
- 132: Salisbury Plain and West Wiltshire Downs

Local level

1.23 As shown on Figure 1.1, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape includes parts of seven Local Planning Authorities, which all have their own Landscape Character Assessments of varying ages:

- Swindon Borough Council (2004, currently under review)
- Wiltshire Council (2005)
- West Berkshire District Council (2019)
- Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council (2021)
- Test Valley Borough Council (2018)
- Vale of White Horse District Council (2024)
- South Oxfordshire District Council (2024)

1.24 The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment draws on these separate assessments to provide a comprehensive and consistent character assessment focussed on the National Landscape.

Chapter 2
Methodology

Approach

2.1 This Landscape Character Assessment follows the method promoted by Natural England through 'An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment' (2014) **[See reference 3]**, which embeds the principles of the European Landscape Convention (ELC) within it.

Process of Assessment

2.2 The process for undertaking the study involved the following key stages:

- Inception meeting
- Review and baseline data collection/collation of mapped data in GIS
- Desk-based review of the landscape character type and landscape character area classification of the landscape
- Field survey to check/identify key characteristics, collect aesthetic/perceptual information, take photographs and observe forces for change
- Consultation with key stakeholders; and
- Draft and final reporting.

2.3 The initial desk-based stage involved the collation of a wide range of up-to-date mapped information to 'sense-check' the existing landscape classifications and to update the baseline. Designations relating to cultural heritage, nature conservation and landscape were checked for any changes since 2002. Data used within the report, including data collated in the GIS database is shown in Appendix B.

2.4 Classification is concerned with dividing the landscape into areas of distinct, recognisable, and consistent character and grouping areas of similar character together. The existing classification conforms to the recommendations of Natural England, and divides the landscape into Landscape Character Types, which are then subdivided into Landscape Character Areas. Natural England promotes the idea that LCTs should be based on the identification of patterns in

the landscape resulting from the interaction of natural and socio-cultural factors. These are landscapes with a consistent, homogeneous character, sharing common combinations of geology, topography, vegetation, or human influences. Although not identical they share a common pattern of elements. Landscape Character Areas are single and unique, discrete geographical areas of the landscape type.

2.5 The presentation of the assessment is also updated to include clearer mapping on a 1:25,000 OS base, a range of representative photographs, text descriptions covering natural, cultural and perceptual influences, identified of valued qualities and more specific landscape and development management guidelines. The assessment has also been rationalised to avoid repetition. A list of forces for change and management guidelines is provided at the LCT level, with more local issues and guidelines presented at LCA level.

Stakeholder engagement

2.6 A workshop was held with team members from the National Landscape and relevant Local Planning Authority officers to present the updated approach to the Landscape Character Assessment. The workshop also explored what is valued about the landscape, what is changing in the landscape and any relevant guidance. These insights fed into the identification of valued qualities, forces for change, and guidelines.

2.7 An online consultation hub was also set up to provide further opportunities for Local Planning Authorities, councillors and parishes to comment on the valued qualities and forces for change in the landscape. Where relevant, the comments received were fed into the updated Landscape Character Assessment.

Outputs

2.8 The Landscape Character Assessment is presented in Chapter 5. The profiles are structured as follows:

LCT profile

- A location map which shows the extent of the LCT and its relationship with other LCTs, followed by summary paragraphs explaining its defining landscape character and location.

- Representative photograph of the LCT.
- Key characteristics in bullet points, providing a description of the character of the LCT.
- An evaluation comprising:
  - Forces for change acting on the landscape.
  - Guidelines on how to manage the impact of forces for change to ensure the valued qualities of the landscape are retained and enhanced. The guidelines can be considered as part of development management, for example guiding mitigation or enhancement, or influencing wider land management decisions for the rural environment.

LCA profile

- A location map at 1:25,000 scale showing the area covered by the LCA, and its relationship to the surrounding landscape.
- Representative photographs of the LCA.
- A description of the natural influences on the landscape, including designated habitats.
- A description of the most significant cultural influences on the landscape including designated cultural heritage assets.
- A detailed description of the principal settlement(s) within the LCA, and their setting within the landscape.
- A description of the most significant perceptual and aesthetic influences in the landscape.
- An evaluation comprising:
  - Landscape qualities – the landscape features and attributes that are particularly valued for their contribution to landscape character i.e. if any one of these features or attributes ceased to exist it would change the character to the detriment of the landscape.
  - Any additional local forces for change acting on the landscape.
  - Any additional local guidelines on how to manage the impact of local forces for change on valued qualities of the landscape.

Chapter 3
Evolution of the landscape

Physical Influences

3.1 The basic structure of any landscape is formed by its underlying geology. The actions of weathering, erosion and deposition alter the form of the landscape, drainage and soils and in turn, patterns of vegetation and land use. The North Wessex Downs is influenced by geological formations from the Cretaceous, Tertiary and Quaternary periods. The central and dominating feature, which gives structure and unity to the landscape, is the expanse of chalk at the heart of the Downs.

3.2 The geological structure of the North Wessex Downs is illustrated on Figures 3.1 and 3.2.

Geology and soil

Cretaceous (145.6-65.0 million years ago)

3.3 The rocks underlying the North Wessex Downs were formed during the Cretaceous period some 130 million years ago and have a strong influence on landform and landscape character today. During this period, a time of intense tectonic activity in Europe, the London Platform was elevated high above sea level exposing Jurassic strata, which were extensively eroded. Subsidence of the Wessex Basin led to the deposition of early sediments of Lower Greensand, Gault Clays and Upper Greensand.

3.4 In the late Cretaceous period rising sea levels progressively inundated the area and calcareous sediments were deposited, which eventually became chalk. Chalk was originally deposited throughout the region and during Alpine tectonic phases the southern part of the region was folded into the broad asymmetric syncline of the London Basin. The principal outcrop of this chalk forms a broad arc radiating from Stonehenge with one arm stretching across Wiltshire, Hampshire and Sussex and the other across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. These form the distinctive downland landscapes of southern England of which the North Wessex Downs is an integral part.

3.5 The chalk was deposited sequentially into layers of Lower, Middle and Upper Chalk. The Middle and Upper chalk comprise pure white chalks which have resisted weathering, giving rise to the distinctive elevated plateau of expansive downs including the Marlborough Downs, Lambourn Downs, Horton Downs, Blewbury Downs and North Hampshire Downs. The high plateau of open, smoothly rolling downland is dissected by a network of dry valleys and long sinuous scarp slopes interlocking with gently rounded domed summits, as for example at Walbury Hill (297 metres), the highest chalk hill in southern England. The thin covering of well-drained, nutrient poor soils overlying the chalk bedrock supports a characteristic vegetation of herbs and grasses. Traditionally grazed by sheep and rabbits, these create the distinctive short springy chalk downland turf. These soils are also ideal for cereal growing and much of the downs are now under intensive arable cultivation.

3.6 Along the northern edge of the North Wessex Downs the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, a softer clayey substrate, which has given rise to a lower and more level land surface and leaves a prominent and dramatic chalk scarp. The scarp along the northern edge descends to the heavy blue-grey Lower Cretaceous Gault Clay of the undulating clay plain of the Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.

3.7 The chalk upland is divided into two by the Vale of Pewsey. Here, the lower-lying vale exposes the softer, underlying Cretaceous deposits of Upper Greensand and Gault Clay. The deep well-drained loamy soils on the Greensand and deposited river alluvium have given rise to a rich agricultural landscape, which supports a mix of both cereal and dairying which characterises the Vale. Gault and Upper Greensand formations are also exposed on the north-west edge of the National Landscape, north of Chiseldon, where they have similarly given rise to a lowland agricultural landscape.

Tertiary (65.0 - 1.64 million years ago)

3.8 Further geological contrast is evident in the eastern part of the North Wessex Downs around Newbury, on the edge of the London Basin, where the chalk strata dip towards the north and are buried beneath the younger, softer Tertiary deposits of the Reading Beds, Bagshot Beds and London Clay, creating a low lying, gently sloping plateau capped by gravels and cut through by shallow river valleys. The varied geology gives rise to a range of soil types with fertile loamy soils overlying the London Clay supporting a mixture of improved pasture, arable farming and blocks of woodland, while the nutrient poor acidic soils of the plateau gravels have given rise to heathland, woodland and pasture dominated landscapes.

Sarsen Stones

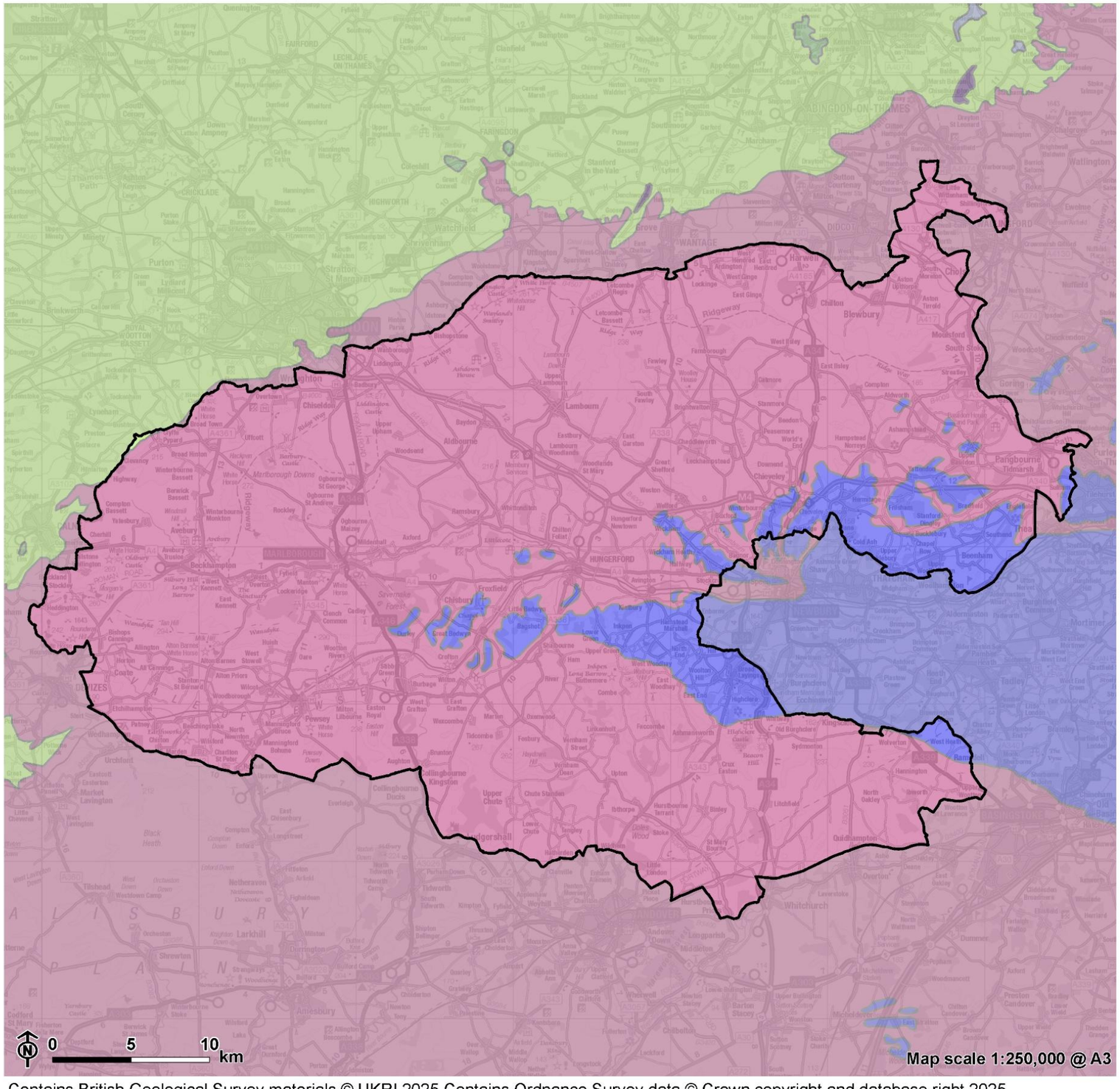
Blocks of quartz sandstone, known as sarsens, are a particular feature of Overton Down, Fyfield Down and Piggledene on the Marlborough Downs, but are also found elsewhere within the chalk upland, forming one of the most distinctive features of the North Wessex Downs. The hard siliceous sandstones derive from tertiary deposits, later eroded and moved by glaciation. The sarsens have long been used for building stone – the best known forming the megalithic monuments such as at Avebury. They have also been used for domestic buildings and several villages, such as at West Overton, Lockeridge, Fyfield and West Kennet are constricted of roughly broken blocks of sarsen fitted together in a jigsaw pattern. A substantial stone cutting industry developed around the sarsen stones in the mid-19th century, with the stone being cut for tramways and paving kerbs, among other uses.

Quaternary (1.64 million years ago - present)

3.9 The landscape is also considerably influenced by drift deposits, which overlay the solid geology. Many of the plateaux and ridges of the chalk downs are capped with Quaternary deposits of Clay-with-Flint; pockets of reddish-brown clay containing flint pebbles. The heavier clay soils have retained their woodland cover and form the characteristic landscapes of the wooded downs, such as Chute Forest and Savernake Forest. The gently sloping plateau to the west of Newbury is capped by plateau gravels, deposits of acidic sand and gravels which have given rise to isolated areas of heathland.

3.10 Slope deposits, also known as ‘combe deposits', are local features where frost-weathered debris accumulated during winter, forming a slurry when the snows melted and flowing down the slopes to create deposits resembling till. This type of deposit is widespread in the dry valleys of the downs. River alluvium dominates the main valley floodplains throughout the North Wessex Downs, such as along the Kennet, Lambourn and Pang creating rich wetland landscapes.

Figure 3.1: Bedrock Geology



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

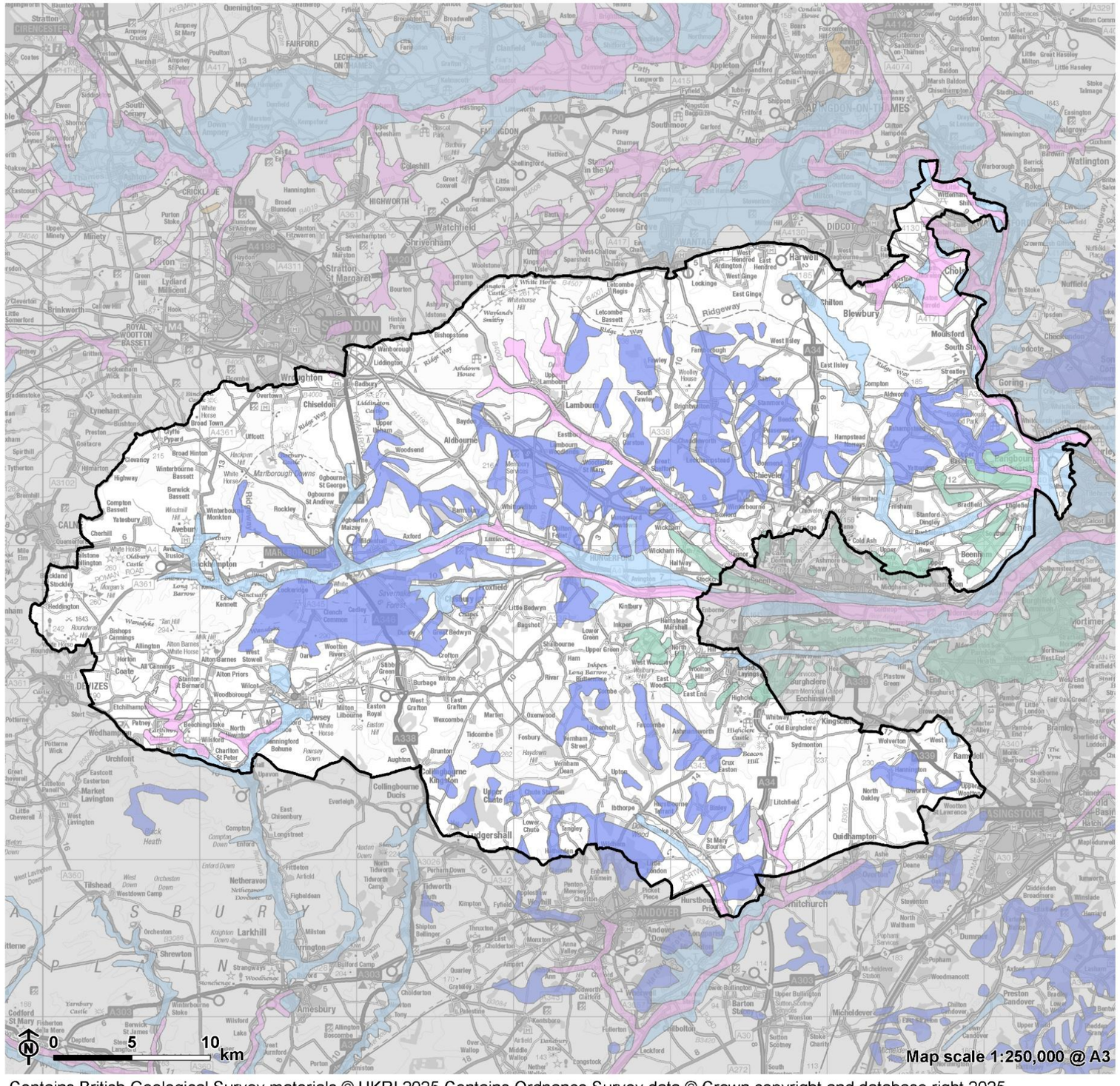
Figure 3.1: Bedrock Geology

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Bedrock geology - lithology

- Chalk
- Clay, Silt, Sand And Gravel
- Mudstone, Sandstone And Limestone
- Mudstone, Siltstone And Sandstone
- Sandstone And Mudstone
- Sandstone And Siltstone, Interbedded

Figure 3.2: Superficial Geology



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.2: Superficial Geology

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Superficial geology

- Alluvial Deposits - Clay, Silt And Sand
- Glacigenic Deposits - Diamicton (Clay, Sand And Gravel)
- Glaciofluvial Deposits - Sand And Gravel
- Residual Deposits - Diamicton (Clay, Sand And Gravel)
- River-Terrace Deposits - Sand And Gravel

Watercourses

3.11 The topography and watercourses of the North Wessex Downs are shown on Figure 3.3. In general, it is the Thames Basin which determines the drainage pattern of the North Wessex Downs, with the main rivers flowing to the east. The River Kennet dissects the National Landscape from west to east. However, the separate catchments of the Salisbury Avon and Test also influence the pattern in the south, draining the Pewsey Vale and Hampshire Downs respectively.

3.12 The deeply incised chalk river valleys of the Lambourn, Kennet, Pang and Bourne are key features of the North Wessex Downs. With their clear, fast flowing waters these watercourses are highly prized for their distinctive ecology and their valleys form the main routes for communication and settlement, contrasting with the sparsely populated chalk summits. The downland is also dissected by a number of dry valleys, some of which support distinctive ephemeral winter streams or 'bournes'. These were formed during the Ice Age, when permafrost impeded sub-surface drainage and valleys, or coombes, were cut through the chalk. Today, however, much of the high open downland is waterless due to the porous nature of the bedrock.

3.13 Where the chalk formations of the central area meet the clays and gravels of the Reading and Bagshot Beds of the London Basin, water stored within the chalk aquifer issues along many spring lines. Minor, shallow tributaries drain this area into the rivers Enbourne, Kennet and Pang, which form part of the wider Thames catchment. These are frequently associated with ecologically important habitats and linear settlements. Springs are also a feature of the northern escarpment, issuing at the point where the porous chalk overlies the impermeable clays. These give rise to the distinctive scalloped coombe landform, such as The Manger on Whitehorse Hill, and spring line villages clustered along the foot of the slope.

The Kennet and Avon Canal

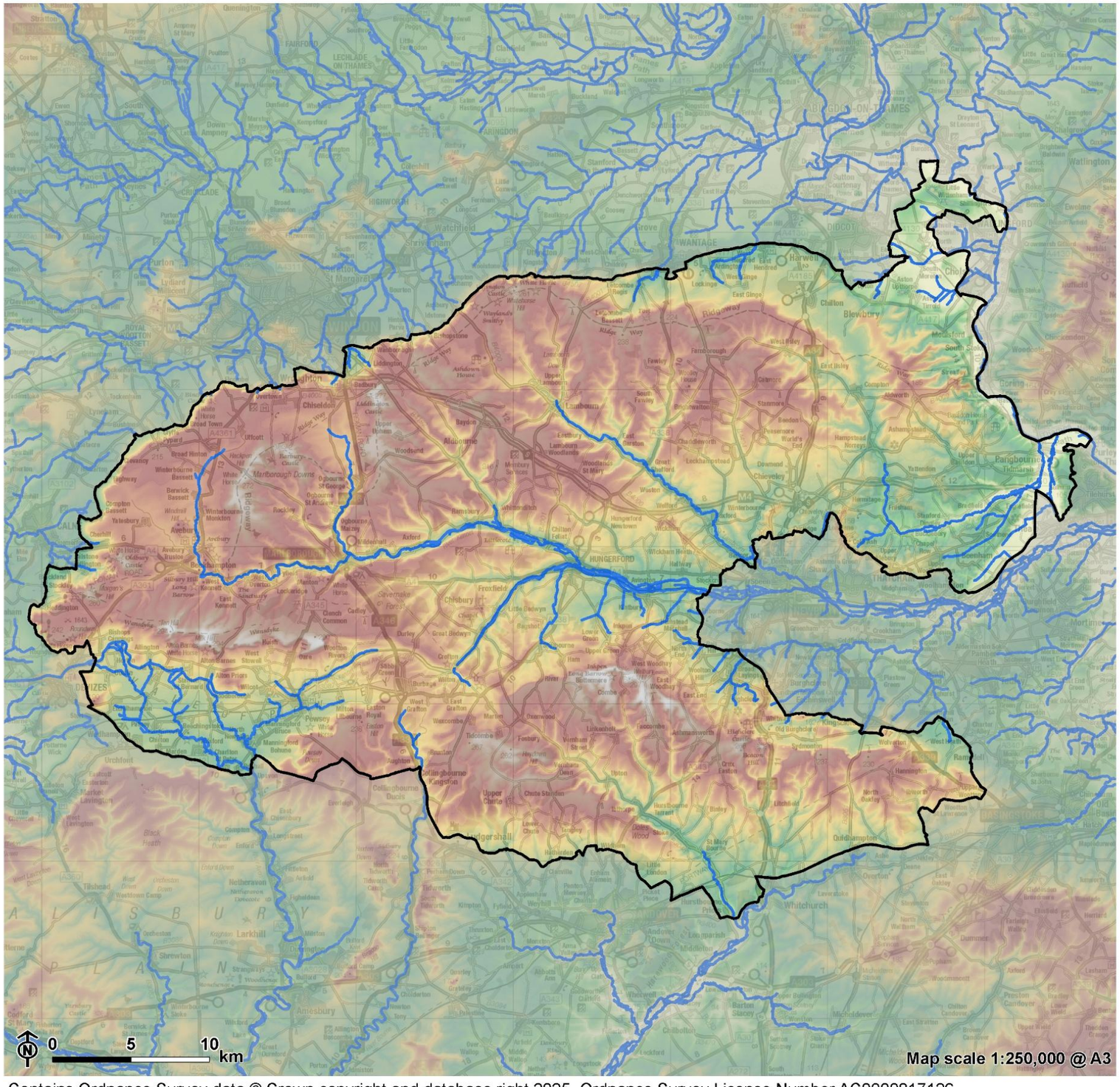
The Kennet and Avon Canal is a distinctive linear feature, threading through the heart of the North Wessex Downs linking its diverse landscapes. Constructed between 1794 and 1810 to join the river navigations of the Kennet and Avon, it provided a direct and safe waterway between Bristol and London. Its route crosses the agricultural, lowland Vale of Pewsey, the narrow, meandering wooded valley of the River Dun and the distinctive chalk river corridor of the Kennet.

Designed by John Rennie, an engineer and architect, the Kennet and Avon includes many fine structures including aqueducts, tunnels such as the brick-built Bruce Tunnel at Savernake, bridges and lock flights. These features, along with the canal side and wharf buildings create a remarkable built heritage. Crofton pumping station in the Vale of Pewsey houses the oldest working steam engine in the world.

The canal found favour with the military when in the 1940s it was designated as part of the ‘GHQ Line Blue’, intended as a defence line in the event of a successful German invasion. Pillboxes and anti-tank obstacles still feature along its course through the North Wessex Downs.

The importance of the waterway for commercial trade declined following the opening of the Great Western Railway in 1841 and the canal went into a long period of deterioration. The 1960s saw the start of restoration of the waterway, initiated by the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, and the full length of the canal was reopened in the 1990s.

Figure 3.3: Topography and Watercourses



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.3: Topography and Watercourses

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Watercourse

Elevation (metres)

330

-1.2

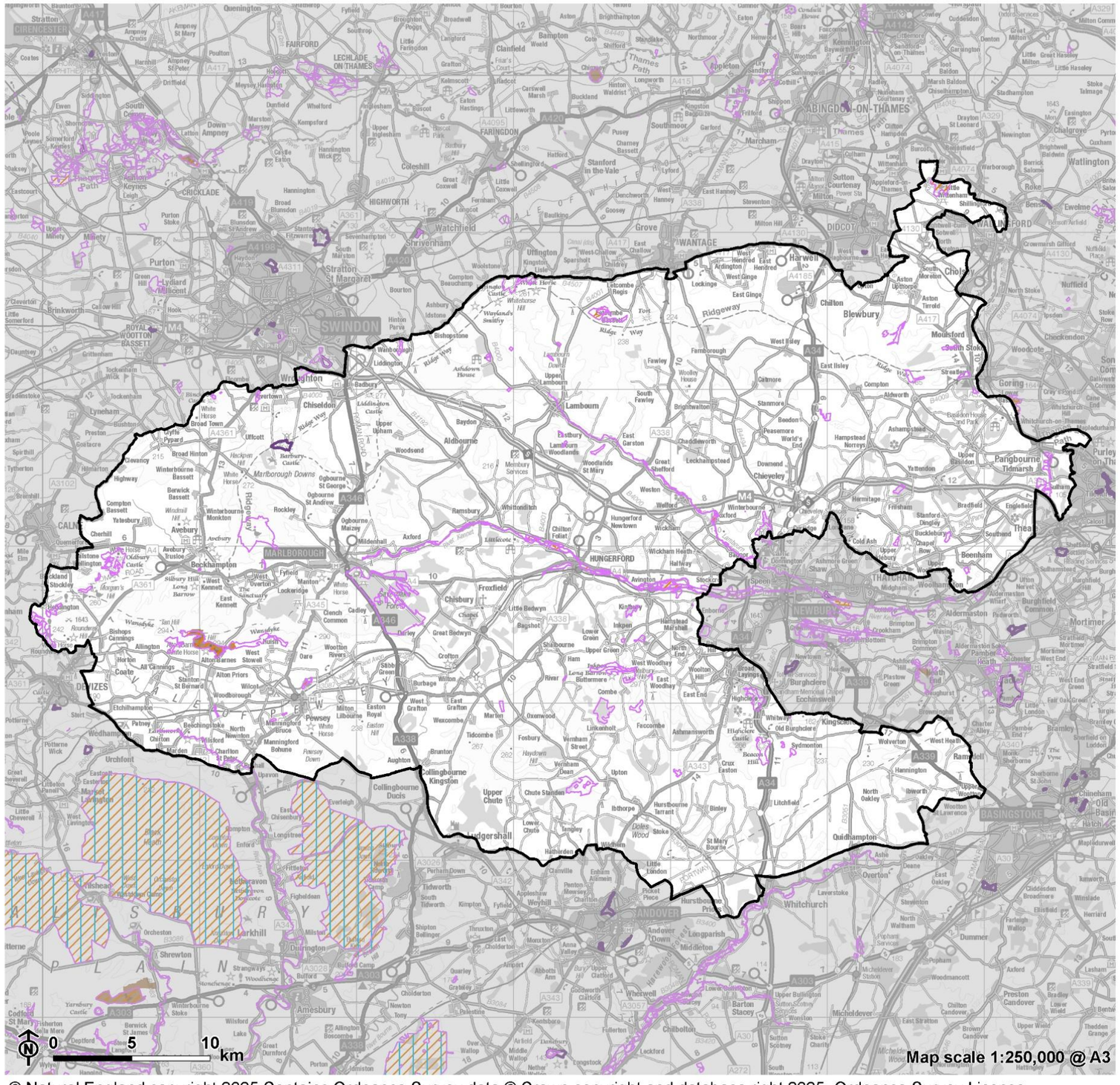
Ecology

3.14 The ecological character of an area is closely linked to its landscape features. The combination of such features as the chalk geology, hydrology, topography and land-use, results in a set of biological conditions under which specific ecological communities develop. The diversity and variety of landscapes within the North Wessex Downs has therefore resulted in a corresponding variation in habitats.

3.15 The North Wessex Downs contains vast stretches of intensively cultivated arable fields supporting relatively little wildlife interest. However, within this context there are some very high quality habitats of local, national and international ecological importance. These include sixty-six Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within the National Landscape boundary; six of these are also Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). There are also a large number of non-statutory sites of nature conservation interest. The nationally designated sites are shown on Figure 3.5.

3.16 The most characteristic ecological habitats are the chalk grasslands and chalk rivers, plus semi-natural woodland and arable farmland. There are in addition, a wide variety of other habitats that are also important and characterise particular areas within the North Wessex Downs. These include the small remnant patches of heathland that survive on river gravel deposits in the east of the National Landscape, the distinctive communities of lower plants that have developed on the sarsen stones (which are a special feature of the downs), areas of chalk scrub and the wide unimproved grassy verges of the droveways which characterise the open chalk downlands. At a local level, the hedgerow network, springs and ponds also provide important refuge and habitats. Collectively, these represent a rich biological resource offering potential for restoration/recreation and management to enhance the overall ecological character of the North Wessex Downs.

Figure 3.4: Nature conservation Designations



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.4: Nature Conservation Designations

- North Wessex Downs National Landscape
- Site of Special Scientific Interest
- Special Protection Area
- Special Area of Conservation
- Local Nature Reserve
- National Nature Reserve

Chalk Grassland

3.17 The thin, well-drained, nutrient poor soils overlying the chalk bedrock support a characteristic vegetation of herbs and grasses. Traditionally grazed by sheep and rabbits, this is the 'springy' turf characteristic of the downlands forming one of the most distinctive and ecologically notable habitats of the North Wessex Downs. Unimproved chalk grassland is one of Britain's botanically richest habitats supporting a diverse community of invertebrates, mammals and birds. Key features of the chalk grasslands of the North Wessex Downs include:

- important butterfly populations including: adonis blue, silver-studded blue, marsh fritillary, chalkhill blue, small blue, silver spotted skipper and Duke of Burgundy fritillary.
- a large number of scarce plant species including early gentian, eyebright (*Euphrasia pseudokerneri*), pasque flower, Chiltern gentian, dwarf mouse ear, tuberous thistle, field fleawort, round-headed rampion, burnt orchid, bastard toadflax and musk orchid.
- feeding and breeding habitat for a number of rare and declining birds including skylark and stone-curlew.

3.18 The 20th century saw extensive destruction and fragmentation of these important grassland areas. This is largely attributed to agricultural intensification and the ploughing up of the light shallow downland soils with an associated decline in grazing. Once widespread, the unimproved chalk grassland of the North Wessex Downs is now fragmented with small, isolated blocks restricted largely to the steep scarp slopes and dry valleys plus areas maintained as pasture around archaeological sites. The chalk grasslands are especially characteristic of three landscape types: LCT 1 Open Downland, LCT 5 Downs Plain and Scarp, and a smaller amount within LCT 2 Downlands with Woodland. There is a particular concentration within the west of the National Landscape, perhaps the area where arable farming has been less intensive. Today, the reduction in livestock and associated abandonment of marginal land, some remaining areas of unimproved chalk grassland are under threat of loss to scrub encroachment.

Chalk Streams and Rivers

3.19 The spring fed streams and rivers, which incise the chalk include the River Kennet, Lambourn, Pang, Salisbury Avon and Bourne. These are described in LCT 7 River Valleys. Chalk rivers are as a key habitat because of the diverse and characteristic biological communities they support. They are of international significance and have distinctive environmental characteristics such as a high alkalinity and conductivity. The percolation of water through chalk filters out much of the solid material resulting in these rivers' characteristically clear water and they provide important fisheries. A particular feature of the National Landscape is the winterbournes - ephemeral streams that flow in the upper reaches only during late autumn, winter and early spring. Key features of the chalk rivers in the North Wessex Downs include:

- extremely rich in plant and animal communities deriving in part from the high- quality of the base-rich water which, being spring fed, is naturally clear and fast flowing.
- important habitat for a number of near extinct species including otter (formerly believed to be extinct in the National Landscape but possibly beginning to re-colonise), and freshwater white-clawed crayfish.
- support healthy fish populations including brown trout, salmon, grayling, perch, chub and dace – providing important game fisheries.
- support a diversity of floating vegetation.
- include the characteristic 'winterbournes' with a specialised flora adapted to wide variations in flow.
- irrigate a rich mosaic of associated wetland habitats creating distinctive valley landscapes including fens, floodplains, water meadows, carr and wet woodland. Diverse 'wetland' habitats support many rare species. The Red Data Book summer snowflake survives, for example in seasonally flooded woodlands along the Kennet Valley.

3.20 The abstraction of water from chalk aquifers has resulted in low flows within the chalk rivers of the North Wessex Downs. Development on the periphery of the National Landscape places particular pressures on water resources. More recently, localised autumn and winter flooding of the valleys has also been a concern. Pollution from agricultural run off has contributed to a decline in the quality of the chalk river habitat.

Broadleaved Woodland and Wood Pasture

3.21 Semi-natural woodland is a now a scarce and valuable ecological resource. In the North Wessex Downs many of these woodlands are found on steep scarps and in coombes inaccessible for cultivation (e.g. LCT 5) or on the heavier soils where Clay-with-Flint caps the Chalk, notably within LCT 2 Downlands with Woodland and in LCT 3 Wooded Plateau. The most densely wooded areas, for example Chute Forest and Savernake Forest are derived from former royal hunting forests. A further concentration of ancient semi-natural woodland is found on the lower clays and gravels in the eastern part of the National Landscape (LCT 8). In much of the National Landscape, the density of semi-natural woodland is one of the defining features of the landscape, as reflected in the naming of the landscape types. The extent of woodland coverage and recorded ancient woodland is shown on Figure 3.6.

3.22 There are a variety of woodland stand-types in the National Landscape reflecting the range of environmental conditions including hornbeam coppice, oak/ash stands, hazel/oak stands, birch, ash/wych elm coppice, ash/wych elm/oak/field maple/hazel stands, ash/maple stands, and hazel/ash stands.

3.23 Within the valleys, such as Kennet Valley there are also important examples of wet alder woodland. Surprisingly, beech woodlands are limited in extent (compared for example to the adjacent Chilterns National Landscape) and restricted to beech hangers along the escarpments to the north (in LCT 5) and the escarpment along the north edge of the Hampshire Downs (LCA 2E).

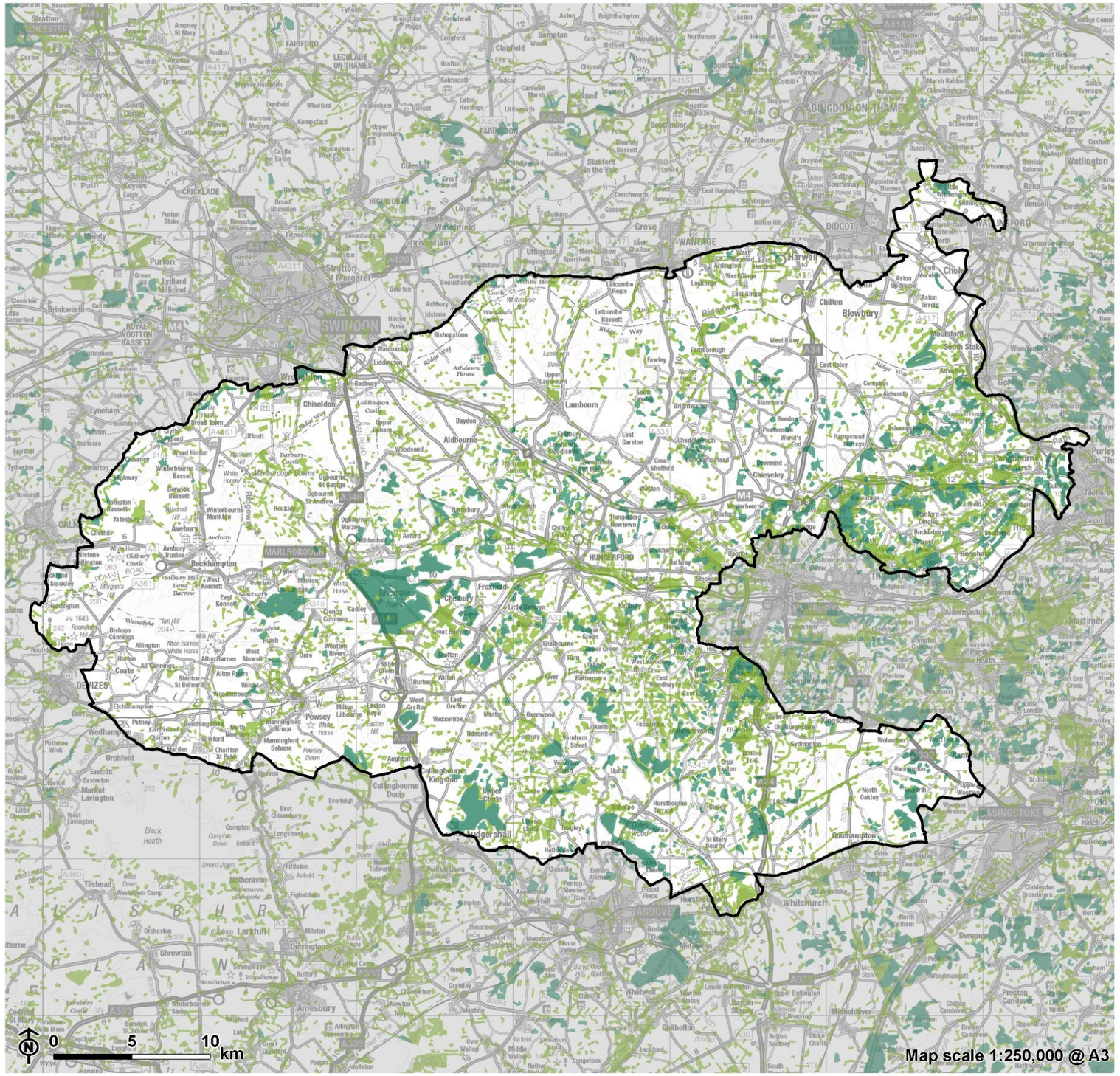
3.24 The key features of the woodlands of the North Wessex Downs are:

- rich in invertebrate species especially butterflies, including some severely declining fritillaries, e.g. pearl-bordered fritillary.
- long rotation hazel coppice provides important habitat for dormice, a UK priority species.
- provide roosting and/or feeding sites for a number of bats species including: Bechstein’s, Barbastelle, greater horseshoe and noctule.
- calcareous woodlands support a number of scarce species such as spiked star-of- Bethlehem.
- good examples of calcareous bluebell woods.
- a number of nationally scarce moss species.
- Savernake Forest (LCA 3A) is particularly important as a large remnant of wood pasture, with 900 ha designated as SSSI in recognition of its

outstanding lichen flora, fungi, rare invertebrates and breeding bird community. A further important example of lowland wood pasture and parkland is provided by Highclere Park SSSI (LCA 8E).

3.25 The woodlands would formerly have been an important part of the rural economy. They provided a source of fuel and building materials, as evidenced by timber framed buildings, and were used for hurdle making in support of the sheep economy on the downlands. The decline in traditional techniques of woodland management such as coppicing, and neglect are having an impact on the ecological value of the woodland resource.

Figure 3.5: Woodland Cover



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.5: Woodland Cover

North Wessex Downs National Landscape
Ancient woodland
National forest inventory

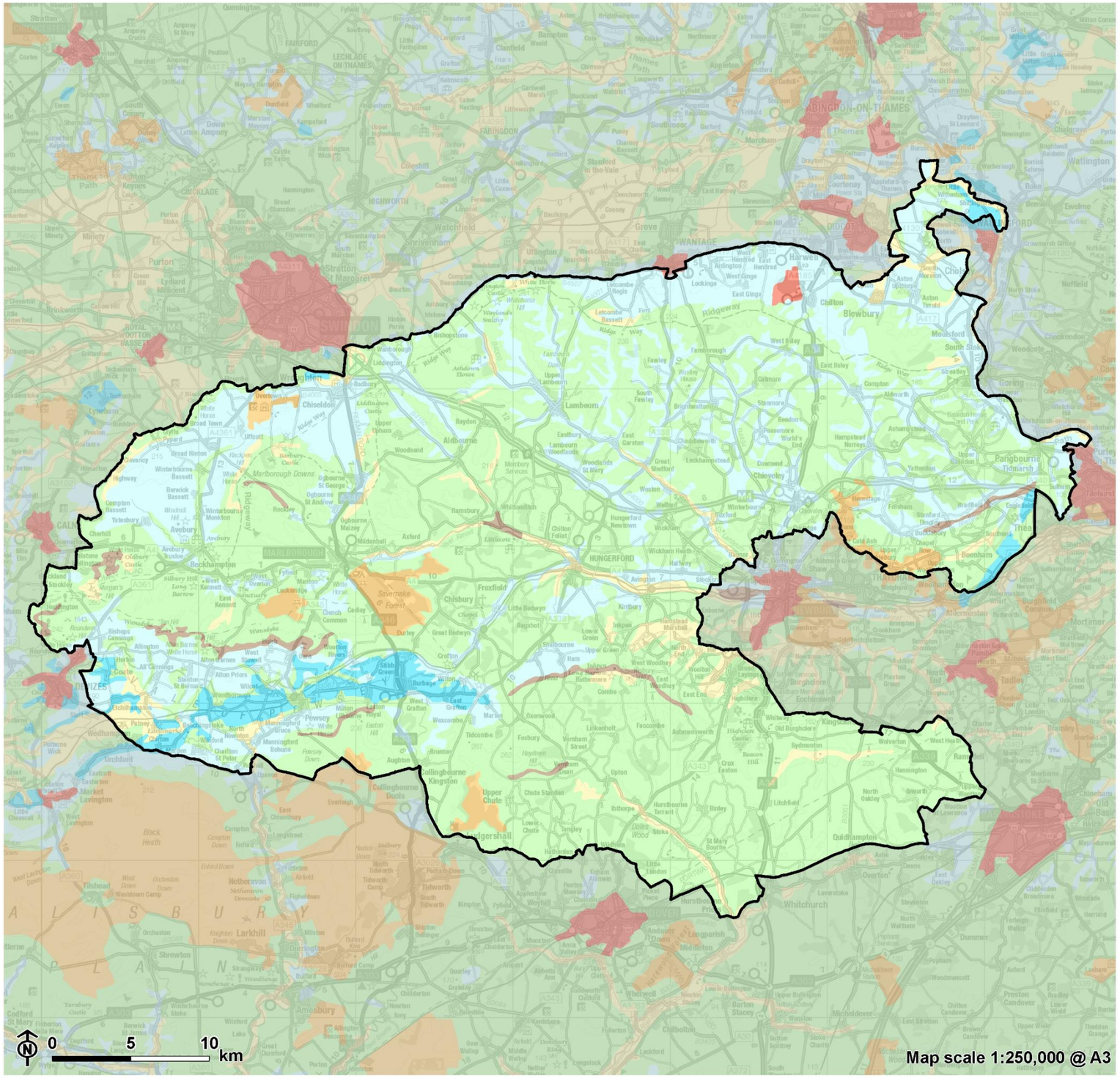
Arable Farmland

3.26 Today, the dominant land use within much of the National Landscape is the open arable farmland with few hedgerows and occasional small, wooded areas (LCT 1) intermixed within a more wooded mosaic (LCT 2). Figure 3.4 shows the Agricultural Land Classification. The arable land is largely managed under modern intensive systems, although may still support a characteristic range of wildlife, including:

- rare and colourful arable weeds, such as dense flowered-fumitory, slender tare and shepherd's needle, which are dependent on a regular cropping regime and survive in the less intensively managed field margins.
- an important range of farmland birds. Spring-tilled arable on stony chalk soils provide essential breeding sites for stone curlew, a bird formerly widespread on the chalklands of lowland England, and a focus of conservation projects in the North Wessex Downs. Skylark and yellowhammers remain relatively common and widespread, while grey partridges, lapwings, turtle doves and corn buntings can also still be found.
- a habitat for species such as the brown hare.

3.27 Agri-environment schemes through the Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELM) are designed to support the rural economy and align to Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan. Schemes support the sensitive management of arable margins, which can enhance biodiversity within arable landscapes. The integration of production and nature conservation objectives, supported by appropriate incentives represent a major opportunity for biodiversity within the National Landscape.

Figure 3.6: Agricultural Land Classification



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.6: Agricultural Land Classification

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Agricultural Land Classification (ALC)

- Grade 1 (excellent)
- Grade 2 (very good)
- Grade 3 (good to moderate)
- Grade 4 (poor)
- Grade 5 (very poor)
- Non agricultural
- Urban

Historic Environment

Introduction

3.28 The landscape as we see it today is the product of a series of major changes through which its character has been transformed by the interaction of natural and human processes. While the basic landform remains the same, its covering is constantly subjected to change. Some periods of landscape change have been more rapid and radical than others. These changes are not only important from an archaeological perspective, but also significant in determining the overall character of the North Wessex Downs.

3.29 A summary of the key events in the development of the North Wessex Downs landscape is outlined below and provides the context for the individual character area descriptions. It is based on research undertaken by Wessex Archaeology and is largely unaltered from the 2002 Landscape Character Assessment. The extent of cultural heritage designations is shown on Figure 3.7.

Post-glacial hunters and horticulturalists: 11,000 - 4,000 BC (Palaeolithic-Mesolithic)

The First Landscapes

3.30 During the last full glaciation between 18,000 - 11,000 BC much of southern Britain - untouched by the ice - was tundra, with heather, bilberry and crowberry. Arctic willow, dwarf birch, grasses and sedges were present in more sheltered places, although there were periods when birch and poplar woodland established themselves. By 8,000 BC (the Mesolithic period) the climate was warming, and pine, juniper and birch forest spread, giving way to hazel scrub and then more mixed broad-leaved oak woodland with elm, ash, alder, lime and hazel. Alder dominated forests to the west, while greensand areas to the east and the gravel floodplains of the Thames may have had lighter woodland cover. Heather and grass plant species indicate some clearings were forming, either naturally or through human action, and were then regenerating as hazel scrub.

Social life and society structure

3.31 During this period, Late Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic communities may have consisted of kin or family-related bands, which themselves would

have often split up into various task groups such as hunting or fishing parties. At certain times of the year, these bands may have combined into larger affiliated groups, based on wider kinship or tribal ties.

Ideology

3.32 Over time, certain points in the landscape became especially significant for these communities and stories and myths would have emerged. Natural features - prominent trees, hills, streams or flint sources - might have been named, and thought of as inhabited by the spirits of animals, plants and the human dead. The symbolic potential of animals, trees and woodland would have been great.

3.33 Little evidence survives of the people themselves. Upper Palaeolithic burials are unknown on the North Wessex Downs and, like rare Mesolithic burials, occur mostly in cave sites near the coast. The absence of Mesolithic human remains indicates that the dead were exposed on the ground, on platforms or in trees, or set adrift in rivers and streams.

Buildings and settlement

3.34 Upper Palaeolithic inhabitation sites were mostly confined to caves and rock shelters, largely beyond the North Wessex Downs. Only a few open area sites are known from within the National Landscape, but scattered finds of flint tools suggest Upper Palaeolithic groups ranged far across them, and valleys such as those of the Rivers Thames and Kennet may have seen regular, seasonal-based activity. The evidence for Mesolithic activity also consists mainly of flint scatters although some excavations have recovered traces of temporary shelters.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.35 The last full glaciation was very severe, and hunting groups may have been driven from Britain altogether. As the climate began to stabilise from 11,000 BC, Late Upper Palaeolithic groups returned. By 8,500 BC, the higher downland within the National Landscape may have formed upland hunting areas for Mesolithic groups, with valleys exploited for plant foods, freshwater fish and wildfowl. Several sites in the Kennet Valley suggest intensive exploitation of this favoured location. By the Late Mesolithic, groups were deliberately clearing areas of the forest uplands in the North Wessex Downs to attract grazing animals, and herds may have been selectively culled or even

provided with fodder over the winter. Edible wild plants might also have been managed and encouraged to grow and spread.

Trade, artefacts and communication

3.36 During the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, ties with certain places in the landscape would have developed, these sites being linked through traditional paths and weekly, seasonal and annual rounds. Contact with unrelated groups might have been infrequent, and may have occurred at only a few places in the landscape, where food, water or flint was especially abundant. Portland chert used in stone tools, distinctive stone axes and adzes, and slate and unusual pebbles from Devon and Cornwall were distributed quite widely across the area during the Mesolithic, which hints at developing patterns of social interaction.

Early agricultural and ritual practices: 4,000 - 2,400 BC (Neolithic)

3.37 The fifth and fourth millennia BC saw a major transformation in the landscape of the North Wessex Downs, from the gatherer-hunter economy to one involving food production. This resulted in a series of changes in material culture, plant cultivates and animal domesticates and the first human influenced changes to the landscape.

Social life and society structure

3.38 Evidence for new activities in the Neolithic included pottery making and weaving. Cattle, sheep, goats and pigs would have had to be taken to areas of grazing or forage, and clearings created where plants were cultivated or managed. Communities may still have been very small, though people were coming together in greater numbers at certain times of the year. This was the time when huge monuments were being built which suggests an advanced degree of co-operation and organisation. Developing territorial awareness may be seen in the clustering of long mounds and other Early Neolithic monuments into regionally distinct groups, such as those around Avebury. Monuments such as causewayed enclosures are absent from areas such as the Lambourn Downs and the North Hampshire Downs, although are present around the Vale of Pewsey, and this again suggests different regional traditions within the North Wessex Downs area.

Ideology

3.39 The theme of death and burial is a significant one in the landscape of the National Landscape. The earliest evidence for treatment of the dead comes from the Neolithic period in the form of two types of site where human bones are commonly found. These are large enclosures, formed by segmented (or "causewayed") ditches, and long mounds or long barrows.

3.40 As a monument type, causewayed enclosures are relatively rare, yet three examples are found in the National Landscape, at Windmill Hill, north-west of Avebury, Knap Hill and Rybury on the scarp overlooking the Vale of Pewsey. Although the function of these monuments is by no means certain, archaeological evidence suggests that they may have been used to define an area where the dead could be excarnated. There are numerous examples of Neolithic long mounds from the area, including some 20 examples around Avebury. These monuments comprise long earthen mounds, which cover a variety of structures associated with burials. One of the most dramatic, the West Kennet long barrow, for example, is some 113 metres in length and contains individual chambers constructed of sarsen slabs. The long barrows are distinctive forms in the landscape and are often positioned on hilltops or ridges or follow the lines of rivers and valleys.

Buildings and settlement

3.41 In southern Britain generally, remains of Neolithic buildings are very rare. Many groups may have led semi-nomadic lives, moving between specific areas at different times of the year, but returning to them again and again. Intensive survey in the eastern part of North Wessex Downs has shown many Neolithic artefacts lie over Mesolithic flint scatters, implying considerable antiquity for patterns of movement around the landscape. They are especially common on Clay-with-Flint areas, and as these soils were unsuitable for crops at that time, this suggests that flint sources and tradition were also important for inhabitation.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.42 Marks made by the first crude ploughs or ards have been found underneath some Neolithic monuments such as the South Street long mound near Avebury. Instead of permanent fields maintained across generations it is now thought that Neolithic people may have planted crops in woodland clearings, using short-lived plots cultivated for only a few seasons. The herding

of animals may have suited a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence, with people moving with the herds from season to season, and from upland to lowland.

Trade, artefacts and communication

3.43 In the Early Neolithic, stone axes were transported over long distances, either as rough-outs or as finished objects, from stone sources in Cornwall, Norfolk, Cumbria and North Wales. Pottery made from Cornish gabbroic clay has been found on sites such as Windmill Hill near Avebury, and other pottery from the lower Thames valley was also entering the North Wessex Downs. Causewayed enclosures such as Windmill Hill and Knap Hill may have seen regular but episodic gatherings of people, possibly linked through wider clans or kinship groups, who came together to celebrate ritual ceremonies, trade, broker marriages, exchange breeding stock, and carry out a host of other activities. These sites may have been located on the edges of developing territories. The importance of trackways and routes along ridges for trade - such as the Ridgeway, Harroway, Icknield Way and Portway - may have developed from this time.

Landscape change

3.44 The environmental evidence for the Neolithic period within the National Landscape indicates a landscape that was still substantially wooded, though areas of grassland were now established and some erosion of soil had begun. Some clearances remained open or expanded, but others were abandoned and left to regenerate into hazel scrub and light woodland. Early Neolithic monuments such as causewayed enclosures were located in woodland clearings at the margins of human occupation, and long mounds were also built in limited clearances. The management of woodland resources would have been necessary to meet demands for timber and firewood, created by massive monumental structures and new practices.

3.45 In the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (3,000-1,500 BC), evidence for scrub, long and short turfed grass and cereal cultivation is more apparent. Although woodland was still very significant in the landscape, many clearances became permanent and large communal monuments such as Avebury and the round barrow cemeteries were located in large, cleared areas. It was during this period that the characteristic open ‘chalk downland’ vegetation first appeared over large parts of the North Wessex Downs, with the heavy soils of the flint-capped areas tending to retain their woodland cover.

A monumental landscape: 2,400 - AD 43 (Bronze Age - Iron Age)

Social life and society structure

3.46 By the Early and Middle Bronze Age, the lack of clear age or gender distinctions in barrow burials and cremations suggests that status was inherited rather than acquired, and that dominant lineages had now formed within societies. Large, linear ditches dividing up the landscape appeared on the Marlborough Downs and Salisbury Plain during the Late Bronze Age, and together with increased evidence for warfare this suggests emerging territories on the chalk uplands. Rather than extensive social networks, the emphasis on roundhouses, enclosures, linear ditches and field systems may also reflect that kinship groups were becoming more important in these communities. The creation and maintenance of linear ditches, field system boundaries and hilltop enclosures may have become the favoured arenas for communal social activity and expressing identity. This development of tribal communities, with substantial defended sites - hillforts - sitting amongst an ordered landscape with enclosed settlements and hamlets reaches its apogee in Iron Age society.

Ideology

3.47 The Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (around 2,400 BC) is a time when the landscape of the North Wessex Downs became monumentalised. Huge henge enclosures such as at Avebury and at Hatfield Farm, Marden in the Vale of Pewsey were built, together with the remarkable circular mound of Silbury Hill. A similar massive mound at Hatfield Farm, known as the Hatfield Barrow, which once measured 7 metres in height and 147 metres in diameter, was levelled in the early 19th century. This period of construction was followed by a time of transformation into stone, when many existing monuments were further enhanced by rows and circles of standing stones, as dramatically illustrated at Avebury. These monuments are, without doubt, some of the most remarkable manifestations of human organisation in prehistoric Europe.

3.48 Many of the numerous round barrows which are such a characteristic feature of the North Wessex Downs landscape, were constructed in the Early Bronze Age. Sometimes the barrows are highly visible on ridges and hill tops (or slightly below the actual top, on what is called the ‘false crest’, so that when seen from below they are on the skyline), while others follow the lines of valleys and streams. Notable examples on the North Wessex Downs include the Seven Sisters by Beacon Hill and the Lambourn Seven Barrows. Many barrow groups

are focused around earlier monuments, or form linear alignments, as on Overton Hill, near Avebury.

3.49 From the Middle Bronze Age, the large communal monuments fell out of use. Instead, the places and routines of everyday life, the ditches, pits and postholes of enclosures and fields became the focus for spiritual activity. In the Late Iron Age however, small numbers of individual burials and cremation burials appear again in the region, many of high-status individuals, such as richly furnished cremation burials found in Marlborough and in a barrow at Blagden Copse in Hampshire. Extensive Late Bronze Age and Iron Age middens such as Potterne and All Cannings Cross, near Devizes, may have been connected to these ideas. Here, vast accumulations of everyday domestic refuse were mixed with more deliberate deposits of artefacts, many either unused or deliberately broken. Votive offerings of metalwork continued in rivers such as the Thames but are rare elsewhere in the North Wessex Downs. During the Iron Age the seasonally appearing bournes seem to have held a particular fascination. Along with springs and certain trees, these may have been favoured places of the gods.

Buildings and settlement

3.50 The overall pattern of settlement in the Middle Bronze Age seems to be one of a patchwork of small farms and hamlets with associated arable and pastoral fields and interspersed woodland on heavier clays. But from this time and especially in the Late Bronze Age, more substantial buildings and settlements began to appear, such as the hilltop enclosure on Rams Hill, near Uffington, which was one of the first examples of ‘hillfort’ construction. The general impression is of a move to more nucleated settlements and developing competitive social networks. Prominent ridge end or hilltop enclosures also appeared at this time. These large, defended sites, such as at Walbury and Ladle Hill on the escarpment of the southern block of chalk upland may have been the residences of emerging social elites. Evidence suggests they may also have functioned as refuges in time of trouble, and as redistribution centres for crops and livestock, although they were unlikely to have been inhabited year-round.

3.51 Both enclosed and unenclosed farmsteads continued into the Early Iron Age, consisting of roundhouses and possible raised-floor granaries, with associated field systems. These remained the predominant settlement types through into the Romano-British period. They were often sited between the upper downland and the river floodplains. In the Middle and Late Iron Age, small numbers of distinctively shaped ‘banjo’ enclosures appeared, as at Blagden

Copse, some of which may have been more specialised settlements associated with herding.

3.52 The most visual manifestation of the Early and Middle Iron Age are the large numbers of hillforts, which are a very distinctive and visible feature of the landscape of the North Wessex Downs. A fine example is Ladle Hill where a hillfort was constructed (but never completed) within the earlier enclosure. Although many of these monuments had been abandoned by the Middle Iron Age, those that survived were often elaborated and increased in size. Some may have formed the seats of local chieftains and may thus be related to power and display. Beacon Hill (which sits opposite Ladle Hill) in Hampshire and Liddington Castle and Barbury Castle in Wiltshire. The latter are classic examples in the line of hillforts sited approximately along the line of the Wiltshire/Berkshire Ridgeway.

3.53 In the last century or so before the Roman conquest a number of large nucleated settlements developed, often at strategic points in the landscape such as river crossings. Calleva (Silchester) and Venta (Winchester) both of which are just outside the National Landscape boundary, are well known, however archaeological evidence from Mildenhall in the Kennet Valley suggests this was another major focus possibly connected to a series of undated linear earthworks in the woods to the south of the valley.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.54 Evidence for scrub, long and short turfed grass and cereal cultivation became apparent during the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, indicating an expansion of arable and pastoral agriculture. More dramatic changes came during the Middle and Late Bronze Age, when extensive field systems began to appear on the downlands, such as those on the Marlborough Downs, the Lambourn Downs, and Salisbury Plain. This was related to a move to ‘short fallow’ agriculture, where fields were used more intensively, and ploughs and manuring were necessary to ensure the productivity of the soil. Field boundaries may indicate that access to the land was more tightly controlled.

3.55 By the Iron Age, sheep and cattle were being grazed on downlands largely devoid of woodland, with wet valley bottoms providing rich summer grazing. Cattle were still significant although sheep were by far the most numerous livestock on the downs, reared for meat but mainly for wool. Pigs may have foraged in woodlands. During the Iron Age a great diversity of plant foods were produced in cultivated fields with crops including spelt wheat, emmer wheat, barley, oats and rye, in addition to Celtic beans, peas, vetch, sorrel and fat hen.

Over time the soils on the chalk may have become thinner and less productive in some areas, and competition for land and resources may have led to or exacerbated social tensions.

Trade, artefacts and communication

3.56 Extensive communication and trade networks are demonstrated by the presence of non-local pottery on Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age sites brought in from areas to the west. By the Middle Iron Age there were distinct pottery traditions in the Wiltshire Avon, the Kennet Valley and Berkshire Downs, and in Hampshire. Continental pottery styles and Gallic pottery vessels, wine amphorae and glass have been found on some Middle and Late Iron Age sites within the area and indicate that an export trade was operating.

Landscape change

3.57 During this period, forest clearance continued leading to the opening of large tracts of land. Settlement appears to have expanded on the chalk downland, complemented by a great increase in the number of burial monuments. Woodland appears to have persisted preferentially on soils on Clay-with-Flint. These heavier acidic soils may have been deliberately avoided for agriculture. It is likely that the heathlands on the lower land in the eastern part of the National Landscape were also formed during the Bronze Age through forest clearance and depletion of the soils.

3.58 In the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age (1,100 BC - AD 43), hilltop enclosures formed by banks and ditches were very dramatic features. Extensive patterns of field systems divided up much of the landscape, whilst surviving woods must have been carefully maintained using techniques such as coppicing, to ensure a constant supply of building materials and fuel. Cattle were grazed in valleys close to water sources, but sheep require less water and would have been grazed on the higher downland and maintained the distinct short-cropped downland turf. Hardier crops such as barley and spelt meant that cultivation had spread across the higher downs, even onto Clay-with-Flint areas, and the fragile downland soils were beginning to be eroded or exhausted in places.

Town and country, settlement of the landscape: AD 43 - 1066 (Roman - Saxon)

Social life and society structure

3.59 The Roman conquest of AD 43 brought changes reflecting the new centralised administration, although there was still much continuity with most native oppida continuing to develop as urban centres. Existing native lineages and their leaders would undoubtedly have continued to be hostile to the Roman invaders long after the occupation, including the Atrebates whose territory included the North Wessex Downs, but others rapidly adopted Roman customs and practices. Within a few centuries, native and Roman cultures had fused into a distinctive Romano-British identity, that was also subtly distinct other societies within the empire.

3.60 By the late 4th century AD Saxons were among the raiders pillaging the southern and eastern areas of England. In AD 410 the last Roman legions officially left from Britain, and by the later 5th century there were waves of Germanic immigration across southern England. A British victory over the Saxons at the battle of Mount Badon is recorded in the 6th century, the location of which may be within the North Wessex Downs. Thereafter the region became the scene of power struggles between the emerging kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. It is during this time that some of the substantial Iron Age hillforts began to be redefended and massive earthworks such as the Wansdyke, which straddles the chalk uplands south of the Kennet, and Bedwyn Dyke, on the Savernake plateau, are thought to have been constructed. Place-name evidence also suggests quite widespread Anglo-Saxon settlement. Society was highly stratified, with a warrior aristocracy - the thegns, based in centres within each manor, and ruling over tenant peasants (villeins) and serfs. This evolved into the feudal society. Fighting between Wessex and Danish forces occurred on the Berkshire Downs in the late 9th century.

Ideology

3.61 Romano-British culture practised both cremation and inhumation burials, and larger centres had cemeteries located outside of the towns, on roads leading into the settlements. Early pagan Anglo-Saxon cremation and inhumation cemeteries of the 5th and 6th centuries AD have been found at Collingbourne Ducis, East Shefford near the River Lambourn, at Blacknall Field in the Vale of Pewsey, and just north of Andover. These contained grave goods such as pottery, brooches, tools, jewellery and weapons. Following the

conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, burials took place around churches, usually without grave goods.

Buildings and settlement

3.62 The Romano-British period supposedly saw an intensification of settlement and reorganisation of land usage and landholding. In reality, many farmsteads continued to develop and expand following the Roman occupation and remained little different in appearance. No forts have been found on the North Wessex Downs, but the introduction of villa estates was a dramatic change. There are villas clustered close to Andover, whilst some on the Lambourn Downs make use of earlier field systems. Some villas were themselves developed out of earlier native farmsteads, and by the 3rd century AD most villas had rectangular, tile-roofed stone buildings at their centres. Only a few Roman settlements were established close to the National Landscape, with Leucomagus or Andover and Cuentio or Mildenhall being the most notable. Some villages also appeared during the Romano-British period, such as Chisenbury Warren, which had numerous buildings spread out along a central street.

3.63 There is little direct archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement on the North Wessex Downs. However, these early settlements are likely to have clustered in the principal river valleys, close to water sources. Great Bedwyn, for example, is certainly known to have Anglo-Saxon origins, as it is mentioned in a charter. Typical Anglo-Saxon constructions were the grubenhauser or sunken- featured buildings. Early documentary records of around 888 AD, the oval street plan and the possible Saxon origins of the church on the edge of the area suggest that the settlement of Lambourn has Saxon origins. Large Saxon estates on the Downs were sometimes subdivided to form parishes. The countryside was divided into vills and manors, with each administrative unit including a proportion of meadowland, arable lower slopes and pasture on the higher ground. The need to use these different areas led to the long, thin parishes characteristic of the chalk downlands of the National Landscape.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.64 The Roman occupation has traditionally been seen as a period of great change in the rural landscape. There was an increase in cereal cultivation and livestock numbers, attributed to the introduction of ten percent taxation, and the demands of the Roman army for grain, meat and hides. Tanning and related crafts may have become industrial in scale, and a large-scale wool industry

developed, with an expansion of field systems on the downs to meet the demand for wool.

3.65 In the 3rd century AD mouldboard ploughs appeared, capable of working heavier soils. Livestock increased in size, wool became finer, and the appearance of mules and new varieties of horse, dog and fowl suggest an increased interest in breeding. Spelt and emmer wheat declined in importance, whilst bread/club wheat, rye and oats became more popular. Winter cropping of wheat probably began after the occupation, whilst cabbage, parsnips, turnips, carrots and flax were introduced to Britain for the first time, along with hay cropping.

3.66 Anglo-Saxon arable crops included wheat, barley and oats, especially free-threshing bread wheat, although at this time arable agriculture may have reduced on the downs due to declining soil fertility. Many villages and manors on the chalk adopted two field systems, where half of the arable land was left untilled each year to be grazed by cattle and recover its fertility. In more fertile areas such as the Vales villages adopted three of four field systems, with the land cultivated for two years for cereal crops and then left fallow for a third year.

Trade, artefacts and communication

3.67 The Roman occupation saw dramatic changes in communication, trade and artefacts. Roman roads were revolutionary, allowing goods, livestock and people to move long distances in a relatively short time, replacing native trackways that had been used for centuries. The Portway linked Durnovaria or Dorchester with Calleva or Silchester, and at Leucomagus or Andover it met the road linking Venta or Winchester with Sorviodunum or Old Sarum. In addition, Ermin Street ran between Silchester in Hampshire and Cirencester in Gloucestershire crossing the National Landscape for a substantial distance. New markets and consumers were created because of these new roads. The Roman roads continued in use during the early Anglo-Saxon period, although communications did become poorer, and trade therefore more restricted. Some Roman roads within the National Landscape are still in use today, for example the road between Mildenhall and Chiseldon.

Landscape change

3.68 Roman roads were the most obvious changes in the landscape following the invasion in AD 43. However, the bulk of the North Wessex Downs did not change in appearance, although field systems may have expanded further into

previously open downland areas. Further woodland clearance took place, in part driven by increased demands for firewood and charcoal for pottery kilns and smithies. During the Anglo-Saxon period it is likely that the North Wessex Downs would have been divided up by the Wessex royal family, the Church and the lay nobility or thegns. Areas of woodland such as Savernake Forest and that of Barroc were probably almost continuous, and the forests of Chute and Melchet were also quite large. These were all turned into royal hunting parks or haga. Massive linear earthworks such as the Wansdyke in Wiltshire, and Grim's Ditch in Berkshire and Devil's Ditch in Hampshire may date to the 5th and 6th centuries AD. They may have marked territorial boundaries and were also perhaps defensive works.

3.69 Although hunting parks were established by the Saxons, it was the Normans who codified their management in the Forest Law. Chases such as Highclere Chase in Hampshire were unenclosed but nevertheless delimited hunting preserves, usually for the nobility. Royal Forests were not necessarily wooded, but usually consisted of a mosaic of woodland, scrub and grassland or heath. These were outside common law and subject to the special Forest Laws.

Settlement and organisation of the landscape: 1066 – 1499 (Medieval)

Social life and society structure

3.70 The Norman Conquest of England replaced an English-speaking elite with a French speaking nobility, based in castles and manor houses. Castles were built at Marlborough and Ludgershall to ensure the stability of the area. The Crown, the nobility, the bishoprics of the Church and the great monastic houses owned most of the land within the North Wessex Downs.

3.71 The Domesday survey of 1086 offers an insight into how parts of the English landscape was organised prior to and following the Norman Conquest of 1066. Important landowners, particularly the King and the Church controlled large parts of the countryside either directly or indirectly. The harvest failures and famines of 1315 to 1322 and the Black Death caused widespread misery, the latter killing 40%- 50% of the population, and altering the balance of economic and social power between peasants and lords. Serfdom largely disappeared, and paid labourers and classes of landed peasants and yeoman farmers emerged.

Buildings and settlement

3.72 The Normans established motte and bailey castles, such as the one at Marlborough, as local centres of power and control, and some new settlements appeared around them. The prosperity and growth which characterised the later-12th and 13th centuries led to the rapid expansion of towns just outside the National Landscape, such as Andover, Basingstoke, Overton, Newbury, and Lambourn which lies just inside the National Landscape.

3.73 Within the National Landscape settlement was concentrated along the river valleys, with scattered hamlets and isolated farmsteads restricted to clayland or the downland, where dairying, stock-raising and pasture-farming predominated. Large open fields divided into strips usually surrounded villages; these being owned individually but usually farmed together. Rectangular buildings with their own yards (the tofts and crofts) were arranged along the central roads or lanes that ran through the villages, often following the valley alignments. Manor houses and churches continued to be at the heart of village life, although some manor houses were located on the outskirts of the villages.

3.74 This general settlement pattern did vary. The Vale of Pewsey had a mixture of nucleated and dispersed settlements, often aligned across the valley rather than along it. The parishes of the Kennet valley were also more varied, and the area of downland in the south-east part of the National Landscape (west of Basingstoke) has a dispersed pattern of hamlets and individual farms. The Thames Valley, for example, saw a variety of smaller, nucleated, open green or dispersed settlements. These settlement patterns are still clear in the present-day landscape.

3.75 After the Black Death, falling population, decline in arable acreage, and low corn prices contributed to the desertion and partial desertion of villages particularly along the chalkland valleys of the National Landscape. Other late medieval desertions came about because of the creation of deer parks, such as the great new park at Savernake created by the Dukes of Somerset during the 16th century.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.76 During the 13th century management of woodland and Royal Forests for game, timber and fuel was intense, and coppicing, pollarding and charcoal burning were all- important practices in such areas. Villagers had common rights to some woodland and open areas, where grazing was also important. Rabbits were almost certainly introduced to Britain after the Norman Conquest

and were often managed in artificial warrens called pillow mounds with good examples on the Marlborough Downs. A population explosion prior to the Black Death also resulted in extensive areas of the National Landscape being cleared and ploughed, as evidenced by the many strip lynchets visible in the landscape today. These terraces, by which cultivation was extended up hillsides, enabled more land to be ploughed. Today, these are among the most common landscape features of the chalk and whole series survive along the northern edge.

3.77 The numerous small irregular shaped fields or assarts, which are especially prevalent in the east of the National Landscape are also evidence of this land-hunger and represent clearance of areas of forest waste or encroachment into heathland. Following the catastrophe of the Black Death, a declining population and reduced corn prices meant that arable farming was less profitable. There was a marked decrease in the extent of arable cultivation and land was allowed to revert to grass such as in the heavy clays of the Vale of the White Horse and on the thin soils of the Lambourn Downs. Sheep flocks, meanwhile, increased substantially as the wool industry developed further, with towns such as Marlborough, Whitchurch and Newbury becoming important textile centres.

Trade, artefacts and communication

3.78 By the medieval period, trade was becoming more long-distance and large-scale once more, with wool and livestock being the predominant export from the downlands. This was taken to burgeoning market towns often on the fringes of the downs, such as Andover and Swindon. This increased the network of communications with new tracks being established, although many medieval droveways and tracks may have had earlier origins. These tracks now form the intricate network of footpaths, byways, and green lanes that can be found across the National Landscape.

Landscape change

3.79 The clay Vales were much more wooded at this time and along with the remains of Saxon royal woodlands such as the Forest of Chute and the Forest of Pamber were used as hunting areas. The management of these areas was codified in Forest Law by the Normans. However, by the 13th century there was a wave of disafforestation when the Crown relinquished Forest Law over many areas. This meant woodlands became smaller, and had often fragmented into individual deer parks, which are a particular feature of the lower lying eastern

part of the National Landscape (e.g. Highclere Chase). Deer parks were surrounded by bank, ditch and fence boundaries often called pales. Deer-leaps allowed deer to move into the parks easily but restricted their ability to leave. Although the Romans may have introduced fallow deer to Britain, they did not appear on the North Wessex Downs until after the Norman Conquest.

3.80 From the 13th century onwards, large areas of former arable land on the downs were converted to pasture, and the open and un-hedged landscapes characteristic of the chalk downland became dominant across much of the region. By the 14th century however, in many areas of the North Wessex Downs this pattern was changing, with the consolidation of land blocks and their enclosure as fields using hedges, banks or ditches. This may partly have been a result of the depopulation resulting from the Black Death.

Post medieval: 1500 - 1799

Social life and society structure

3.81 By the 16th century there was a distinct 'middle-class' emerging in the countryside, with merchant and artisans in the towns, encouraged by expansion of the woollen cloth industry and the sale of monastic properties following the Dissolution. In the 17th and 18th centuries the rural gentry built new large houses or refurbished old ones, but following enclosure many poor farmers who had previously owned small plots of land found themselves working as paid but landless labourers. There was some social unrest during the time of the Civil War, when Andover, Marlborough, Littlecote, Ludgershall, Donnington, Newbury, Basing and Reading were all drawn into the conflict or were the site of battles and sieges. The battlefield of Roundway Down (1643) occurred in the western part of the North Wessex Downs.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.82 Many field systems remained little altered in some areas until the 18th century, but in others enclosure during the 15th and 16th centuries meant land use became more intensive, and the management of water meadows developed within the river valleys. It was during the 18th and 19th centuries that there were more dramatic changes, partly prompted by the Napoleonic Wars. Land improvements included drainage, new crops such as hemp, flax, woad, cabbages and rape and increasing use of machinery. Chalk was often extracted and burnt in limekilns to produce lime fertiliser. Formal Parliamentary enclosure not only changed the appearance of the landscape but also transformed the

agricultural cycle and the routines of the people who lived there. Farm sizes increased considerably in many areas.

Landscape change

3.83 By the 18th century, enclosure had created a patchwork of small, irregularly shaped fields and winding lanes and tracks in many areas. From the later 18th century though, some areas of pasture of the downs were converted to arable, and common woods, heaths and grasslands were also enclosed. The rectangular, regular patterns of field systems seen in most areas today were the result of these later Parliamentary enclosures. The eighteenth 18th also saw the wealthy financing the development of 'polite' landscape gardens, with Highclere Castle being a particularly spectacular example. The expansion of the navy during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the demands of industry, caused large areas of surviving woodland to be clear-felled and the creation of the more open landscape character of much of the North Wessex Downs today.

The modern landscape: 1800 - Present

Social life and society structure

3.84 Following the Napoleonic Wars conditions in the countryside for the poor were dire. There were economic crises in the 1820s and rural populations fell, while town populations grew rapidly. By the end of the 19th century more people were working in industries based in towns than were working in agriculture. Further declines in the rural population followed the First and Second World Wars, and the 20th century saw major social and economic changes in the North Wessex Downs.

Subsistence, agriculture and industry

3.85 Lace and silk making were specialist industries that developed in places such as Marlborough and Whitchurch on the edge of the North Wessex Downs during the 18th and 19th centuries, but during the 19th century the cloth industry declined markedly. Ironworks and engineering developed in the surrounding towns of Swindon, Andover and Devizes. The coming of the railways saw an increase in dairying, especially in the clay Vales, as it became much easier to transport milk to towns and cities. Watercress was an unusual 19th and 20th century crop that continues to be cultivated in flooded beds within the river valleys, notably the Bourne, a tributary of the River Test.

3.86 Following the First and Second World Wars there was increased mechanisation on farms, and farm labouring as a way of life declined rapidly. Many farms on the downlands are now very large business concerns with intensive ploughing and use of fertilisers and insecticides maintaining high crop yields. Post-war intensification of agriculture, the use of fertilisers and insecticides and increased mechanisation has led many farmers to continue ploughing on slopes and elevated downland, and to remove many hedgerows and field boundaries, creating very large-scale fields. Many archaeological features have been destroyed, and in some instances much of the topsoil also has been lost.

Trade, artefacts and communication

3.87 Turnpike roads were a significant improvement in communication, and in 1810 the Kennet and Avon Canal was opened, serving Pewsey, Hungerford, Newbury and Reading. The Wiltshire and Berkshire Canal was another important waterway. The construction of railways initiated an increase in milk production, and Swindon (a small market town until the Great Western Railway was constructed) became a major locomotive depot and repair centre. The railways served as the major communication and trade arteries until the 1970s, when most freight began to shift to road transport. The M4 and the A34 are the largest modern routeways in the National Landscape, and contrast with the relatively narrow roads that otherwise characterise the North Wessex Downs.

Landscape change

3.88 The development of the canal, railway and road networks has had a major impact on the landscapes of the North Wessex Downs, especially more recent road routes such as the M4 and A34. During the Second World War many areas such as the Lambourn Downs and Marlborough Downs that had been under pasture were ploughed up again to maximise arable production. This has created the open character of the landscape today.

3.89 The 20th century has seen major changes in the agricultural management. At the same time there has been a significant increase in the urban population and growth of development. These changes are not only significant from an archaeological perspective but are significant in determining the overall character of the North Wessex Downs. They are considered further in Chapter 4.

Figure 3.7: Cultural Heritage Designations

North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.7: Cultural Heritage Designations

North Wessex Downs National Landscape
Scheduled monument
Registered Parks and Gardens
Listed building
- Grade I
- Grade II*
- Grade II

0 5 10 km

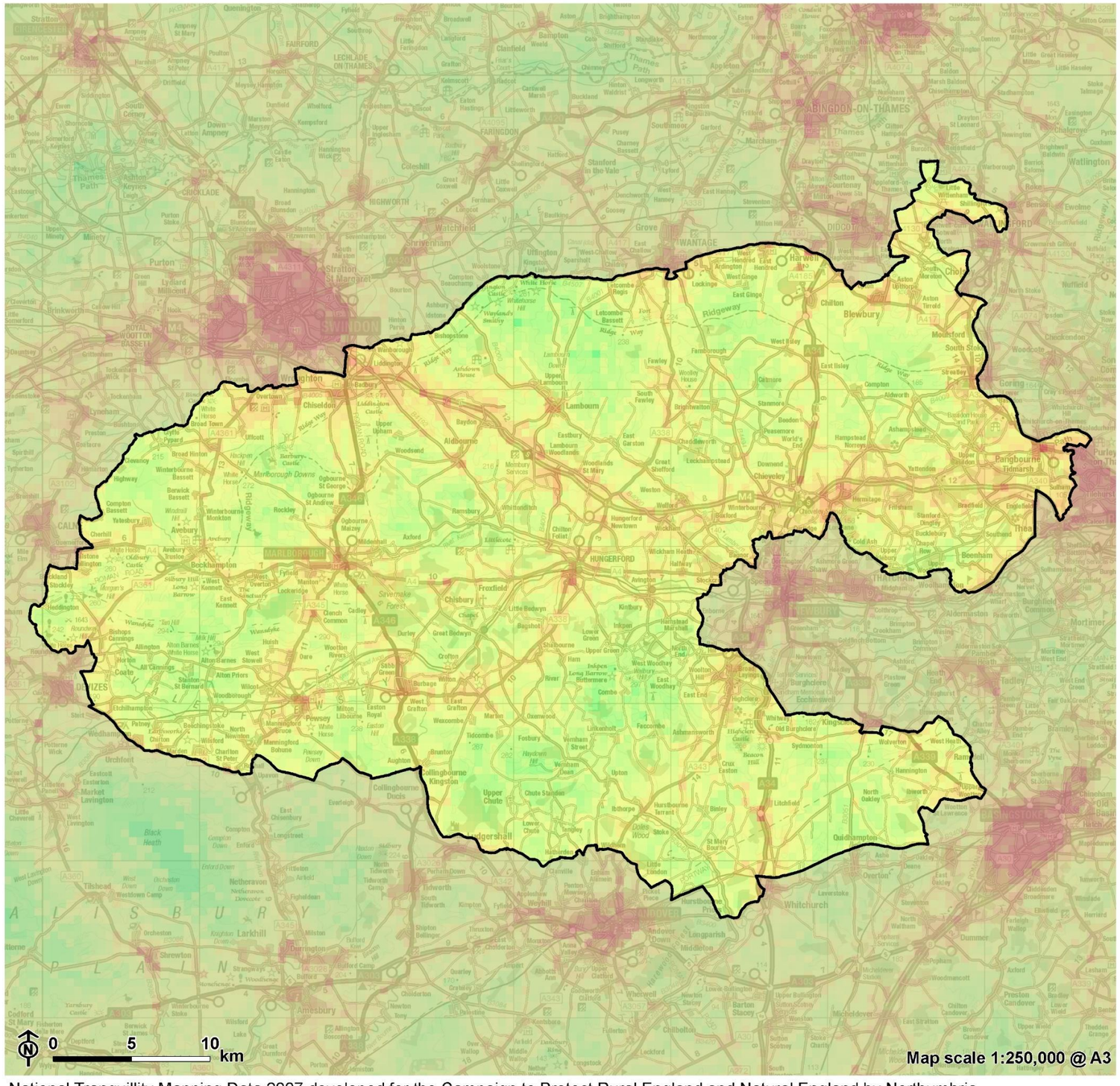
Map scale 1:250,000 @ A3

Perceptions

3.90 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape enjoys relatively high levels of tranquillity, largely due to elevation and distance from large settlements. The areas of lower tranquillity are found around the larger settlements and along the corridors of the major road network, as shown in Figure 3.8 Tranquillity.

3.91 Figure 3.9 Dark Skies shows the levels of light pollution within the North Wessex Downs, illustrating that the majority of the National Landscape enjoys dark or very dark night skies, with limited light pollution. As many as 3,000 stars can be seen from the darkest areas, and a number of locations on the chalk downs are promoted as stargazing spots. Dark night skies can make an important contribution to perceptions and enjoyment of the landscape.

Figure 3.8: Tranquilty



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.8: Tranquility

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

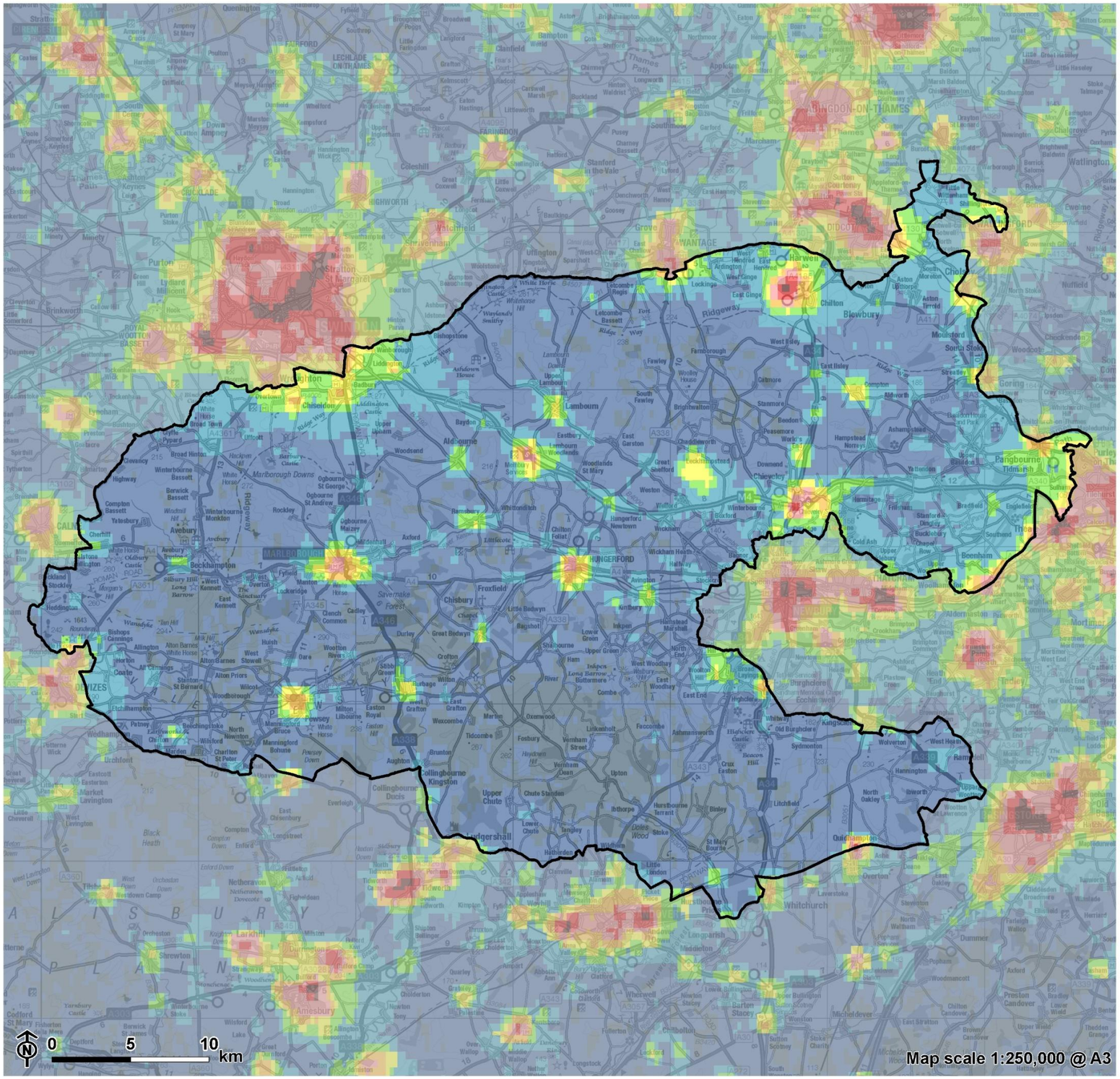
Level of relative tranquility

High

Low

National Tranquillity Mapping Data 2007 developed for the Campaign to Protect Rural England and Natural England by Northumbria University.Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2025. Ordnance Survey License Number AC0000817126.

Figure 3.9: Dark skies



North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 3.9: Dark Skies

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

CPRE Night Blight 2016

NanoWatts/cm2/sr

- >32 (brightest)
- 16 - 32
- 8 - 16
- 4 - 8
- 2 - 4
- 1 - 2
- 0.5 - 1
- 0.25 - 0.5
- < 0.25 (darkest)

This is pure downland; the breasted hills curving as if under the influence of a great melody. It is beautiful, a quiet, an unrenowned and a most visibly ancient land. **[See reference 4]**

Edward Thomas (1878-1917)

3.92 A landscape can assume national significance not only because of its particular character and qualities, but also because of special associations and perceptions that it may have. These include the perceptions of local people who live and work in the area as well as artistic and literary associations. An examination of the way that others have perceived the landscape over time can also provide pointers to a consensus view on why an area is considered special, and what particular features have consistently attracted attention and comment. This chapter considers, first, the perception of the inhabitants of the North Wessex Downs of their local landscape and goes on to review artistic and literary associations, which have raised the profile of the National Landscape nationally.

Local Perceptions

3.93 There is a strong local resonance and affinity with the landscape of the North Wessex Downs, particularly the individual downs and the river valleys that make up the National Landscape - the Marlborough Downs, the Lambourn Downs and the key features within it such as Avebury, the Uffington White Horse, the Ridgeway, Combe Gibbet above Inkpen, Watership Down, Savernake Forest, the Kennet and Avon Canal, the historic towns of Marlborough and Hungerford, the Ridgeway and many other outstanding features.

3.94 Unlike the Chilterns or Cotswolds which have a very strong image and identity in peoples' minds, the North Wessex Downs as an entity covers a very large geographic area encompassing a diverse range of landscapes. The name of the National Landscape has also been described as misleading and an imposed artificial name, since local people consider themselves to be neither, north, Wessex or indeed wholly downland. This is not to say however, that residents do not have a strong affinity with the area, but most recognise it by the component parts rather than the National Landscape as a whole.

The Racehorse Training Industry

The Lambourn area is known as the 'Valley of the Racehorse' and is renowned for its associations with the racehorse training industry. It has been a famous training area for over 150 years, producing winners of all the greatest races (Flat and National Hunt) in the Racing Calendar. Lambourn-trained horses that became household names during their careers and are still remembered with affection include Mandarin, Mill House, Grundy, Garrison Savannah, Rheingold and Party Politics. Celebrated trainers include Fred Winter, Peter Walwyn, Nicky Henderson, and Jenny Pitman the first woman to train a National Hunt winner. Jockeys particularly associated with the Lambourn area include Lester Piggott and Bruce Hobbs, among many others.

The distinctive landscapes of the Lambourn Valley and downs have formed a backdrop and setting for the racing novels of Dick Francis and equine artists have also been attracted to the area. A good example being the oil painting Morning on Lambourn Downs by Sue Wingate. The artist notes:

"I had seen this particular gallop in Lambourn and liked the rolling landscape with groups of trees which add interest to the background. It was soft, slightly misty morning in the summer and the horses are shown returning to their yard after work."**[See reference** 5**]**

Landscape Descriptions

3.95 The North Wessex Downs is a landscape rich in historic sites and natural features. This magical landscape has attracted naturalists, antiquarians and travellers to the area throughout recent history. Records of visitor's perceptions reveal how the landscape was viewed as well as how it has changed. In 1725 Daniel Defoe visited, and wrote of, the wonder of the Vale of the White Horse. He climbed the hill at Uffington for close examination of the white horse and commented on the construction of these great features; "trenches…. about a yard long, and filled almost up with chalk". He then stood many miles off to observe the feature from some distance: "you see the exact shape of a white horse…. not ill-shaped I assure you" **[See reference** 6**]**.

3.96 However, views of the landscape were not always positive. William Gilpin wrote in 1770:

“The Marlborough Downs is one of the most dreary scenes which our ancestors … chose as the repositarium of their dead. Everywhere we see tumuli, which were raised over their ashe”” **[See reference 7]**.

3.97 In contrast, William Cobbett, writing in 1825, was impressed by the vast, scale of the landscape:

‘I like to look at the winding side of a great down, with two or three numerous flocks of sheep on it, belonging to different farms; and to see, lower down, the folds, in the fields, ready to receive them for the night. …. Our point of destination was this village called Burghclere, which lies close under the north side of the lofty hill at Highclere, which is called Beacon Hill, and on top of which there are still the marks of Roman encampment. We saw this hill as soon as we got on Winchester Downs; and without regard to roads, we steered for it, as sailors do for a land-mark”” **[See reference 8]**.

3.98 Edward Thomas, similarly describes the vastness and remoteness of the landscape in the first chapter of his biography of Richard Jefferies (1909), again likening it to the ocean:

“The Downs in this immediate country of Richard Jeffries are among the highest, most spacious, and most divinely carved in rolling ridge and hollowed flank, and their summits commune with the finest summits of the more southerly downs - Inkpen, Martinsell, Tan Hill

…Jeffries often thought of the sea upon these hills. The eye expects it. There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their solitude … They are never abrupt, but, flowing on and on, make a type of infinity … they have a hugeness of undivided surface for which there is no comparison on earth” **[See reference 9]**.

3.99 Richard Jefferies (1848-1887), novelist, naturalist, essayist, and mystic grew up in a hamlet at the foot of the Downs. Jefferies developed an extraordinary sensitivity to nature and wrote many perceptive letters, essays and books on rural matters inspired by this part of the North Wessex Downs:

“From the blue hill lines, from the dark copses on the ridges, the shadows in the combes ... there comes from these an influence which forces the heart to lift itself in earnest and purest desire” **[See reference 10]**

3.100 One of Jefferies’ most well-known books Wildlife in a Southern Country (1879) contains an evocative description of the Ridgeway, which still has resonance today:

“A broad green track runs for many a long, long mile across the downs, now following the ridges, now winding past at the foot of a grassy slope, then stretching away through a cornfield and fallow. It is distinct from the wagon-tracks which cross it here and there, for these are local only, and, if traced up, land the wayfarer presently in a maze of fields, or end abruptly in the rickyard of a lone farmhouse. It is distinct from the hard roads of modern construction which also at wide intervals cross its course, dusty and glaringly white in the sunshine … With varying width, from twenty to fifty yards, it runs like a green ribbon … a width that allows a flock of sheep to travel easily side by side.” **[See reference** 11**]**

3.101 Another native writer associated with the Downs is Alfred Williams (1877-1930), a working man employed in the steam-hammer shop at Swindon railway works. Williams wrote both poetry and prose describing the local landscape of this part of the Downs.

“The slopes of the downs, if they have general forms, are continually changing and interchanging in localities, assuming new and strange shapes, charming and surprising with their grace and exquisiteness … for ever reflecting the mood of the heavens ….” **[See reference** 12**]**

3.102 A standing sarsen stone, erected east of Barbury Castle on Buderop Down, commemorates Jefferies and Williams.

Myth and Legend

Archaeological sites

3.103 The area has a rich legendary heritage and local myth, and mystery surrounds many of the ancient stone circles, burial mounds and hillforts that characterise the North Wessex Downs, which are thought to be connected through the area by mysterious ley lines. Avebury World Heritage Site includes the largest stone circle in Europe and has intrigued visitors for hundreds of years with images often captured in topographical writings and drawings. William Stukeley, for example made a number of observations and line drawings of the monument in his visits to the area in the early 18th century. People remain fascinated by what they see and seek to find an explanation for its majesty and aura. One myth tells of the magician Merlin bringing the stones from Ireland.

3.104 Various legends have also been attached to Silbury Hill to help explain the creation of this unusual feature. Folklore has claimed it to be the burial place of King Sil, a knight in golden armour or fabled hidden treasure. It is also suggested as being a symbolic effigy of the ancient Mother Earth Goddess and associated with fertility rituals. Another explanation is that Silbury Hill could have been used as an accurate solar observatory by means of the shadows cast by the mound on the carefully levelled plain to the north, towards Avebury. Perhaps the most popular legend is that the hill was created by the Devil who was going to empty a huge sack of earth on the nearby town of Marlborough but was forced to drop it at Silbury through the magic of priests at nearby Avebury.

3.105 Located on the Ridgeway, close to the White Horse is Wayland's Smithy, a Neolithic long barrow, sheltered by a grove of beech trees and built of massive sarsen stones. Legend has it that, if you leave your horse here overnight with a payment in silver, Wayland the smith of the Saxon gods, will shoe it by dawn.

Sarsen Stones

3.106 A similar fascination exists for the enigmatic Sarsen Stones, which have cast their spell on many who see them. The stones are often known as 'grey wethers' on account of their resemblance to grazing sheep when seen from a distance, or alternatively as 'druid stones'. Henry of Huntingdon's *History of England*, written c.1130, describes 'stanenges, where stones of wonderful size have been erected after the manner of doorways, so that doorway appears to have been raised upon doorway; and no one can conceive how such great stones have been raised aloft, or why they were built there' **[See reference** 13**]**. John Aubrey wrote of the stones in the 17th century "many of them are mighty great ones, and particularly those in Overton Wood" **[See reference** 14**]**. In 1668 Samuel Pepys visited Avebury and Silbury Hill, commenting "… it was prodigious to see how full the downs are of great stones, and all along the valleys stones of considerable bigness most of them growing certainly out of the ground so thick as to cover the ground **[See reference** 15**]**". The fate of these stones may be traced to writings. Brentnal, writing at the end of the Second World War, noticed that "the stones are gone for the most part to make the roads of Swindon". This was not the only use of the stones - many stones went into the making of early churches and footpaths - one such path of sarsen setts may still be seen between the villages of Alton Priors and Alton Barnes in the Vale of Pewsey.

Chalk Carvings

3.107 The spirit and mystery of ancient Wessex is perhaps symbolised best by the chalk-carved White Horses, which are redolent with myth and legend. Uffington White Horse, which stands out of the Downs above the Vale of the White Horse is the oldest example (at least 3,000 years old) and may have inspired the subsequent creation of the many other etched chalk figures which now characterise the North Wessex Downs. The Uffington figure is unique, with a long sleek body and beak like head. It is believed by some to represent the mythical dragon slain by St George – a legend associated with the adjacent rounded hill called 'Dragon Hill'. It has also been attributed to Hengist and Horsa, two 5th century princes, and as a commemoration for King Alfred's defeat of the Danes, but is much older than either of these.

3.108 Bill Bryson in the introduction to the book *The English Landscape* (2000) **[See reference** 16**]** notes that "what is truly notable 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 for its creators has long since faded away. For most of its existence – through plague and war and famine… the White Horse has been preserved simply because people liked it. I think that is splendid." This tradition is continued today under National Trust ownership with its 'Scouring of the White Horse' event.

3.109 The Uffington White Horse is a symbolic landmark, commemorated by many poets and novelists, including G.K. Chesterton in his *Ballad of the White Horse*:

"Before the gods that made the gods Had seen the sunrise pass / The White Horse of the White Horse Vale Was cut out of the grass." **[See reference** 17**]**

Crop Circles

3.110 More recently the appearance of enigmatic crop circles, most notably in Wiltshire, and frequently associated with ancient monuments, have further contributed to the mystical charm of this landscape.

Artistic connections

3.111 There is relatively little record of paintings from the North Wessex Downs, during the Victorian period. Paintings by Turner and Constable are plentiful from the surrounding area including Oxford, Stonehenge and Salisbury but absent from the Downs. Avebury, however, has long been a source of wonder and inspiration. Paul Nash (1889-1946) discovered the megaliths at Avebury during his stay in Marlborough in 1933. His surreal and imaginative style of painting was inspired by these great stones as objects of mystery in the 'Landscape of the Megaliths' series.

3.112 Nash wrote an evocative description of the stones in the book Picture History **[See reference** 18**]** as they were prior to the Keiller reconstruction:

"The great stones were then in their wild state, so to speak. Some were half covered by the grass, others stood up in the cornfields were entangled and overgrown in the copses, some were buried under the turf. But they were always wonderful and disquieting, and, as I saw them, I shall always remember them … Their colouring and pattern, their patina of golden lichen, all enhanced their strange forms and mystical significance."

3.113 Nash's distinctive style of painting also captured the character of other parts of North Wessex Downs including the beech topped knolls in *Wood on the Downs* and *Wittenham Clumps*. Nash drew the beech clumps obsessively and saw them as the repossession of human works by nature.

3.114 The landscape of the North Wessex Downs has continued to inspire artists in the 20th century. The painter John Piper (1903-1992) knew and loved the Wiltshire Downs and designed a stained-glass window for the Devizes Museum incorporating archaeological motifs from the Marlborough Downs including the stones of West Kennett Avenue, the Devil's Den dolmen, and several round barrows. Contemporary perceptions of the Ridgeway and surrounds were gathered in The Ridgeway: Europe's Oldest Road **[See reference** 19**]**. This collection of paintings by contemporary landscape artists, including Keith Grant and Philip Hughes, illustrate perceptions and features of the present-day landscape. Philip Hughes uses free flowing lines to represent the strong landscape patterns in the Downs.

Literary Associations

3.115 The author Thomas Hughes (1822-96) was born and brought up in the village of Uffington in the shadow of the Downs. He describes the countryside in

that most English of books, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* **[See reference** 20**]** and in *The Scouring of the White Horse* **[See reference** 21**]**.

3.116 It was the Victorian novelist, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), who is reputed to be responsible for reviving the obsolete Saxon name of Wessex. The rolling chalk landscape south of Wantage (Alfredstone) forms a setting for his last, and probably most profound novel, *Jude the Obscure* **[See reference** 22**]**. Hardy's descriptions note the increasing arable nature of the chalk landscape and describe it as ‘ugly' and ‘dry and ‘dusty'. Maps of Hardy's Wessex identify Beacon Hill (Inkpen Beacon) and the Marlbury Downs (Marlborough Downs) as significant landmarks within the North Wessex Downs.

3.117 In the second half of the 19th century Kenneth Grahame wrote the *Wind in the Willows* **[See reference** 23**]**. He was a nature worshipper and sought inspiration from the Berkshire Downs. In his first book, Pagan Papers (1898) he describes the Ridgeway and surrounding landscape.

“Join it at Streatley, the point where it crosses the Thames; at once it strikes you out and away from the habitable world in a splendid purposeful manner, running along the highest ridge of the Downs, a broad green ribbon of turf, with but a shade of difference from the neighbouring grass, yet distinct for all that. No villages nor homesteads tempt it aside or modify its course for a yard; … Out on that almost trackless expanse of billowy Downs such as track is in some sort humanly companionable; it really seems to lead you by the hand.” **[See reference** 24**]**

3.118 D H Lawrence spent two years, between 1917 and 1919 in Hermitage, north of Newbury, after being moved away from the coast during the war. Of all Lawrence's writing, the story most closely based on Hermitage is *The Fox*, first published in 1923.

3.119 Poets have also been inspired by the North Wessex Downs landscape. The highly regarded poet, Edward Thomas (1878–1917) developed a strong affinity with the area around the Marlborough Downs. Thomas was a great admirer of Richard Jefferies and was commissioned to write his biography, which includes some imaginative descriptions of the landscape of this part of the North Wessex Downs. Thomas’s poetry captured the essence of the English countryside and was inspired by nature and the landscape. *The Combe* aptly describes the scarp edge north of the Marlborough Downs.

“The Combe was ever dark, ancient and dark. / Its mouth stopped with bramble, thorn and briar; And no one scrambles over the sliding chalk / By beech and

yew and perishing juniper / Down the half precipices of its sides, with roots And rabbit holes for steps.” **[See reference** 25**]**

3.120 Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895-1915) was a contemporary of Edward Thomas, and like Thomas was a victim of the Great War. Sorley attended Marlborough College and wrote a number of poems, collected in his book *Marlborough and Other Poems*, inspired by the varied local landscape of high downs and scarp slopes incised by deep river valleys:

“I who have walked along her downs in dreams, And known her tenderness and felt her might, / And sometimes by a her meadows and her streams Have drunk deep-storied secrets of delight.” **[See reference** 26**]**

3.121 More recently Michael Baldwin (b. 1930) has described the Uffington White Horse in his poem *Chalk Horse*:

“Men cut their Gods in the hills The galloping Gods whose hooves Go flying away in the grass / When the grass moves in the winds.” **[See reference** 27**]**

3.122 John Betjeman (1906-1984) lived in Uffington and knew the local landscape well. In the 1950s he opened people's eyes to changes in the landscape because of the loss of public rights of way and heritage through his rhyming verse.

“He takes no part in village life beyond Throwing his refuse in a neighbour's pond And closing footpaths, not repairing walls Leaving a cottage till at last it falls. / People protest. A law-suit then begins, / But as he's on the Bench, he always wins.” **[See reference** 28**]**

3.123 Writers and poets have continued to express concern about change in the landscape. *Watership Down* **[See reference** 29**]** was written in 1972 by Richard Adams and allows the reader to enter the rabbit world and Watership Down, the area of countryside north of Overton. It provides detailed descriptions of the downland landscape and highlights the damaging impact that development can have on this inspirational landscape.

Chapter 4
Forces for change

4.1 The North Wessex Downs is a dynamic landscape that has evolved and changed over time in response to prevailing economic and social conditions. It is the cumulative effect of past change that has created the special and distinctive character of the North Wessex Downs that is valued today. The landscape will continue to change in the future.

4.2 This chapter provides an overview of the main forces for change affecting the landscape of the North Wessex Downs. Area-specific current and future forces for change are included in individual LCT and LCA profiles.

Climate Change

4.3 Climate change is a major pressure on rural landscapes and is likely to result in increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, leading to more frequent and intense heatwaves, droughts, floods and storms. These changes are resulting in the need for agriculture to adapt to grow different crops and develop more flexible and responsive land management practices. For example, hotter summers and increases in temperatures could result in increased demands for agricultural irrigation.

4.4 Climate change and increasing demands for urban development can increase the urban heat island effect. Urban areas are warmer than the surrounding rural landscapes due to heat trapping from urban land use, including street layout, tarmac and roads and increased glazing in buildings.

4.5 Climate change resulting in more extreme weather could alter the species composition of existing species-rich woodlands and hedgerows, favouring species with lower water demand. The increasing frequency and intensity of storms could increase storm damage and reduce the number of veteran trees which are more susceptible to damage. Increasing incidences of pathogens may change the species mix of woodlands and higher temperatures and prolonged droughts are likely to put woodlands under further stress and increase the risk of wildfires.Climate change is increasing the impact of pests and diseases, including ash dieback and acute oak decline, and the increased spread of invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam.

4.6 Climate change is also likely to affect other important semi-natural habitats. These changes may manifest themselves within the natural environment through changes in habitats and a decline of flora and fauna which are unable to adapt quickly enough to the changing habitat conditions. Longer drier summers may affect heathland and dry grassland and increase the risk of fire. The changing seasons may also disturb migrating birds and invertebrates, as there will be an increasing mismatch in timing of the arrival of migratory species and food sources, affecting neutral grassland and woodland as well as intertidal habitats. Wetter winters shorten the growing season for crops, and impacts the types of crops it is possible to grow.

4.7 Wetter winters will increase the risk of flooding from watercourses, particularly along river valleys. Impacts of flooding on the landscape include the temporary evacuation or permanent abandonment of buildings and damage to roads, buildings and field boundaries. Measures to provide flood protection may lead to conflict between defences and wildlife value, and erection of flood defences may also have a visual impact on the landscape. Increased frequency of flooding can lead to increased runoff of pollutants from the land. Conversely, hotter and drier summers result in lower summer river flows, which means there is less water available for dilution and dispersion of pollutants such as nutrients and contaminated sediments. The risk of eutrophication and algal blooms increases the longer nutrients remain in a water body.

4.8 Many of the Local Planning Authorities have declared climate and ecological emergencies. These include targets of achieving carbon neutrality in the short-term. Mitigation and adaption to climate change, to achieve Net Zero, is also changing the landscape. This includes the demand for renewable energy, which in the North Wessex Downs could result in the introduction of new types of energy crops for digestors, short rotation coppice. Although demand for wind turbines and solar farms will remain small within the North Wessex Downs, renewable energy developments in the setting of the National Landscape will impact on the visual and perceptual characteristics.

Agriculture and Land Management

4.9 The historic analysis undertaken as part of this assessment has indicated that the character of agriculture within the North Wessex Downs has fluctuated over time in accordance with prevailing economic circumstances and technological developments. For example, arable cultivation on the downs was established as early as the prehistoric period and during the 17th and 18th centuries, corn was the major cash crop on the chalklands. In the mid-19th

century, arable farming entered a decline until post-1945 national policy, and subsequently the CAP, established a new framework for agriculture and the intensive arable agriculture that characterised the National Landscape.

4.10 The introduction of the Basic Single Payment (BPS) in 2005 replaced production linked subsidies and introduced cross compliance rules that required land managers to meet environmental, food safety, and animal welfare standards to receive payments. Agri-environmental schemes became more popular and influential on land management and agriculture in the early 2000s with the introduction of the Environmental Stewardship Scheme in 2005 (ESS). ESS promoted sustainable farming practices that benefited the environmental, wildlife, and sustainable food production. Widespread uptake of the lower Entry Level Stewardship resulted in greater participation in simple measures such as buffer strips and hedge management.

4.11 Continued CAP reform and an increasing public interest in sustainability, wildlife and climate resilience led to the next iteration of agri-environment schemes with the introduction of Countryside Stewardship (CS) in 2015. CS aimed to be more spatially focused but also introduced funding for a greater array of sustainable management practices such as herbal lays, nectar flower mixes and winter cover crops.

4.12 After Brexit, England exited the CAP framework, and an agricultural transition plan was created to support land managers and agriculture whilst the UK exited the European Union. The Agriculture Act 2020 replaced CAP in England, which involved phasing out BPS from 2021 to 2027 and push the new principle of ‘public money for public goods’. New Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs) were introduced, which maintained the current Countryside Stewardship with alterations to options available and payment rates, but the introduction of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and the Landscape Recovery Scheme (LR). SFI had a high uptake of applicants, prior to its temporary pause in early 2025, which encouraged management for healthy soils, clean water, improved biodiversity and reduced emissions. A reformed scheme is expected to be announced later in 2025.

Past Agricultural Change

4.13 Post-war agricultural policy resulting in the intensification and industrialisation of farming in the North Wessex Downs has been a major force for change since designation of the National Landscape in 1972. A study by the RSPB13 using MAFF June Census data revealed that between 1968 and 1998 the total area under grassland in the National Landscape was reduced by 32%.

The consequent effects on the character of the North Wessex Downs are well known and include:

- fragmentation of important habitats, notably chalk grassland into a few isolated remnant sites.
- extensive areas of land being farmed as a single unit in very large-scale fields, with loss of peripheral boundary features.
- mechanisation and reduction of farm labour means that there are no longer the skills to maintain woodland coppice, hedgerows and other landscape features which would formerly have been an integral part of the agricultural scene.
- loss of important archaeological, with many features such as round barrows only visible as cropmarks on air photos and no longer forming recognisable landscape features.
- impact of run off (fertiliser, herbicides plus soil erosion) from intensively farmed arable areas on the delicate habitats and high-water quality of the chalk rivers that are a special feature of the National Landscape.
- reduction in livestock, as farms have converted to arable and because of BSE and foot and mouth, which make it difficult to maintain extensive areas of grassland.

4.14 Arable farming has itself changed. These include development of hardier cereal varieties allowing a shift from spring to autumn drilling with consequent impacts on biodiversity, particularly farmland birds. Maize, now a widespread crop in parts of the National Landscape, is a significant contributor to soil erosion and diffuse pollution to watercourses due to the extent of bare ground within the crop. There have also been changes in the types of crops grown.

Current Changes in Agriculture

4.15 Presently, a broad range of funding sources are available for both small- and large-scale land management projects that focus on building climate resilience, nature recovery and sustainable food production. The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) and England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) are government funds which have supported an increase in woodland cover. FiPL also supports hedge planting, habitat creation and restoration and regenerative farming machinery. Other funding sources available and likely to impact land management across the National Landscape include National

Lottery funding, Farming Equipment and Technology Fund, Biodiversity Net Gain opportunities and other local/community funding.

Increase in Large Farm Units

4.16 The larger and well-structured arable farms of the North Wessex Downs are likely to be able to respond to the competitive global market, driven at the international level by global trade agreements. This may result in increased specialisation with a concentration on the best and most productive land and the amalgamation of holdings with very large farms managed as a single unit under a block farming regime, mainly through contract labour. Anticipated adverse impacts may include further homogenisation of the landscape, reduction in the already very depleted biodiversity, potential demand for more centralised and large-scale buildings such as grain storage facilities and further reduction in the level of agricultural employment.

4.17 Increased specialisation and dominance of arable systems may also mean that in some areas there may no longer be livestock to maintain areas of grassland. However, it is also true that larger units may also have the resources, labour and capital to respond to environmental initiatives and pursue landscape and biodiversity enhancement in association with productive agriculture. Many of the large farms currently operating in the North Wessex Downs are very conservation-minded, particularly with regard to game shooting interests.

Surplus/Marginal Agricultural Land

4.18 The concentration of resources on the best land may result in marginal areas coming out of production resulting in pockets of unmanaged land throughout the National Landscape. The reduction in livestock, for example, may lead to some grasslands regenerating to new areas of scrub and woodland. Recent years have also witnessed an increase in marginal land being put into set-aside. While this does have ecological benefits (e.g. for ground nesting birds and invertebrates) it also has a significant impact upon the landscape. There is potential for marginal or surplus agricultural land to be brought into positive environmental management, supported through agri-environment initiatives, for example to provide a connected habitat of chalk grassland potentially combined with a new access network.

4.19 There are also pressures for new uses of marginal land including ‘lifestyle’ farms or smallholdings, leisure uses and horse paddocks – all of which can

have local visual impacts. With appropriate guidance and management advice new landowners may be responsive to National Landscape objectives and able to deliver positive landscape benefits.

Medium and Small Farms

4.20 It is also expected that the North Wessex Downs may see the emergence of a sector of small farms seeking to build on the opportunities presented by UK's agricultural reform program. Under this scenario small scale family owned and tenanted farms may increasingly seek to produce high quality premium, possibly organic, goods for local markets potentially under environmentally sensitive regimes, supported through measures such Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes. However, the effort and ingenuity required to achieve these goals should not be under-estimated. Many of the necessary skills and labour are now much depleted within the area, for example, those in shepherding and animal husbandry. More fundamentally, perhaps, has been the change in consumer demand since the last time sheep extensively grazed open downland. At this time the demand was for wool and mutton; now the demand is for lamb. This potentially requires the development of new farming systems utilising the traditional sheep breeds of the downlands. It may also mean the linking of downland pastures with off-down pastures for finishing.

Diversification: New Land Uses

4.21 Studies have shown that farmers would prefer to focus their diversification actively within farming, for example into alternative crops and adding value. Both public and private funding for land management over the past twenty years has focused on prioritising sustainable practices, and most recently 'public money for public goods'. Recent changes to arable farming include:

- herbal lays and cover crops: herbal lays are introduced in the rotational cropping system to improve soil health but also provide a healthy, nutritional sward for grazing livestock. A herbal lay consists of a legume and forb rich sward, the deep-rooted herbs help to break up compacted soil and inclusion of legumes fix atmospheric nitrogen and reduce the need for artificial fertilisers. Winter cover crops are a non-harvested crop that is grown over winter months between cash crops, to minimise soil erosion, break up compacted lays of soil and fix nitrogen. Both crops introduce a visual green cover and promote sustainable practices which reduce soil erosion, improve soil health and reduce the need for artificial fertiliser application.

- plots within arable fields: funding for flower-rich margins, nectar plots, winter bird food and unharvested headlands have made this feature more common across arable fields. This has supported a greater diversity of habitats within arable landscapes, with the aim to support greater populations of pollinators, farmland birds and other local wildlife.
- soil and water protection: arable reversion to grassland and grassland buffer strips alongside watercourses and ditches have become more popular with funding from agri-environment schemes. Grassland helps to catch sediment, phosphorus and other substances which improves local water-quality. Greater grassland cover also improves soil health and retention.
- regenerative management practices: a greater interest in regenerative agriculture has been noted nationally. No-till management practices and organic farming have become more popular which prevents practices such as application of chemicals or ploughing which produce greenhouse gas emissions and reduce soil health and water quality.
- woodland management and planning: there has been a big push around sustainable woodland management and woodland creation. Loss of trees through diseases such as Dutch elm disease, ash dieback and acute oak decline have reduced the resilience of England's woodlands. Advice and guidance now promote planting of climate-resilient species, controlling deer pressure and supporting natural regeneration to manage native woodlands. Increasing woodland cover is also a main priority, with appropriate areas of grassland or arable land targeted for woodland creation. Planting of hedgerow trees and small copses have also been popular.

4.22 Energy crops have been introduced for use as biofuels, for anaerobic digestion and for biomass. Crops include wheat, sugar beet, maize, miscanthus and short rotation coppice. These can alter the landscape character of the North Wessex Downs, including the experience of openness, remoteness and the fundamental exposure of the chalk topography, which are key attributes of the National Landscape.

Development Pressure

4.23 Expanding settlements, increases in tourism, and renewable energy development are the main drivers for landscape change.

4.24 A number of large urban centres lie within the setting of the North Wessex Downs, including Swindon, Wantage, Didcot, Reading, Newbury, Basingstoke and Andover. Impacts on the National Landscape from development on the edge include:

- visual impacts not only from the immediately adjacent landscapes but also from the high central core of the downs.
- demands on the water resources of the chalk aquifer, resulting in low flows within the region's prime chalk rivers.
- increasing recreation pressures and loss of tranquillity, which is a rare commodity in southern England.
- increased traffic levels on the rural lane network, resulting in both loss of tranquillity, higher accident levels, and damage to the character of the lanes.

4.25 There is also a high demand for housing within the National Landscape particularly in the east, where there are many small attractive villages near employment centres. The key issues are:

- severe planning restrictions on villages perceived, by some, to be leading to village cramming and need to achieve an appropriate balance between 'protection' and allowing settlements to expand gradually.
- need to ensure new development is sympathetic and of good design and helps maintains the local village character.
- inappropriate location of development which can have a significant impact on character, for example by expansion of villages along valleys, or up onto the open downlands.
- poor design in terms of style and materials - some parts of the National Landscape (notably some villages to the east) are taking on a more suburban character.

4.26 Diversification of farm businesses and realisation of assets, includes pressure for the re-use of farm buildings. National guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and from Historic England provide sensitive methods of reusing these historic buildings, maintaining their presence in the landscape. In the North Wessex Downs planning permission is being sought for both modern large portal frame constructions and conversion of traditional farm buildings for both residential and economic uses. The key issues are:

- new uses include warehousing, industrial or business units, as well as a strong demand for equestrian uses, all of which may contribute to greater traffic levels in the National Landscape.
- need for associated infrastructure such as parking and lighting which impact on local character.
- impacts on the internal and external fabric of historic buildings.
- effect on a variety of declining wildlife species which co-exist with the agricultural use of buildings but can be disturbed or killed during conversion. These include barn owls, swallows, swifts and house martins and several species of bats.

Infrastructure

4.27 The development of communication infrastructure has had a significant impact on the tranquillity. The M4 and the A34 slice across the North Wessex Downs. The road infrastructure has a major visual and noise impact on the National Landscape as well as a severance effect. It has also acted as a catalyst for development in the form of petrol stations, service areas and hotels. While further major road infrastructure within the National Landscape is not envisaged, the incremental upgrading of the rural roads and lanes is also having a detrimental impact on landscape character. This includes the erosion of road edges and verges, particularly on the narrow sunken lanes, with road improvements by kerbing, highway lighting, wide visibility splays and signing creating a more urban character.

4.28 The recent electrification of the Great Western Railway saw the addition of large masts and gantries above the railway track. Although it was too late to change the design of the gantries in the North Wessex Downs, National Grid has funded the Mind the Gap programme. This has provided funding for both mitigation and enhancement projects to soften the scars left by the electrification and enhancing the outstanding landscape of the North Wessex Downs and adjacent Chilterns.

Recreation and Tourism

4.29 The expanding peripheral population and increase in leisure time is anticipated to be a major force for change within the North Wessex Downs. This raises a number of issues:

- impact of motorised vehicles on green lanes including the Ridgeway.
- locally requirements for parking in the countryside plus an increase in traffic on the rural lane network.
- impacts on key ‘honeypot’ sites including damage to archaeology and erosion of fragile habitats.
- increase in noise from more intrusive countryside sports such as clay pigeon shooting.
- loss of sense of remoteness.

4.30 Many of these issues can be overcome through good management and anticipated growth in recreation and tourism could act a catalyst for positive change. Tourism is widely recognised as an increasingly important sector, albeit currently operating from a relatively low base. There are a number of key attractions in the North Wessex Downs. These include the historic town of Marlborough, with a location on the A4, which has enabled the town to develop as a tourist stop-off. The North Wessex Downs also has a wealth of archaeological and historic sites that attract significant visitor numbers. Avebury World Heritage Site, for example, receives in the region of 400,000 visitors a year and revenue generated is an important contributor to the local economy. The Ridgeway National Trail similarly attracts in the region of 100,000 visitors a year. There is a wealth of smaller sites, historic houses and other tourism attractions within the National Landscape.

4.31 There has been a recent emphasis on promoting sustainable tourism, including walking the Ridgeway, cycling using the National Landscape national cycle route, horse tourism via the extensive linked network of bridleways, and visiting the Kennet and Avon Canal and archaeological sites.

Chapter 5
The character of the North Wessex Downs

5.1 The physical, cultural, described in the previous chapters have combined to create the unique and distinctive character of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. The area is characterised by a diversity of landscapes and these variations and differences are represented by eight landscape types. Each of the generic landscape types has a distinct and relatively homogenous character with similar physical and cultural attributes, including geology, landform, land cover, and historical evolution. The landscape types can be further sub-divided into component landscape character areas. These are discrete geographic areas that possess the common characteristics described for the landscape type. Each character area has a distinct and recognisable local identity.

5.2 The landscape classification identifies 8 LCTs and 42 LCAs. These are shown on Figure 5.1.

5.3 It is important to note that boundaries between one LCT or LCA and the next are often transitional: there is rarely a clearcut change in character ‘on the ground’. This assessment has been mapped at a scale of 1:25,000 which provides an appropriate level of detail for the landscape character assessment at the strategic unitary authority scale.

5.4 Profiles for the Landscape Character Types and Landscape Character Areas are set out below.

1: Open Downland

- 1A Marlborough Downs
- 1B Lambourn Downs
- 1C Horton Downs
- 1D Blewbury Downs

2: Downland with Woodland

- 2A Brightwalton Downs
- 2B Ashampstead Downs
- 2C Lambourn Wooded Downs

- 2D Walbury Hill -Watership Down Scarp
- 2E Chute Forest – Faccombe
- 2F Litchfield Downs
- 2G Hannington Downs

3: Wooded Plateau

- Savernake Plateau

4: High Chalk Plain

- Salisbury Plain

5: Downs Plain and Scarp

- 5A Avebury Plain
- 5B Chiseldon – Wanborough Plain
- 5C Hendred Plain
- 5D Moreton Plain
- 5E Clyffe Pypard - Badbury Wooded Scarp
- 5F Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp

6: Vales

- 6A Vale of Pewsey
- 6B Shalbourne Vale
- 6C Wanborough Vale
- 6D Thames Floodplain

7: River Valleys

- 7A Kennet Valley
- 7B Lambourn Valley
- 7C Bourne Valley

- 7D Pang Valley

8: Lowland Mosaic

- 8A Hermitage Wooded Commons
- 8B Winterbourne Farmland
- 8C Wickham Wooded Heath
- 8D Hungerford Farmland
- 8E Highclere Lowlands and Heath
- 8F Ewhurst Parklands.

Figure 5.1: Landscape Character Area Overview

North Wessex Downs
Landscape Character Assessment
North Wessex Downs National Landscape

LUC

Figure 5.1: Landscape Character Area Overview

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Landscape Character Area

- 1A: Marlborough Downs
- 1B: Lambourn Downs
- 1C: Horton Downs
- 1D: Blewbury Downs
- 2A: Brightwalton Downs
- 2B: Ashampstead Downs
- 2C: Lambourn Wooded Downs
- 2D: Walbury Hill - Watership Down Scarp
- 2E: Chute Forest - Faccombe
- 2F: Litchfield Downs
- 2G: Hannington Downs
- 3A: Savernake Plateau
- 4A: Salisbury Plain
- 5A: Avebury Plain
- 5B: Chiseldon - Wanborough Plain
- 5C: Hendred Plain
- 5D: Moreton Plain
- 5E: Clyffe Pypard - Badbury Wooded Scarp
- 5F: Liddington - Letcombe Open Scarp
- 6A: Vale of Pewsey
- 6B: Shalbourne Vale
- 6C: Wanborough Vale
- 6D: Thames Floodplain
- 7A: Kennet Valley
- 7B: Lambourn Valley
- 7C: Bourne Valley
- 7D: Pang Valley
- 8A: Hermitage Wooded Commons
- 8B: Winterbourne Farmland
- 8C: Wickham Wooded Heath
- 8D: Hungerford Farmland
- 8E: Highclere Parklands
- 8F: Ewhurst Parklands

0 5 10 km

Map scale 1:250,000 @ A3

12859_001_NWD_LCA_Figures/
12859_r1_001_NWD_Baseline_Data_A3L - 2/06/2025

Appendix A
Glossary of terms and abbreviations

Table A.1: Glossary of terms and abbreviations

Term	Abbreviation and meaning
AOD	Above Ordnance Datum (sea level).
Agricultural Land Classification (ALC)	The classification of agricultural land in England and Wales.
Analysis	The process of breaking the landscape down, usually in descriptive terms, into its component parts to understand how it is made up.
Ancient trees and veteran trees	Individual trees or groups of trees with wood pastures, historic parkland, hedgerows, orchards, park, and other areas. They are often found outside ancient woodlands. irreplaceable habitats with some or all the following characteristics. Ancient trees An ancient tree is exceptionably valuable. Attributes can include its great age, size, condition, biodiversity value (because of significant wood decay and the habitat created from the ageing process), cultural and heritage value. Veteran trees A veteran tree may or may not be very old, but is has decay features,