

Landscape Types:

Estate Farmlands



4. ESTATE FARMLANDS

Regional Character Areas

Northamptonshire Vales, Cotswolds, Vale of Aylesbury, Vale of White Horse, Chilterns.

Location

This landscape type covers the estate landscapes around Carterton and Woodstock and to the west of Wantage. It also extends along the northwestern part of the Chilterns around Watlington and Chinnor.

Overview

This is a rolling agricultural landscape characterised by parklands and a well-ordered pattern of fields and estate plantations.

Key Characteristics

- Medium to large, regularly-shaped hedged fields.
- Small, geometric plantations and belts of trees.
- Large country houses set in ornamental parklands.
- Small estate villages and dispersed farmsteads.

Geology and landform

The geology varies from the northern to the southeastern part of the landscape type. To the east, the Upper Greensand and Lower Chalk forms a smoothly rounded landform with small hills that divide the low-lying vale from the steep Chilterns escarpment. Towards the lower part of this area, the undulating character becomes particularly pronounced due to the fragmented field pattern and lack of tree cover. The Upper Greensand continues further south, imparting a rolling landscape to the north of The Wessex Downs. In the northern part of the landscape type, the thick limestone bed of the Great Oolite dominates, along with its rubbly surface known as cornbrash. This forms the transition between the limestone outcrop and the clay vale to the south, giving rise to a gently rolling landform. Around Fringford, cornbrash is mixed with Oxford Clay.

Land use and vegetation

The land uses are generally mixed, with arable cropping becoming increasingly dominant, particularly in the area around Carterton, to the northeast of Woodstock and at the southwestern foot of the Chiltern Hills. Semi-improved and improved grassland is largely associated with parkland, with the more undulating parts of the landscape and smaller fields around villages. There are some species-rich road verges around Carterton and Tackley.

The main structural component of the landscape is the large number of small, rectilinear mixed plantations and linear tree belts. These are often managed for game and provide some sense of enclosure in the landscape. Remnants of semi-natural ancient woodland survive in places such as the Cotswold Wildlife Park. The plantations are located along field boundaries and roadsides, and are usually larger within the areas of parkland. There are a number of small to medium-sized parklands, with the exception being the large parkland of Blenheim at Woodstock. The majority have associated lakes and ornamental planting. Small copses are also a feature around farmhouses. At the foot of the North Wessex Downs, the rolling landform is dissected by small, narrow valleys and springlines, which are often dominated by woodland and scrub.

Cultural pattern

There is a strong, geometric pattern of medium and large-sized fields surrounded by late enclosure hedgerows. Around Carterton, the fields are occasionally enclosed by stone walls. This ordered field pattern, complemented by the planned nature of the woodland planting, is the main unifying element throughout, and is frequently accentuated by the strong rolling landform.

Hedges are dominated mainly by hawthorn and blackthorn. However, there are a few species-rich hedges with shrubs such as spindle, field maple, hazel, wild privet and dogwood. They border old tracks like the Icknield Way and narrow lanes such as Knightsbridge Lane. Hedgerow trees are mainly oak, ash and sycamore. Although sparsely scattered, they are an obvious feature throughout the landscape and reinforce the visual impact of the field pattern, creating a stronger sense of enclosure. They are often denser along roadsides, ditches, estate and parish boundaries. Mature oak trees are also a feature around farmhouses and along estate field boundaries. Open views across the rolling agricultural landscape are frequently filtered by hedgerow trees.

The settlement pattern is characterised by scattered farmsteads and small nucleated villages often associated with the large estates. This pattern is quite strong at the foot of the North Wessex Downs and at Ewelme, where the settlements take advantage of the emerging springlines and easily-cultivated soils. The network of straight roads reinforces the ordered pattern of fields and woods.

The vernacular character is strong in most villages, but building materials vary. In the Chilterns many houses and farms are either plain brick, combinations of brick and flint, or red and blue brick with clay roof tiles. Elsewhere, to the south of the landscape type, plain bricks as well as bricks and stones with clay roof tiles are the main building materials. In the Cotswolds, limestone houses with stone tiles are a distinctive feature of many villages. Large country houses and their associated parklands add to the cultural richness of the area.

BIODIVERSITY

Overview

This is a well-ordered landscape of large arable fields, plantations and parklands supporting a wide range of locally important habitats. Priority habitats such as ancient semi-natural woodland species-rich hedgerows and calcareous grassland, can also be found.

Key Characteristics

- Predominantly low-medium to medium-high bioscores/biobands.
- Priority habitats include ancient semi-natural woodland, species-rich hedgerows and some calcareous grassland.

General Description

This is a relatively large landscape type, which supports a range of locally important habitats including deciduous woodlands, plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. Parkland, with its associated mature trees, grassland and lakes, is a characteristic feature throughout this landscape type, with Rousham being a good example.

There are a few blocks of ancient woodland surrounding the Cotswold Wildlife Park, and there are fragments of limestone grassland at places like Shipton on Cherwell Quarry and a steep embankment near Tackley. However, the extent and distribution of priority habitats is very fragmented, small and localised. Species-rich hedgerows border some old tracks and green lanes such as the Icknield Way. Bioscores are generally higher in those areas where there is a combination of locally important habitats and surviving priority habitats.

LOCAL CHARACTER AREAS

A. Fringford (BC/1)

Landscape Character

There are small copses and mixed and deciduous plantations scattered throughout the area and some of these, along with mature hedgerow oaks, are associated with Stratton Audley Park. Elsewhere, medium-sized fields with mixed land uses are enclosed by well-maintained hawthorn, blackthorn and elm hedges.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 35/LM

The few locally important habitats include plantations and semi-improved grassland. The main habitats of interest are associated with Stratton Audley Park and they include mature trees and a lake.

B. Rousham Park (CW/49)

Landscape Character

Land uses are mixed, with small to medium-sized fields bounded by tall, well-maintained hawthorn and elm hedges. The area is also characterised by densely distributed hedgerow trees of mature ash and oak. Small mixed plantations are found within Rousham Park.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 43/LM

Apart from some locally important habitats such as plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees, the main features of interest are associated with Rousham Park.

C. Woodstock (CW/52)

Landscape Character

This area has a prominent rolling landform. There are small, rectilinear mixed and deciduous plantations scattered throughout and they are a characteristic landscape feature of this area. They are found largely along roads, field boundaries and around farm houses. Large, geometric arable fields are dominant, but semi-improved grassland is found within the extensive grounds of Blenheim Park, at Tackley Park, and on parts of the steeper slopes throughout the area. Hedges are dominated by hawthorn and blackthorn, and are generally low and gappy. Hedgerow trees of ash, field maple, sycamore and dead elm are largely confined to hedges bordering roads and tracks.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 111/MH

This area supports a wide range of locally important habitats including plantations, scrub, semi-improved grassland, species-poor hedges with trees and tree-lined watercourses. It also includes part of Blenheim Park, with its veteran and mature trees and lakes. There is also surviving limestone grassland on some of the steeper slopes in the area, at Tackley for example, and also parts of Shipton-on-Cherwell Quarry.

D. Carterton (CW/1)

Landscape Character

This is an area where the planned character of the landscape is very prominent. It is defined by numerous rectilinear mixed plantations, wide tree belts and medium to large-sized regular arable fields. There is a large block of ancient semi-natural oak and ash woodland at Bradwell Grove Park. Some semi-improved grassland is associated with at the former airfield at Kencot and around the village of Shilton, where it is used primarily for horse-grazing. The field boundaries are mostly stone walls, but towards the south there are there gappy hawthorn, blackthorn and elm hedges. The stone walls are generally in poor condition, and in many places have been overtaken by hawthorn scrub.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 101/MH

This large area supports a wide range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland, species-poor hedges with trees and tree-lined watercourses. There is parkland with some associated ancient semi-natural woodland and lakes, and fragments of limestone grassland at places like Westwell Gorse near Burford, Carterton and a green lane near Minster Lovell. These are all very small isolated sites, which vary in condition and management.

E. Wantage to Idstone (WH/23)

Landscape Character

This is an undulating landform sloping northwards into the Vale of White Horse. The area is characterised by small to medium-sized fields enclosed by tall hawthorn and elm hedges. Land uses are mixed, with small grass fields being largely confined to the outskirts of villages. There are scattered hedgerow trees of ash, sycamore and dead elm throughout the area. Similarly, small discrete plantations, particularly those associated with the parklands at Kingston Lisle and Sparsholt, are also a feature. Areas of secondary woodland occupy some of the minor valleys along the slope.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 103/MH

Locally important habitats include deciduous woodland and scrub, plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. There are also parklands with associated mature trees and lakes, reedswamp and some ancient semi-natural woodland.

F. Postcombe (VA/2)

Landscape Character

The area is strongly undulating with characteristically rounded hills. Land uses are mixed, but arable farming is dominant to the east of Stoke Talmage. Mature oak and ash hedgerow trees are a prominent feature to the west of the area, and small to medium-sized mixed plantations create a unifying element throughout. Hawthorn hedges link these scattered plantations, and there are a few species-rich hedgerows bordering roads and tracks. The parklands at Brightwell and Wheatfield contribute to the well-maintained character of this estate landscape.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 65/M

This area supports a more limited range of locally important habitats including deciduous woodland, scrub, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. There are areas of parkland and some species-rich hedgerows with trees bordering roads and tracks.

G. Chinnor to Watlington (CH/1)

Landscape Character

This is a strongly undulating landscape characterised by large, geometric arable fields. Woodland cover is not prominent and is largely confined to small clumps around farmhouses and occasional small, geometric plantations. The parklands at Pyrton and Shirburn are associated with larger blocks of secondary deciduous woodland. To the northeast of Watlington mature ash, oak and sycamore trees in hedges bordering roads are a notable feature. The field pattern is generally weak and fragmented. This is particularly evident to the south of Ewelme, where many hedges have been completely removed, resulting in an open unenclosed landscape. Species-rich hedges can be found along sections of the Icknield Way and bordering narrow sunken lanes.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/Bioband: 143/H

This area supports a range of locally important habitats including deciduous woodland, plantations, tree-lined watercourses, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. Other important habitats include parkland, with its associated mature trees and lakes and ancient semi-natural woodland. There are also priority habitats such as calcareous grassland, and species-rich hedgerows with trees bordering green lanes. The chalk grassland site at Fiddle Hill is small at around 4 ha, and isolated, but also in reasonable condition and management.

FORCES FOR CHANGE

- Overall, the hedgerow pattern is in decline with many low or overgrown, gappy hedges. This is particularly evident in the open, intensively managed arable land around Ipsden, where much of the hedgerow pattern is either fragmented or lost. The field boundary pattern is also weak along main roads and on the fringes of main settlements such as Witney and Carterton. Where stone walls occur, they are often in poor condition and frequently overgrown with scrub.
- The landscape type has a largely unspoilt rural character. Residential development is moderate in scale, particularly in some settlements to the west of Chinnor. In places there has been some suburbanisation, particularly around the fringes of Carterton and Witney, where there is ribbon development, development that is out of character as well as expansion of settlements into the open countryside. Similarly, the impact of industrial estates and business parks, with their intrusive large buildings on the urban fringe, is significant in places.
- Unrestored mineral workings and their associated infrastructure can sometimes be an eyesore. This is true of quarries at Chinnor and Shipton-on-Cherwell. Concrete structures at the disused quarry at Shipton-on-Cherwell are visually intrusive.
- Intensively managed amenity landscapes, such as golf courses and playing fields on the edge of built-up areas like Witney, can have a negative impact on landscape character by introducing suburban influences including car parks, lighting and incongruous buildings into the rural environment.
- Disused airfields, such as the one to the south of the Cotswold Water Park, may appear rather derelict, but this can be mitigated to some extent by a strong pattern of hedgerows.

Landscape Strategy

Conserve the planned estate character of this landscape type through maintenance and enhancement of the parklands, woodlands and field boundaries.

Guidelines

- Conserve and restore the pastoral character of existing parklands and promote the replacement of veteran and mature trees where appropriate.
- Promote the sustainable management of existing woods and plantations, and the establishment of new tree belts and plantations with a significant proportion of deciduous tree and shrub species characteristic of this area.
- Strengthen the field pattern by planting up new or gappy hedges using locally characteristic species such as hawthorn.

- Promote environmentally-sensitive maintenance of hedgerows, including coppicing and layering where necessary, to maintain a height and width appropriate to the landscape type.
- Priority should be given to safeguarding and maintaining existing species-rich hedges through coppicing, layering and replanting where necessary with shrub species such as blackthorn, field maple, dogwood and spindle.
- Protect stone walls from deterioration.
- Conserve surviving areas of permanent pasture.
- Protect the sparsely settled character of the landscape and the integrity and vernacular character of the estate villages.
- Minimise the potential visual impact of intrusive land uses at the fringes of towns and villages with the judicious planting of tree and shrub species characteristic of the area. This will help to screen the development and integrate it more successfully with its surrounding countryside.
- Where appropriate, mitigate the potential visual impact of mineral extraction and landfill sites with the judicious planting of tree and shrub species characteristic of the area. This will help to screen the development and integrate it more successfully with its surrounding countryside.

Biodiversity Strategy

Ensure that all surviving priority habitats are safeguarded, in favourable condition and management, and enhanced to satisfy the actions and targets identified within the relevant habitat and species action plans. Safeguard, maintain and enhance all locally important habitats in a way that is appropriate to the landscape character of the area. Promote agri-environment schemes which will benefit biodiversity in general and protected species and farmland birds in particular.

Guidelines

- Priority habitats in this landscape type are relatively small and isolated. They include limestone grassland and species-rich hedgerows.
- Limestone grassland is found at a few isolated sites such as Crecy Hill, Tackley and a green lane near Minster Lovell. The majority of these sites are either Sites of Special Scientific Interest or county wildlife sites, and the priority must be to ensure that they are in favourable condition and management through landowner agreement. Opportunities for significantly expanding this habitat type are limited, but may include the establishment of field margins/buffer strips adjacent to existing sites using native wildflower species appropriate to the area.
- Species-rich hedgerows are distributed throughout different parts of the landscape type. Priority should be given to safeguarding, maintaining and expanding this resource, particularly in those local character areas where they remain a significant feature.
- Other important habitats include parkland and ancient semi-natural woodland.
- Parklands, and their associated habitats of woodlands, trees, lakes and grassland, make a significant contribution to the biodiversity resource of the landscape type. Some parklands support veteran trees and a priority must be to ensure that there is a sustainable, long-term programme for safeguarding and perpetuating this resource.
- There is only a limited amount of ancient semi-natural woodland at places like the Cotswold Wildlife Park. The priority must be to ensure that these sites are in favourable condition and management.
- There are a range of locally important habitats, and the guidelines for conserving and maintaining these are provided under the guidelines for landscape character.
- Promote the use of agri-environment schemes such as conservation headlands, overwintered stubbles and winter-sown crops to benefit farmland birds such as skylarks and yellowhammers.

Key Recommendations

- **Safeguard and enhance the estate character of this landscape type through the protection, management and enhancement of its parklands, woodlands and hedgerow network.**
- **Ensure that remaining priority and other important habitats are in favourable condition and management.**

