

Landscape Types:

Farmland Slopes & Valley Sides



7. FARMLAND SLOPES & VALLEY SIDES

Regional Character Areas

Northamptonshire Uplands, Cotswolds, Chilterns.

Location

This landscape type covers the steep valley sides of the Upper River Cherwell and its tributaries, the valley sides of the Rivers Evenlode, Windrush and the Thames Valley to the south of Shiplake.

Overview

A landscape type with prominent slopes within broader valleys. It is occupied by a mixed pattern of pasture and arable land. Long-distant views across the valleys are characteristic.

Key characteristics

- Prominent slopes and valley sides interrupted by a number of small, narrow v-shaped valleys.
- Large arable fields on the gentler slopes and small pasture fields on the steeper slopes and steep-sided valleys.
- A well-defined pattern of tall hedges and hedgerow trees.
- Small woodland copses and belts on steep slopes and along watercourses in the minor valleys.
- Small unspoilt villages with rural character.

Geology and landform

The Middle and Upper Lias beds, which are composed of soft clays, siltstones and shales, underlie the steep valley slopes. These soft rocks are heavily folded and drained by small streams to form an area of complex topography with narrow v-shaped valleys. Further to the north, the river Cherwell cuts through the Marlstone rock bed, which is an iron bearing limestone, to the underlying Lias siltstones and clays. In the Chilterns, the dip slope of the chalk escarpment descends towards the Thames valley and it is particularly steep to the south of Lower Shiplake.

Land use and vegetation

Underlying geology and landform both influence patterns of vegetation and land use. The fertile clay over the valley sides favours intensive arable cultivation, particularly on the gentler upper slopes around Lower and Upper Heyford, and Shipton-under-Wychwood. In contrast, steeper slopes that are less easily worked have a more mixed and intimate pattern of pasture and arable farmland. In particular, semi-improved and calcareous grassland, frequently interspersed with dense hawthorn and blackthorn scrub, is associated with a series of steep-sided valleys.

In places characterised by very steep slopes and steep-sided minor valleys there is a strong pattern of dense hedges, hedgerow trees, small copses and scattered woodland belts. Ash, oak, beech and conifers are the main tree species associated with the mixed plantations. This pattern is more noticeable along slopes in the Cotswolds, particularly around Swerford, Great Tew, Steeple Aston, Chipping Norton and Charlbury. There is also some wet woodland, and mature ash and willow fringing watercourses along the valley bottoms creating a sense of intimacy and enclosure.

Cultural pattern

The field pattern is characterised by geometrically-shaped, large-size arable fields, and smaller more irregularly-shaped grass fields on the steeper slopes and valley sides. They are largely enclosed by a network of tall, thick hawthorn and elm hedges, although they are much lower in areas dominated by intensive arable farming. Mature hedgerow trees of ash, sycamore and oak are prominent throughout the landscape. Many of the hedgerows have matured into dense corridors of trees, which emphasise the slope and dip of the valley sides. They are much denser in pastoral areas and where the landscape structure is stronger. This combined patchwork of field hedges, woodland and small valleys contribute towards a visually diverse landscape. Sometimes stone walls form the field boundaries, particularly around Shipton-under-Wychwood, Charlbury and Fulbrook.

The settlement pattern is largely characterised by small, rural, unspoilt nucleated villages. There are also a few larger settlements such as Burford and Shipton-under-Wychwood. Scattered farmsteads and old barns are sparsely scattered throughout, and the slopes are crossed by straight roads. Around Fulbrook and Burford the roads are sunken and more sinuous. The vernacular character is strong in almost all the villages. In places such as Chastleton, Sarsden, Great Tew, Over Worton and Middle Aston, there is the appearance of well-managed estates associated with the distinctive manor houses and small parklands. The dominant building materials are oolitic limestone and stone tiles. In the northern part of the landscape type, the warm orange-brown ironstone and thatched roofs are very characteristic in villages such as Great Tew and Lower Heyford. In the Chilterns, around Playhatch near Reading, the houses are mainly built of red bricks and clay tiles.

BIODIVERSITY

Overview

This landscape type consists mainly of valley sides and slopes, which support a wide range of locally important habitats including small woods, plantations and tree-lined watercourses. Other notable habitats include ancient semi-natural woodland, species-rich hedgerows, parklands, calcareous and marshy grassland.

Key Characteristics

- Predominantly low-medium bioscores, but reaching medium-high in some of the Cotswold river valleys including the Cherwell, Evenlode and Windrush.
- Important habitats include ancient semi-natural woodland, parkland, species-rich hedgerows and calcareous grassland.

General Description

The landscape type supports a wide range of locally important habitats including deciduous woods, plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub, species-poor hedges with trees and tree-lined watercourses in the valleys. There is also a range of other important habitats including ancient semi-natural woodland, parkland and priority habitats such as species-rich hedgerows with trees, and calcareous and marshy grassland particularly in the valleys of the Rivers Cherwell, Evenlode and Windrush.

LOCAL CHARACTER AREAS

A. Hanwell (east) (NU/25)

Landscape Character

A pattern of medium-sized arable fields characterizes this area. Fields are enclosed by ash and hawthorn hedges, which are generally in good condition, and a few scattered ash trees. Woodland cover is largely restricted to a block of deciduous semi-natural woodland with species such as ash, sycamore and hazel.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 25/L

This area supports some locally important habitats including deciduous woodland and plantation, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees.

B. Adderbury (NU/15)

Landscape Character

There is a mix of land uses in this area associated with medium-sized fields. Grass fields, grazed by cattle and ponies, tend to be smaller and located around settlements. The field pattern, dominated by hawthorn and elm hedges, is generally very weak and many internal hedges have been either removed or replaced by fences. Ash and oak are thinly scattered throughout, and are mostly found in hedges bordering roads and pastureland.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 58/LM

There are a number of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges with trees. To the east of the village there is an area of parkland with its associated mature trees and lakes.

C. Twyford Road (NU/26)

Landscape Character

The area is dominated by a prominent, regular field pattern of medium-sized arable fields. To the north of the area there is some grassland interspersed with hawthorn scrub. In places, the hawthorn hedges are very low and gappy. Tree cover consists mainly of young ash trees scattered throughout the hedgerows, willows fringing a number of spring lines and a poplar plantation.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 34/LM

A number of locally important habitats fall within this area, including deciduous plantation, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges with trees.

D. Swerford Park (CW/33)

Landscape Character

This is a more diverse landscape characterised by tall, dense hedges enclosing small grass fields. The hawthorn and blackthorn hedges are part of a strong network including some that are species-rich with shrubs such as dogwood, field maple, wayfaring tree and buckthorn. There are a few patches of calcareous grassland on the very steep slopes. The dense hawthorn and blackthorn scrub on the slopes, along with mature ash and sycamore hedgerow trees, contribute to the wooded character of the area. This character is reinforced by small, scattered blocks of semi-natural and mixed plantations on the slopes and sides of a number of small valleys. Dense corridors of ash and willow, combined with patches of dense

scrub and marshy grassland, add to the diverse nature of the landscape.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 94/M

Locally important habitats recorded in this area include deciduous woodland, mixed plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges with trees. Priority habitats include species-rich hedgerows with trees and calcareous grassland associated with the banks of the old disused railway near Hook Norton.

E. Steeple Aston (CW/48)

Landscape Character

This is a diverse landscape with small streams and minor valleys that cut across the broader slopes. The area is characterised by medium to large-sized fields with a mix of arable farming and semi-improved grassland. Some calcareous grassland can be found on the very steep slopes and patches of marshy grassland are associated with watercourses. Fields are enclosed by a mix of woodland copses and hedges that are generally in good condition and with species such as hawthorn, field maple and elder. The areas of parkland at Great Tew, Over-Worton and Middle Aston create small-scale, intimate pastoral landscapes. Overall, the landscape is characterised by semi-natural woodland as well as mixed and deciduous plantations on the slopes and valleys sides. Ash, oak, beech and sycamore are the main tree species found in these woods. There are dense corridors of wet woodland bordering watercourses and, combined with the mature ash and oak hedgerow trees, they add to the woodland cover.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 109/MH

There is a range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and tree-lined watercourses. In the valleys to the west of Great Tew there are a number of important and priority habitats including calcareous and marshy grassland and wet woodland. There is also some calcareous grassland in an area close to Tackley. The different parklands also support several valuable habitats including mature trees and lakes.

F. Lower and Upper Heyford (CW/56)

Landscape Character

This is a very intensively managed arable landscape dominated by medium-sized fields. There is some improved grassland and pony paddocks around villages. The field pattern is weak and locally fragmented, with hedges being overgrown and gappy. There are scattered ash and sycamore hedgerow trees, mainly within roadside hedges, and these add to the overall tree cover. Tree cover is limited to small deciduous, mixed and coniferous plantations on the slopes and also bordering the small streams and valleys.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 18/L

This area supports a relatively limited range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees.

G. Fulwell (BC/5)

Landscape Character

The area has medium-sized arable fields enclosed by intact hawthorn hedges. Hedgerow trees are scattered, but are denser along a hedge bordering a ditch and there is a corridor of dense scrub along the disused railway line.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 28/L

Locally important habitats include deciduous woodland, scrub, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees.

H. Churchill (CW/28)

Landscape Character

This is a diverse landscape characterised by minor valleys and streams. The area is dominated by medium-sized arable fields, with some semi-improved grassland around Chipping Norton, enclosed by a pattern of intact high hawthorn and elm hedges. Mature hedgerow trees, mainly ash and some oak, are densely distributed throughout much of the area. There are numerous small and medium-sized blocks of semi-natural deciduous woodland as well as deciduous, mixed and coniferous plantations. Woodland and scrub occupy many of the small wooded valleys with species such as ash, oak, beech and poplar. Sarsgrove Wood, to the south of Chipping Norton, is a large block of ancient semi-natural woodland. There are some parkland features, including mature trees and lakes, associated with Chastleton and Sarsden houses.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 90/MH

This is a relatively diverse landscape with a range of locally important habitats including deciduous woodland, plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub, species-poor hedges with trees and tree-lined watercourses. In addition, there are other important habitats such as mature trees and lakes associated with some of the parklands including Sarsden House. There is also a large block of ancient semi-natural woodland named Sarsgrove Wood.

I. Fifield (CW/19)

Landscape Character

The area is characterised by small-scale fields with a range of land uses. Fields are enclosed by tall, intact hawthorn and blackthorn hedges. In places they are species-rich with shrubs such as dogwood, spindle and field maple. Mature ash trees are prominent, particularly within hedges that border pastureland. Woodland cover consists mainly of small blocks of wet woodland with species such as ash, willow and field maple fringing valley streams.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 51/LM

Locally important habitats include semi-improved grassland, species-poor hedges with trees, tree-lined watercourses and some wet woodland. The only recorded priority habitat is species-rich hedges with trees.

J. Shipton-under-Wychwood (CW/20)

Landscape Character

The area is dominated by large-scale arable fields. The enclosure pattern is very prominent, comprising a combination of stone walls and species-rich hedges. However, it is in decline with gappy hedges and stone walls in poor condition. Hedges along the road and lanes are generally taller and thicker. Mature hedgerow trees, mostly oak and ash, are thinly distributed throughout the area. Tree cover is confined to a few small copses, consisting mainly of willow and ash, bordering the small streams.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 96/MH

There are a number of locally important habitats including deciduous woodland and plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub, species-poor hedges with trees and tree-lined watercourses. There is a small block of ancient semi-natural woodland in the Evenlode Valley to the west of Charlbury, as well as species-rich hedges and some calcareous grassland on the embankments of the mainline railway.

K. Wychwood Manor (CW/18)

Landscape Character

This is a very intensively managed landscape dominated by large arable fields. There is some semi-improved grassland on the steep slopes and valley sides. Fields are enclosed by very low, gappy hedges and some stone walls bordering roadsides. Closer to Wychwood the hedges tend to be taller and more species-rich. There are few hedgerow trees, apart from some bordering lanes, parish boundaries and in those hedgerows nearer to Wychwood. There are a few small copses, including some semi-natural ancient woodland, on the sides of the small valleys.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 53/LM

This southern slope of the Evenlode Valley has a range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges. There are some species-rich hedgerows and ancient semi-natural woodland.

L. Charlbury (CW/25)

Landscape Character

The area is characterised by medium-sized fields with a mix of land uses including some semi-improved and calcareous grassland on the steepest slopes and valley sides. Fields are enclosed by tall, thick hedges which are gappy in places and often species-rich, particularly where they border roads. Around Charlbury there are more stone walls. A characteristic feature throughout are the blocks of semi-natural woodland and scrub that grow on the sides of these narrow valleys. There are also a few small deciduous and mixed plantations.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 99/MH

Locally important habitats in this area include deciduous woodland, plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges with trees. It also includes a very small part of Blenheim Park with its veteran trees, species-rich hedgerows with trees and calcareous grassland associated with Stonesfield Common and Reed Hill.

M. Fulbrook (CW/8)

Landscape Character

The area has a mix of land uses and small to medium-sized fields. Semi-improved grassland and some calcareous grassland is found on the steeper slopes and valley sides. The fields are mostly enclosed by prominent, tall, thick hawthorn and elm hedges, but around Fulbrook stone walls are more common. Ash trees growing in the hedges are found throughout, but are particularly prominent to the west of Westhall Hill. The hedgerow network is generally intact but is getting gappier in places. Small, discrete plantations of larch, beech, ash and sycamore are also a feature on the slopes and valley sides.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 56/LM

There are a number of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges with trees. There is also some calcareous grassland on the steeper valley sides around Dean Bottom and near Asthall Leigh.

N. Burford (CW/4)

Landscape Character

The landscape has mix of land uses and small to medium-sized fields. There is some semi-

improved and calcareous grassland, interspersed with hawthorn scrub, on the steeper slopes to the east. The hedgerow network is generally in decline but, along roadsides, they tend to be taller, thicker and more intact. In areas dominated by arable farming the hedges are low and fragmented and where there is pasture they have often been replaced by fences. Small plantations and belts of ash, sycamore and beech growing on the slopes are a characteristic feature.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 48/LM

Locally important habitats in this area include deciduous woodland, plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges with trees. There is also an area of calcareous grassland on a steep north facing slope near Worsham.

O. Play Hatch (CH/10)

Landscape Character

The land is dominated by medium-sized arable fields. There is some grassland and pony paddocks around Lower Shiplake. They are enclosed by prominent overgrown hawthorn and blackthorn hedges with many oak and ash hedgerow trees. Hedges tend to be gappy in areas dominated by intensive arable farming. Locally, on some of the slopes, there are small blocks of semi-natural ancient and wet woodland.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 47/LM

This area supports locally important habitats such as plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. There is also some ancient semi-natural and wet woodland.

FORCES FOR CHANGE

- Overall, the field pattern is in good condition. However, hedges tend to be gappy and low in areas dominated by intensive arable farming and in other areas where there is livestock grazing they have frequently been replaced by fences.
- Stone walls around Ascott-under-Wychwood and Shipton-under-Wychwood are in poor condition and often overgrown with scrub.
- Although the vernacular character is strong in most settlements, there is still a localised impact from modern residential development in larger settlements such as Ascott-under-Wychwood, Shipton-under-Wychwood and Charlbury, and in Upper Heyford and Steeple Aston.

Landscape strategy

Conserve the intimate pastoral character of the small valleys and the rural, unspoilt character of the villages. Strengthen the field pattern where it is weak.

Guidelines

- Strengthen the field pattern by planting up gappy hedges using locally characteristic species such as hawthorn, and hedgerow trees such as oak and ash.
- Promote environmentally-sensitive maintenance of hedgerows, including coppicing and layering when necessary, to maintain a height and width appropriate to the landscape type.
- Protect stone walls from deterioration.
- Conserve the surviving areas of permanent pasture and promote arable reversion to grassland particularly on land adjacent to watercourses.
- Enhance and strengthen the character of tree-lined watercourses and wooded valleys by planting species such as willows, ash and field maple.
- Maintain the vernacular character of settlements and promote the use of building materials and a scale of development that is appropriate to this landscape type. This ranges from the limestones and stone tiles of the Cotswolds through to the ironstones and thatched roofs

of the Northamptonshire Uplands.

- Safeguard, maintain and enhance and the characteristic landscape features of existing parklands including veteran trees, avenues of trees, lakes, woods and walls.

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 calcareous grassland along railway embankments and steeper valley sides, marshy grassland and species-rich hedgerows.
- Along the railway embankments, establish a balance between species-rich limestone grassland and scrub. Prevent scrub encroachment in areas of species-rich grassland. Opportunities for expanding this habitat include the establishment and management of field margins/buffer strips adjacent to existing limestone grassland habitat using native wildflower species appropriate to the area.
- A priority is to ensure that other areas of calcareous and marshy grassland are in favourable condition and management. This can be promoted with advice through organisations such as the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the targeting of agri-environment schemes. Opportunities for extending and linking this resource are limited but, whenever appropriate, this should also be promoted and encouraged by the use of agri-environment schemes.
- 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.
- There are a number of ancient semi-natural woodlands distributed throughout the landscape type and the priority must be to ensure that all these sites are in favourable condition and management.
- Parklands and their associated habitats of woodlands, trees, lakes and grassland make a significant contribution to the biodiversity resource of the landscape type. Parklands that support veteran trees are particularly important and a priority must be to ensure that there is a sustainable, long-term programme for safeguarding and perpetuating this resource.
- Promote the use of agri-environment schemes such as conservation headlands, over-wintered stubbles, and winter-sown crops to benefit farmland birds such as skylarks and yellowhammers.

Key Recommendations

- **Safeguard and enhance the landscape character of the small wooded valleys and field boundaries.**
- **Ensure that all priority habitats are in favourable condition and management.**