

PART ONE

STUDY CONTEXT

THE STUDY

Background

Over recent years, there has been growing recognition of the role of landscape assessment as a basis for countryside planning and management. In particular, the use of landscape assessment as a tool for describing the character of our landscapes is increasingly recognised as an important first step in conserving and enhancing them, and for planning for sustainable development in rural areas.

The impetus for preparing landscape assessments at a district level has come from two main directions:

- the Countryside Commission actively encourages local planning authorities to undertake district-wide assessments to provide an informed background for policy and development control decisions and for countryside management. It has published detailed guidance on landscape assessment and has recently produced a 'New Map of England' which provides a broad context for defining landscape character at a local level. It also promotes the concept of local distinctiveness through its 'Design in the Countryside' initiative.
- Government advice contained within the revised PPG7 (February 1997) takes forward these approaches and encourages planning authorities to undertake comprehensive landscape assessments as part of the local plan review process. The extent and effectiveness of local landscape designations is to be given particular consideration in such reviews.

In response to this background, West Oxfordshire District commissioned Atlantic Consultants to prepare a district-wide landscape assessment. Its main objective is to increase understanding of the landscape resources of the district, to assist with policy formulation and development control and to assist with the targeting of resources for enhancement and management.

Whilst the assessment is primarily intended to assist the District Council, it is also considered to be of relevance to a wide range of organisations and individuals whose activities may have an effect upon the landscape of West Oxfordshire. These will include landowners, farmers, private developers, community organisations and other local interest groups.

The brief outlined the following main requirements of the study:

- to identify and describe the attributes of the landscape (both natural and man-made) that contribute to local distinctiveness;
- to provide a breakdown of the district into areas of distinctive landscape character;
- to examine the relationship between the landscape and patterns of settlement and buildings;
- to identify simple enhancement strategies and priorities for each landscape type;
- and to identify variations in landscape sensitivity across the District and its ability to accommodate change.

Structure of the document

This document is divided into three main parts:

- Part One provides the overall background and context to the study, including an explanation of the approach and methodology employed and a brief overview of the District landscape, its formative influences and overall character;
- Part Two deals with the individual Character Areas, describing in detail their landscape and settlement character together with appropriate guidelines for landscape enhancement and built development;
- Part Three provides more detailed assessment of the fringes of a number of key settlements (mainly local service centres) within the district.

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

landscape character assessment

Over recent years, there has been a general trend away from quantitative systems of landscape evaluation towards an approach based upon understanding the intrinsic character of a locality and its distinctive features, allowing land use planning and management to respond to the local 'landscape vernacular'. This approach is explained within the landscape assessment guidance published by the Countryside Commission (CCP423), which forms the basis for this study.

The approach recognises that the character of the landscape is not simply a scenic or visual phenomenon but is the product of its physiography, history and land management. It recognises that factors such as ecology, history and culture, have a bearing upon the way landscape is experienced and valued and that these factors should also be taken into account within the assessment process. Overall, the approach relies upon a mix of objective recording and subjective judgement, used in a systematic and iterative way.

The assessment process has involved the following main stages of work:

- **Desk study** - this stage involved the collation of a wide range of existing information on the physical and human influences that have shaped the landscape of the district. The process involved 'overlay mapping' of key factors (eg. geology, topography, drainage, woodland cover, and sites of ecological/historical importance etc.) as well as detailed examination of other documentary, map-based or photographic evidence. Other landscape assessments (eg. the New Map of England and Cotswolds AONB assessment) were also consulted to provide context and consistency.

Field survey - this part of the study involved travelling extensively throughout the district, recording detailed variations in landscape character and key features onto 1:25,000 base maps. Other factors, such as evidence

of pressures on the landscape and key management or enhancement needs, were also noted during the field survey.

- **Analysis** - this stage involved combining the results of the desk and field studies to produce a breakdown of the district into areas of distinctive character.

The assessment examines landscape character at two levels. Firstly, it **looks** at the way in which particular landform and landcover elements combine to produce distinctive landscape types. These are generic descriptions and the types can repeat across the district without necessarily being related to geographical location.

Landscape types are particularly useful as a tool for understanding the detailed pattern of landscape variation that occurs across the district as a whole and to assist in day to day development control decisions. However, in planning policy and management terms, it is as important to understand the landscape character and qualities of particular places or areas, so that appropriate policies and action can be applied at a local level. Therefore, it is common practice to define landscape character areas. These are units of landscape which may embrace a number of different landscape types but which in some way have a coherent and recognisable 'sense of place' or local identity.

It is important to stress that the boundaries between landscape types or between character areas are rarely distinct. Instead, the boundaries tend to be best approximations of a gradual but discernible change in character. It is also important to stress that landscape character rarely stops at the district boundary and will usually extend beyond into neighbouring districts.

The basis for the division of West Oxfordshire District into distinctive landscape types and **character areas, is explained in the 'landscape overview' section.**

Guidelines for landscape enhancement

Approach to evaluation

The second part of the study involves identifying variations in landscape quality and condition across the district, primarily to allow appropriate guidelines for landscape conservation, management and enhancement to be defined.

The aim is, therefore, not to identify the 'best' or 'worst' quality landscapes within the district but to examine the intrinsic quality and condition of individual landscape types so that intervention can be targeted to the most needy areas. This approach has therefore been applied across the whole of the district landscape irrespective of the presence of existing landscape designations.

Using the experience and judgement of the study team, each landscape type was assessed in terms of the following attributes (based upon Countryside Commission guidelines):

- Scenic quality - the degree to which the landscape is attractive with pleasing patterns and combinations of landscape features;
- Sense of place - the extent to which the landscape has a distinctive character and a 'sense of place';
- Unspoilt character - the degree to which landscape structure is 'intact' and the landscape is affected by intrusive or detracting influences;
- Landscape as a resource - whether the landscape type represents a scarce or especially fragile landscape resource;
- Conservation interests - whether there are other notable conservation interests that contribute to landscape quality and value.

The landscape types were then assigned one of the following enhancement strategies:

- Conserve - this strategy applies where the landscape is of particularly high scenic quality, is unspoilt, retains a strong, intact landscape structure and sense of place, and often contains areas or features of ecological or cultural heritage significance. In these landscapes, conservation is an overwhelming priority in order to maintain landscape character and quality.

- Strengthen - this strategy applies to those landscapes which have a positive rural character, attractive qualities and where character, landscape structure and sense of place are still comparatively strong, but which are not 'special' or distinctive to quite the same degree as those in the above category. These landscapes are also important to conserve but would benefit from some enhancement through appropriate land management, to strengthen weakened landscape structure and quality and to reinforce local distinctiveness.

The degree to which landscape structure and character require strengthening differs across the District. A distinction is therefore drawn in this category between 'a' landscapes, where only modest strengthening is required, and 'b' landscapes, where more significant strengthening is required to restore landscape structure and features that have been weakened by intensive farming practice.

- Reconstruct - this strategy applies in those areas where the character and quality of the landscape has been substantially modified by poor land management, non-agricultural land uses, or intrusive features, eg. airfields, built development, mineral extraction, roads, power lines etc. They require more significant intervention to mitigate the influence of detracting land uses or features, to raise landscape quality and to reconstruct landscape character and identity.

It is important to stress that these strategies do not equate with any nationally established system or yardstick but are adapted from Countryside Commission guidance to suit the particular circumstances of West Oxfordshire District. They should therefore be regarded as indicative of differences in quality and condition which occur within the context of the district and comparisons should not be made with similar strategies applied elsewhere.

The variations in landscape quality and the application of enhancement strategies across the district are explained in the 'landscape overview' section.

Enhancement principles

The guidelines for landscape enhancement are intended to provide advice on the most appropriate type of management or enhancement needed to maintain or raise landscape quality within each character area. As a general rule, they are aimed at reinforcing or strengthening existing characteristics in the landscape rather than promoting widespread landscape change. Specific guidelines on enhancement priorities are set out for each character area but a number of more general principles are outlined opposite. In addition, a table showing characteristic native species that typically occur within the different landscape types is contained within Appendix 2.

Mechanisms

Clearly, most of these objectives involve changes in land management which can only be achieved through voluntary co-operation. However, there are a number of potential ways in which the guidelines can be taken forward, including:

- through various initiatives, grants and incentive schemes operated by local authorities and other statutory agencies;
- through the work of countryside management services run by local authorities or other agencies;
- through the work of voluntary bodies and community groups involved in local environmental or landscape projects;
- through the activities of farmers and other private landowners;
- through development briefing and the use of landscape conditions, legal agreements and planning gain.

It is important to stress that the achievement of landscape enhancement through development proposals would only be appropriate where the development itself was in compliance with strategic and local planning policies.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR ENHANCEMENT

- management or enhancement should aim to reinforce or restore the local landscape 'vernacular', ie. those characteristics which contribute to local distinctiveness;
- in general, intervention should aim to restore diversity and structure to the landscape (eg. through hedgerow and tree planting, habitat creation etc) to reflect the varied typical landscapes of the District;
- the more 'intact' examples of landscape types described within this assessment, and historical maps and records, can be used as a guide to the most appropriate form of enhancement;
- new planting and habitat creation should also reflect the ecological character of the local area to reinforce local distinctiveness and maximise wildlife benefits;
- particular priority should be given to the mitigation of intrusive features or influences which detract from the rural character of the landscape (eg. hard urban edges, unsightly buildings or structures, poorly managed or degraded land on the fringes of settlements or associated with quarrying activities, insensitive highway improvements etc.);
- special attention should also be given to the enhancement of settlement fringes and road corridors to reduce their impact and to provide a clear definition between built areas and open countryside;
- strong landscape frameworks should be an integral part of any new development.

Guidelines for built development

The third part of the study focuses on the inherent characteristics and qualities of the landscape that will determine its sensitivity to change and, in particular, its ability to accommodate new development.

Policy context

Current Government advice contained within PPG7 (revised February 1997) places a firm emphasis on protection of the countryside for its own sake, even in areas of no special designation, and advises that development in the countryside should maintain and enhance the environment. This advice is reflected in policies contained within the Oxfordshire County Structure Plan and the West Oxfordshire Local Plan (adopted in November 1997).

The Local Plan currently contains a number of policies which specifically seek to protect the character and 'quality of the landscape from potentially adverse impacts of development (as listed opposite). A particular emphasis is placed upon the protection of designated areas (ie. the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Area of High Landscape Value, which covers much of the remainder of the district, and Parks and Gardens of Special Interest). However, Policy CO1 of the plan recognises the importance of protecting all landscape, even non-designated areas, for its own sake, while a number of other policies (eg. BE3, C03, CO10, H12, R13, TM1) refer to the need to protect the landscape setting of settlements or otherwise safeguard the landscape from adverse impacts of development.

The Local Plan indicates a general presumption against housing development in open countryside but other types of development may be permitted by the plan. Where this is the case, the aim is to ensure that it can be integrated sensitively without adverse impact on the landscape. This landscape assessment aims to provide as much information as possible to enable the local authority and others to make such judgements. Although it will clearly be too coarse a tool to deal with many site-specific issues, the principles and considerations outlined within the assessment can equally be applied at a more local level.

SELECTED EXTRACTS FROM KEY LOCAL PLAN POLICIES AFFECTING LANDSCAPE

POLICY CO1: Proposals for development in the countryside will be considered against the need to safeguard its beauty, the diversity of its natural resources, and its ecological, agricultural and recreational values.

POLICY CO6: In the Cotswolds Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty conservation and enhancement of its special landscape qualities will be the overriding consideration.... Although regard will be had to the economic and social well-being of the area any development should not harm its natural beauty.

POLICY CO7: In Areas of High Landscape Value shown on the proposals map the Council will seek to protect and enhance the beauty of the area. Development should not have an adverse impact on the landscape.

POLICY CO8: Within the Area of High Landscape Value near the River Thames and its tributaries, new development should be sited, designed and landscaped so that it does not detract from the special character of these riverside areas.....

POLICY BE3: All development should be of a high standard of design and appearance. It will be expected to...(c) not damage the surrounding countryside which forms an attractive setting to a settlement; (d) respect the scale, pattern, density and character of its setting...

(West Oxfordshire Local Plan (Adopted))

Sensitivity to development

The ability of the landscape to accommodate development is a complex issue which is not simply related to the intrinsic quality of the landscape but will depend upon a combination of different factors. Of key importance will be the nature and scale of the development itself, along with:

- the potential impacts of this development on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall **sensitivity of the landscape to change**;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the landscape, ie. the degree to which it benefits from screening or filtering of views.

A number of general principles for development in the countryside, which will apply across the district, are shown in the table opposite. However, to make the assessment as helpful as possible, we have provided further guidance on the sensitivities of landscapes of differing character and surrounding a number of key settlements, as explained below.

Guidelines for landscape types

Much of the information required to assess the appropriateness of new development in different landscape types should be implicit within the landscape character descriptions and quality evaluations for the individual character areas. In addition, however, some key conclusions on the ability of different landscape types to accommodate development are also summarised for each character area.

For further guidance, a **matrix** is included in Appendix 1 which identifies some of the key characteristics that need to be taken into account in assessing the impact of development proposals on individual landscape types. These are grouped under the headings of 'landscape character', 'settlement character' and 'landscape quality and sensitivity'.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPMENT

- as a rule, those landscapes of particularly high quality and unspoilt character (ie those within the conserve and strengthen (A) categories) are most sensitive to development;
- development should also be avoided in areas of unspoilt countryside (in the conserve and strengthen categories) which are particularly open and visually exposed especially on prominent ridgelines, hilltops or valley sides/escarpments);
- in other open or visually sensitive landscapes, new development should be closely related to existing built form or well-integrated within existing or new landscape frameworks;
- in visual terms, landscapes enclosed by landform or vegetation are generally more able to absorb new development but can be highly sensitive to change because of their intrinsic landscape quality or their ecological and archaeological value;
- extra care is required to maintain the quality of vulnerable landscapes on the fringes of settlements and along road corridors and to prevent ribbon development and the coalescence of settlements;
- all new development should respond to the characteristics of the landscape and built environment within which it is located, to reinforce local distinctiveness and to minimise any adverse impacts;
- development should not erode the rural character of landscape and settlements (eg. introducing lighting into remote countryside, insensitive/urbanised highway treatments, fencing, signage etc.)

The matrix identifies a range of typical characteristics (eg. scale, pattern, boundary types, building materials, visual sensitivity and scenic quality) for individual landscape types and, in conjunction with the character area descriptions, may be used as a checklist to guide the acceptability of development proposals within different parts of the district landscape.

While this additional background information should help in assessing the appropriateness of development proposals, it is clearly still too generalised to provide all of the answers. The main purpose of the matrix is, therefore, to help introduce a discipline in the assessment of potential impacts of any development proposal and to enable a degree of transparency to be applied to development control decisions.

Importantly, it is also intended to help encourage those proposing development in the countryside to view landscape in a more holistic way and to consider not only the potential visual impacts of a development, but also its impact upon the intrinsic character and quality of the receiving landscape.

Guidelines for key settlements

The larger settlements of the District have, in the past, inevitably been under pressure for additional development. These pressures are likely to continue, particularly on the fringes of these settlements. Difficult decisions regarding the opportunities for and direction of potential future growth will have to be made. While the landscape assessment provides a broad context, a more detailed study of the fringes of ten key settlements has been undertaken in order to provide a finer-grained analysis of key landscape **sensitivities** and considerations. They **comprise** the main service centres, with the addition of Ducklington, because of its proximity to Witney, and the inclusion of Milton-under-Wychwood, as a secondary local centre within the AONB.

The ten settlements are listed below, with the Character Areas to which they are most closely related given in brackets:

- Bampton (10)
- **Burford** (8, 9)
- Carterton (9)
- Charlbury (6)
- Chipping Norton (1, 3)
- Ducklington (12)
- Eynsham (11, 12)
- Milton-under-Wychwood (5)
- Witney (8, 9, 7, 11)
- Woodstock (4)

The landscape setting of each settlement is divided into a number of sectors for which we have summarised the key factors which may influence development decisions, namely:

- landscape characteristics;
- visual characteristics;
- key landscape sensitivities and considerations.

We do not seek to recommend areas for development. We simply aim to provide additional detail to assist all those involved in making decisions in respect of appropriate development in the landscape.

Further explanation of these studies and the findings of the assessment are presented in Part Three.

A LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

Introduction

West Oxfordshire is a predominantly rural, agricultural district which covers a land area of around 715 square kilometres. It embraces large areas of unspoilt countryside within its boundaries and a diverse pattern of landscapes, including rolling limestone uplands, pastoral river valleys, historic parkland, remnants of ancient forests, low-lying farmland and riverside meadows, with a scattering of rural villages and some larger settlements.

This patterning is the product of the interaction between the physical structure of the landscape and the nature of the vegetation and land uses that cover it. To understand what makes places distinctive, it is helpful to summarise the main physical and human influences which have shaped the district's landscape over time.

Physical influences

The geology of West Oxfordshire (see Figure 1) is dominated by rocks of the Jurassic period, laid down in warm seas 150 million years ago, and forming part of the 'stone belt' that stretches right across England from Dorset to the Humber. It comprises a sequence of clays and limestones that dip, and get progressively younger, towards the south-east of the district, creating two distinctive broad belts of terrain: the Cotswold Hills and the Upper Thames Clay Vale.

The **Cotswold Hills** sweep across the centre and north of the district and are formed by the rocks of the middle and lower Jurassic. The lowest strata in the sequence are the Lower, Middle and Upper Lias, which are mostly composed of soft clays, siltstones and shales. However, they also include a band of Marlstone, a shelly ferruginous limestone, between the Middle and Upper beds. The most extensive exposures of the **Lower Lias** occur within the upper Evenlode Valley, where it forms a broad, shallow basin characterised by low-lying and gentle topography (see Figure 2), with heavy clay soils supporting mixed farmland and a strong structure of hedgerows and hedgerow trees. The **Middle and Upper Lias** are

exposed mainly across the north of the district, where these *soft* rocks are heavily folded and cut through by rivers and streams to form an area of extremely complex topography supporting a rich pattern of mixed farmland, thick hedgerows, trees and woods.

The Lias is overlain by the harder Oolitic limestones of the upper Jurassic. The Inferior Oolite occurs in thin localised outcrops mainly along the upper edges of the river valleys. However, like the Marlstone, it contains rocks with a high iron content, known as 'ironstones' which give rise to the red soils and warm orange-coloured building stone characteristic of the north-east corner of the district.

It is the thick limestone bed of the Great Oolite which dominates much of the district and gives the Cotswolds its distinctive character. This pale, hard rock is much prized as a building stone and it forms the high, smoothly rolling plateaux which reach an elevation of around 220 metres AOD near Chipping Norton and dip gently towards the south-east. Soils tend to be thin, well-drained and calcareous and typically support medium-grade arable farmland or, less commonly, grassland. Localised deposits of Oxford Clay and glacial till around Leafield and Ramsden in the Wychwood area create heavier, more acid soils typically under pasture or woodland. The limestone plateau is dissected by the main river valleys of the Windrush and Evenlode, with their alluvial deposits predominantly under pasture.

A band of coarse, crumbly Cornbrash limestone marks the transition between the Great Oolite and the clay vale to the south, forming a series of **low** bluffs and hills, including the island of landform within the Windrush valley upon which the town of Witney was sited. The low-lying floodplain landscape of the Upper **Thames** Clay Vale itself occupies extensive deposits of Oxford Clay and alluvium supporting **heavy** clay soils and larger-scale mixed farmland with a comparatively strong structure of hedgerows and trees. However, large drifts of river gravels produce pockets of well-drained, slightly elevated land which support more intensive arable farming and have a distinctively open character.

Human influences

The basic physical structure of the landscape has also had a strong influence on patterns of human occupation and activity within West Oxfordshire. Evidence of prehistoric settlement indicates that early settlers had a distinct preference for sites on higher ground less prone to flooding, with more easily worked soils and access to springs or other supplies of water. Favoured sites are found on the well-drained, light soils of the Cotswold limestone and ironstone uplands and the Thames-side gravels. By contrast, the heavy, wet soils and woodland cover of the clay lowlands were less attractive. The outcrops of dry permeable rocks also supported a network of important prehistoric routeways, such as the Jurassic Way which follows the oolites right across England.

The succession of prehistoric cultures was responsible for radical changes in the landscape. They progressively cut clearings in the dense forests to create extensive open pastures or croplands, firstly on the lighter soils of the limestone hills and river gravels but later extending to the heavier soils of the clay vale, using iron tools for axes and ploughshares. These early landscapes have since been obscured by later land use patterns but tangible evidence of early settlement is found in the scattering of tombs, long barrows, standing stones and ring ditches across the Cotswolds.

The **Romans** brought further changes to West Oxfordshire, creating an integrated pattern of new settlements, planned roads and farmed estates. The process of pre-Roman woodland clearances and the development of sophisticated farming techniques was accelerated by the Romans, bringing further areas of free-draining limestone uplands into highly productive agricultural use for growing barley, wheat and wool which could be marketed at great towns like Cirencester. The scale of romanisation was most impressive on each side of Akeman Street - a major east to west Roman Road - where it crosses the valleys of the Windrush, Evenlode and Glyme and in the neighbourhood of Grim's Ditch. This process created a largely open, farmed landscape, even in the Wychwood area which was reinvaded by forest in later centuries. This highly commercial agriculture was

accompanied by magnificent country houses and villas, such as those at North Leigh and Ditchley. From the early fifth century, the **Saxon** period brought the invasion of groups of Germanic immigrants who laid the foundations of the English countryside. They were credited with further taming of woodland, heath and marsh to clear ground for livestock, and with building new villages and farming settlements. These were mostly concentrated on lighter soils within the river valleys and on the gravel terraces of the Thames, close to well-watered river meadows - examples include Eynsham, which incorporates the Old English word for meadow - 'ham'; Chimney, or 'Ceomma's island', which was located on a low ledge of gravel safe from the Thames floodwaters; and Witney, or 'Witta's island', which stood on a dry cornbrash outlier surrounded by alluvial levels. The Saxons were also responsible for establishing extensive hunting preserves or parks, the management of which was later codified by the Normans in forest law. Woodstock Park was the earliest hunting ground of the Saxon Kings and formed part of the extensive belt of wood, coppice, underwood and spinney which stretched through the Oxfordshire countryside between the royal forests of Wychwood and Shotover in the Oxford Heights.

By the early middle ages, the Domesday survey of 1086 revealed an even pattern of settlements across the district, apart from Wychwood which remained comparatively empty. However, this was a time of expansion and gathering change in the landscape. New villages, such as Leafield, Finstock, Ramsden and Hailey, and fields were carved out from Wychwood through the process of 'assarting', although extensive woodland cover remained. Drainage and reclamation of the flood-plain flats along the Upper Thames also created new marshland villages such as Northmoor and Standlake. The steady advance of sheep-farming on the limestone led to a thriving woollen industry, with early fulling mills established near Enstone and Witney and the grand houses of wealthy wool merchants still visible in the town buildings of many settlements, such as Burford, Witney and Chipping Norton.

Climatic, economic and social changes led to the desertion or shrinkage of many medieval villages, especially between the Thames and Windrush rivers. The great rebuilding that followed in the Tudor and Jacobean period was accompanied by the development of grand mansions and

manor houses. Examples within the Cotswolds include Great Tew, Swerford, Heythrop, Chadlington, Sarsden, Bruern, **Chastleton**, Cornbury, **Shipton-under-Wychwood** and **Asthall**, with equivalents in the clay vale at Kelmscott and Cote. The formal gardens and parks which surrounded these houses had a considerable impact on the landscape but not so dramatic as the picturesque, designed landscapes of the eighteenth century, with which West Oxfordshire is particularly well-blessed. The most notable examples include Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's work at Blenheim Palace; William Kent's masterpiece at Rousham and at Ditchley Park; and Humphrey Repton's work at Sarsden and Great Tew.

Open farmland had been steadily enclosed by hedges, banks, stone walls and sometimes ditches during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, these earlier and more irregular enclosures were largely overwhelmed by the major parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which transformed the landscape of much of West Oxfordshire into an almost 'blueprinted' pattern of square or rectangular fields surrounded by straight thorn hedges or, in the Cotswolds, by stone walls. New farms and model estates were a feature of the landscape and miles of new wide, straight roads were also introduced to replace narrow winding lanes or to create new routes, eg. between Bampton and Oxford.

The Victorian period brought a number of specific changes to the landscape of West Oxfordshire. Firstly, the act for the 'disafforestation' of Wychwood Forest was signed in 1857 and resulted in wholesale clearance of much of the remaining woodland cover and replacement with an entirely new landscape of **new farms**, roads and **villages**. The transformation from royal forest to harvested crops took only sixteen months and gave birth to new settlements to house farm labourers, such as Fordwells and Mount Skippett. Elsewhere, other new villages were created to accommodate smallholders, notably the Chartist settlement of **Charterville and Carterton**. The Victorian period also saw the expansion of many settlements in West Oxfordshire to accommodate a growing population. A feature of this was the distinction between 'closed' and 'open' villages, brought about by changes in the Poor Law which meant that parishes with few landowners actively sought

to keep out the immigration of new people by building only enough houses for their existing workforce. This placed the burden of housing provision upon the 'open villages' which expanded at a considerable rate in a sprawling and haphazard fashion, unlike the compact, well-shaped order of the closed settlements. These distinctions are still evident today, for example between the orderliness of **Sandford St Martin** and the formless, mixed character of nearby Middle Barton.

Changes to the landscape and settlements of West Oxfordshire during the twentieth century have resulted mainly from the pressures of modern farming and the growth in demand for new housing and more efficient communications. The increasing mechanisation of post war agriculture has obliterated many miles of hedgerows and woodlands and transformed many of the former enclosure landscapes back to the bare, open vistas of the ancient common fields. Recent agri-environment initiatives (eg. Countryside Stewardship) seek to reverse these trends and, in effect, to replace **some** of the lost structure and biological diversity of the former enclosure landscapes. For example, within the Upper Thames Tributaries Environmentally Sensitive Area, the emphasis is on returning a wider range of wetland habitats to the river valleys while in the arable uplands, incentives are available for hedgerow planting, conversion of arable land to grasslands (possibly restoring the former character of the broad Cotswold 'sheepwalks') and the creation of more diverse field margins. However, farming practice is still primarily driven by market forces and financial subsidies and whilst the current systems of incentives remain in place, the effects of the agri-environment policies on the landscape will be slow to materialise.

Demographic changes and improvements in road and rail communications continue to place significant pressures on the district to accommodate new housing, although much of this pressure has been successfully resisted, particularly in the smaller rural settlements. A less obvious effect of the prosperity of this area, however, is the gradual 'suburbanisation' and 'gentrification' of many of the districts villages and a gradual erosion of local distinctiveness. The same effects are evident across the district and are manifested in more 'urban' types of fencing, surfacing, buildings, lighting and highway

treatments, which cumulatively detract from the traditional, rural character of the village or hamlet. Other changes in the landscape include extensive mineral extraction, which has transformed parts of the Upper Thames/Lower Windrush Valley.

In planning for future change within West Oxfordshire, the main challenge is to provide a suitable balance between the contrasting claims for housing and business expansion on the one hand and maintenance of the generally unspoilt rural qualities of the landscape on the other.

Variations in landscape and visual character

Having explained the underlying physical and human influences that have shaped the overall landscape of West Oxfordshire, the process of sorting the landscape into units of distinctive character helps further to unravel the factors that contribute to local landscape character.

The process of characterisation has been informed by other landscape assessments which apply to West Oxfordshire. In particular, the study aims to be broadly consistent with the Countryside Commission's 'Countryside Character Map of England', which provides a national/regional context for defining character areas, and other landscape assessments specifically prepared for the Cotswolds AONB and the Upper Thames Tributaries **ESA**.

Landscape character areas

The Countryside Character Map identifies two **regional character areas** within the boundaries of West Oxfordshire (see Figure 3):

- the Cotswolds;
- the Upper Thames Clay Vale;

These conform to the main topographical and geological regions and provide the broad context for defining a total of thirteen **local character areas** within the district. These are tracts of landscape which may be quite diverse in character but have some unifying or consistent elements which are related to their physical form or geographical location (see Figure 4). Detailed descriptions of the Character Areas are given in **Part Two** but their main distinguishing characteristics are summarised as follows:

- 1 **Northern Valleys and Ridges** - a topographically diverse area of complex geology to the north of Chipping Norton, where folding and faulting have created a distinctive landscape of valleys and ridges, a particularly rich pattern of landscape elements and a generally strong landscape structure;

- 2 Ironstone Valleys and Ridges - an area with similar landform and landscape pattern to the above but which is distinguished from it by the presence of characteristic iron-rich red soils and warm orange building stone;
- 3 Enstone Uplands - a high limestone plateau dissected by the River Glyme but otherwise characterised by rolling landform with a distinctive elevated and open character;
- 4 Eastern Parks and Valleys - an area of rolling limestone landscape which is heavily dissected by the valleys of the Glyme, Dorn and Cherwell and distinguished by a particular concentration of formal parks, designed landscapes and estate farmland;
- 5 Upper Evenlode Valley - a distinctive area of rolling Lower Lias clayland which forms a broad, shallow basin around the upper reaches of the River Evenlode, characterised by heavy clay soils and a strong landscape structure of thick hedgerows and frequent hedgerow trees, in marked contrast with the limestone areas to the south and east;
- 6 Lower Evenlode Valley - an area with a distinctive valley landform which, although varying in width between Shipton-u-Wychwood and Bladon, creates a sense of enclosure and a particularly strong pastoral and riparian character;
- 7 Wychwood Uplands - an area of smoothly rolling limestone bounded by the valleys of the Evenlode and Windrush. It has similar characteristics to the Enstone Uplands but is distinguished by the presence of the extensive woodlands of Cornbury Park, remnants of the former Wychwood Forest, which contribute to a more enclosed character at its eastern end;
- 8 Upper Windrush Valley - the Windrush Valley dissects the limestone plateau and forms a distinctive landform unit with its own particular, intimate and pastoral character;
- 9 Shilton Downs - an area of limestone landscape which forms the divide between the low-lying clay vale to the south and the Windrush Valley and limestone uplands to the north;
- 10 Barnpton Vale - an area of distinctively low-lying but gently rolling landscape lying between the edge of the limestone to the north and the very flat, expansive floodplain landscape which borders the River Thames to the south;
- 11 Eynsham Vale - a low-lying area characterised by large-scale, rolling farmland and including the formal parkland and well-managed wooded farmland of Eynsham Park and other large estates;
- 12 Lower Windrush Valley and Eastern Thames Fringes - an area of distinctively flat, low-lying landscape occupying the 'floodplain' of the River Windrush and the margins of the River Thames, heavily modified by mineral extraction but retaining areas of floodplain pasture;
- 13 Western Thames Fringes - an area occupying the very flat, low-lying landscape of the River Thames floodplain, comparatively free from mineral extraction but dominated by arable farmland.

Landscape Types

Although the character areas have a definable physical context and coherent identity, they are inevitably quite diverse in themselves. Even subtle differences in landform, land-use, landscape structure, the degree of visual enclosure and the influence of built development or specific land uses, can create variations in landscape character and local distinctiveness.

Landscape types are classified into the following groups, reflecting broad distinctions in landscape character:

- Valley Landscapes;
- Limestone Wold landscapes
- Clay Wold landscapes
- Clay vale landscapes;
- Parkland and Estate landscapes;
- Sub-rural landscapes

A number of sub-types reflect degrees of character variation within the main types, as shown in the following table.

West Oxfordshire Landscape Types:

Valley Landscapes

- Minor valleys
- Valley floor farmland
- Open valley-side farmland
- Semi-enclosed valley-side farmland
- Open valleys and ridges
- Semi-enclosed valleys and ridges

Limestone Wolds Landscapes

- Open limestone wolds
- Semi-enclosed limestone wolds (large-scale)
- Semi-enclosed limestone wolds (smaller-scale)

Clay Wolds Landscapes

- Open clay wolds
- Semi-enclosed clay wolds (large-scale)
- Semi-enclosed clay wolds (smaller-scale)

Clay Vale Farmland

- Floodplain pasture
- Open flat vale farmland
- Semi-enclosed flat vale farmland
- Open rolling vale farmland
- Semi-enclosed rolling vale farmland
- Floodplain wetlands

Parkland landscapes

- Parkland
- Estate farmland

Sub-rural landscapes

- Rural fringe land
- Sport landscapes
- Airfields and MOD sites
- Minerals and landfill sites

Valley landscapes

These landscapes comprise the various valleys which dissect and contrast with the rolling Cotswold plateau and dip-slope. They occur at varying scales but all have a distinctive valley form creating intimate, enclosed areas of farmland. The smaller V-shaped valleys are treated as a single landscape unit, while larger valleys with a U-shaped profile are divided into valley-floor and sides. A separate type describes particularly complex and intricate landform of valleys and ridges where it cannot easily be divided into its component parts.

The following valley types have been identified:

- **Minor valleys** - small-scale, enclosed and intimate tributaries of main valley systems, typically with a distinctive V-shaped profile;
- **Valley floor farmland** - the distinctive flat floor of larger valleys, typically occupied by floodplain pasture and with pastoral, riparian character;
- **Valley-side farmland** - distinctive, sloping valley-side landform typical of larger valleys, divided between a predominantly *open* and a *semi-enclosed* character;
- **Valleys and ridges** - complex systems of heavily folded and 'corrugated' minor valleys divided by narrow ridges, spurs and low hills. Areas with an *open* and *semi-enclosed* character are distinguished;

Limestone Wold landscapes

These are the landscapes which occur to the north of the Upper Thames Vale on higher, more pronounced landform underlain by the Oolitic Limestones, Lias Clays and shales of the Cotswold region. They are characterised by a distinctive smoothly rolling landform and a predominantly large-scale rectilinear field pattern bounded by dry-stone walls and hedges. The main differences lie between the structure of hedgerows, trees and woodland and the scale and pattern of enclosure.

The following limestone wolds types have been identified:

- Open limestone wolds farmland - these are the wide open, arable landscapes of the limestone summits and slopes (formerly extensive grassland sheepwalks) with a pattern of large-scale, regular enclosures, thin, well-drained soils and a very sparse network of hedgerows and trees;
- Semi-enclosed limestone wolds farmland - farmed landscapes of the limestone uplands with a more intact structure of hedgerows, trees and woods which interrupt the bare open vistas of the plateau. Two main sub-types are identified: predominantly *large-scale*, arable farmland with straight boundaries typical of later enclosures; and more mixed land use and *smaller-scale* pattern of irregular fields with strong hedgerow trees and woodland, typical of fields cut out from former woodland cover.

Clay wold landscapes

These are landscapes underlain by Lower Lias Clays, glacial deposits and alluvium in the lower lying parts of the Cotswolds. Their softly rolling landform and thicker hedgerows gives them a distinctively 'lowland' feel in comparison to the dry limestone uplands. Distinctions have been drawn between differences in field pattern and hedgerow structure as above:

- Open clay wolds farmland - typically open, arable landscapes with a pattern of *large-scale*, regular enclosures and sparse network of hedgerows and trees;
- Semi-enclosed clay wolds farmland - farmland with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees, either with a *large-scale* regular field pattern, mostly under arable, or *smaller-scale* irregular fields with a more mixed pattern of land use.

Clay Vale Farmland

The landscapes of the Upper Thames Clay Vale are characterised by a patchwork of arable fields and pastures, hedgerows, trees and woodland blocks typical of much of lowland England. It is underlain by Oxford Clay, alluvium and river gravels and is distinguished by its subdued and

low-lying relief. Fields are typically bounded by hedges and ditches rather than the walls of the stone country. Differences between types relate mainly to very subtle differences in landform, the dominant land use and the degree of enclosure provided by hedges and trees.

- Floodplain pasture - low-lying, very flat pasture found immediately alongside rivers and watercourses, with a distinctive pattern of tree-lined ditches and a tranquil, pastoral character;
- Flat vale farmland - low-lying, very flat, drained and cultivated farmland within the floodplain, with low horizons and dominance of sky. Distinctions are drawn between those which are very *open* and expansive, and *semi-enclosed* landscapes with a stronger structure of hedges and trees which filter views.
- Rolling vale farmland - low-lying cultivated farmland, similar to above, but distinguished by its slight elevation above the floodplain floor and a discernible but subtly rolling landform. Distinctions are drawn between areas which are very *open* and expansive, and *semi-enclosed* landscapes with a stronger structure of hedges and trees which filter views.
- Floodplain wetlands - parts of the floodplain which are characterised by open water and wetland habitats, typically created from the extraction of sand and gravels.

Parkland landscapes

These are highly distinctive landscapes associated with large country houses and estates where a formal or designed character has been imposed upon the underlying landscape. They include:

- Parkland - comprising the grand designed landscapes of the C18 and other, smaller areas of formal parkland with typical characteristics of parkland trees, avenues, woods, lakes and other formal landscape features;
- Estate farmland - the wider farmed landscape of large country estates, typically with a mature, well-managed and well-wooded character (with copses and coverts

for game), and often with distinctive estate boundaries and avenues of mature trees.

Sub-rural Landscapes

These are landscapes which lie within a rural context but which have developed semi-urban characteristics because of their land uses or proximity to urban influences. Their underlying character is **overwhelmed** by specific land uses or management regimes to produce distinctive landscape types and include:

- Rural fringe land - somewhat scruffy land (typically small, fields on the edges of settlements) which are not strictly in agricultural use, eg. pony paddocks, small-holdings, allotments, waste ground, disused airfields etc.
- **Sports** landscapes - such as golf courses and playing fields, which have an intensively managed character, often unrelated to their landscape context;
- Airfields and **MOD** land - including active airfields and defence sites with a highly distinctive character of flat open landscape, large-scale sheds, security fencing etc.;
- **Minerals** and landfill sites - where the landscape is in the process of being physically altered through active quarrying, tipping or restoration.

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of these landscape types across the **district** as a whole and further details of their distinguishing features are given within the individual character area descriptions. It is important to emphasise, however, that the 'grain' of characterisation within a **district-wide assessment** is **too coarse** to map the more **localised** variations in character that will inevitably occur, especially around the fringes of settlements. It is also important to note that, because of the difficulties in drawing accurate settlement boundaries, some landscape types may include areas of built form which do not register **within** the landscape type description.

Variations in landscape quality and condition

West Oxfordshire remains a predominantly rural district with some outstanding areas of landscape and a high proportion of very attractive, unspoilt countryside. The high quality of its landscape is confirmed by the designation of a large part of the district within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (a national designation) and by the inclusion of most of the remainder within the Area of High Landscape Value (a local designation).

Given that most of the district's landscape is intrinsically of high quality there are, nonetheless, some subtle variations in condition within it, even within the designated areas. These primarily result from a weakening of landscape structure through intensive farming practices, such as the removal of traditional dry-stone walls and the creation of bare, arable 'prairies'. While these landscapes can still be impressive, they lack the ecological or visual diversity which characterises some of the more richly-patterned landscapes. Lack of management, and some specific land uses like quarrying, can also affect landscape and ecological condition and be destructive to 'natural' landscape elements.

Different enhancement strategies are required to deal with these conditions, as defined on page 3. Their distribution across the district is illustrated in Figure 6 and summarised below. However, it must be stressed that the differences are subtle and even those landscapes within the '**reconstruct**' category are not seriously degraded by wider standards.

Conserve

Landscapes which fall into the conserve category are those which have a particularly strong, unspoilt character, a diverse and intact landscape structure, high aesthetic appeal and a range of valued habitats and archaeological resources. These primarily comprise:

- the outstanding landscapes of the eighteenth century parks and other scenically attractive areas of parkland and estate landscape,
- the **unspoilt**, pastoral and tranquil **floodplain** and valley landscapes of the River Thames,

Windrush, Evenlode and Glyme and their minor tributaries;

- the scenically diverse, richly-patterned and textured landscapes of the northern and ironstone valleys and ridges;
- some of the other particularly attractive well-wooded and enclosed landscapes with remnant ancient woodland on the limestone and in the vale, such as around Lew and above Swinbrook.

Strengthen

Landscapes within the 'strengthen' category represent rural, attractive landscapes but which are not quite so special or distinctive as those listed above. They would benefit from some enhancement to strengthen weakened landscape structure and reinforce local distinctiveness.

Those within the Strengthen 'a' category are those which require only **modest** enhancement and primarily comprise:

- those parts of the limestone and clay wolds which have retained a strong structure of hedgerows and trees and a mixed pattern of fields and land uses (eg. the more 'ancient', assarted landscape to the south of Wychwood Forest);
- those parts of the clay vale which have retained a strong structure of hedgerows and trees and where variations in landform and land use create some visual diversity (eg. to the south of Eynsham Park);
- areas of cultivated farmland within the flat river corridors which lack the pastoral qualities of the **floodplain** farmland but which have retained a good structure of hedgerows and trees.

Those **landscapes** within *the* Strengthen 'b' category tend to be those which have a particularly denuded character. While their open character may be impressive, allowing extensive views, for example, across the Cotswold plateau, their ecological value is diminished and they lack the variety and 'health' of some of the more richly-patterned landscapes. They include:

- the intensively farmed and highly mechanised arable 'prairie' landscapes of the open limestone wold on the Cotswold plateau;

- the low-lying and windswept open arable farmland of the Clay Vale, typically associated with deposits of terrace gravels.

Reconstruct

Only a few pockets of landscape fall within the reconstruct category. These represent landscapes which have undergone major change in character, such as gravel pits and limestone quarries and other fringe land uses that, in visual terms, do not fit comfortably within the rural landscape. They include:

- active and disused airfields at Brize Norton, Enstone and near Bradwell Grove which intrude upon the rural scene or have a derelict and somewhat degraded character;
- pockets of land on the fringes of the main settlements which are affected by unsightly land uses and built form;
- mineral extraction sites on the limestone wolds and, particularly, within the clay vale, where the natural landscape has been disrupted or destroyed and plant, machinery, vehicles, road improvements etc. detract from **local** landscape quality.