



# Design Guide 4

## Local Character



### 4.1 THE CHARACTER OF WEST OXFORDSHIRE

West Oxfordshire is a predominantly rural district. It embraces large areas of unspoilt countryside and a diverse pattern of landscapes, including rolling uplands, river valleys, historic parkland, remnants of ancient forests, low-lying farmland and riverside meadows. It contains within its borders scattered villages and some larger settlements. The architectural and landscape character of West Oxfordshire is chiefly determined by the underlying geology, with corresponding variations in traditional architectural forms in different parts of the District.

See *also*: Design Guide 3: Geology & Landscape

### 4.2 ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER AREAS

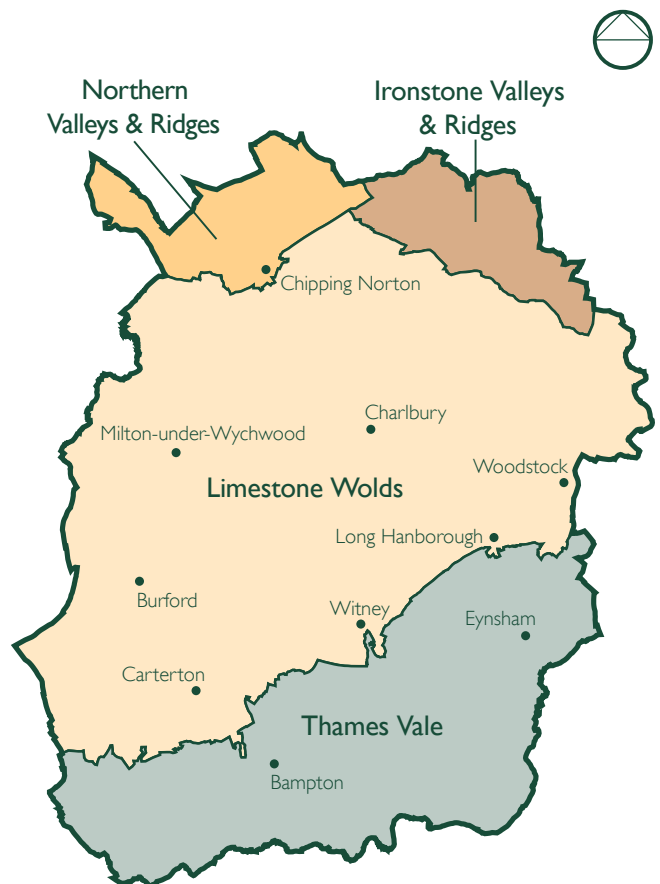
Just as the landscape of West Oxfordshire does not remain consistent throughout the District, so it is with the architecture and building materials. Marked regional variation exists. For this reason, guidance specific to each character area is crucial if this differentiation, and the richness of the District as a whole, is to be honoured.

Four distinct character areas have been identified in West Oxfordshire: the **Thames Vale**, the **Limestone Wolds**, the **Ironstone Valleys and Ridges**, and the **Northern Valleys and Ridges**.

Each area is topographically and geologically distinctive, as well as exhibiting clearly discernible variations in its architecture and building materials. The areas are identical to, or are amalgamations of, the twelve landscape character areas identified in the *West Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment (WOLA 1998)*. Each of the four areas is discussed in detail in the following pages.

Local character is particularly marked in West Oxfordshire, where the local oolitic limestone is the dominant material. It has been cut into smooth ashlar facings for the walls of important buildings, laid as coursed facings for walls or as coursed rubble for lower status houses, cottages and barns.

Today a wide range of architectural forms and synthetic materials are available. These, when used alongside traditional forms and natural materials, may appear alien and out of place. Unless special care is used in the design and choice of materials for new buildings, the character of our historic settlements will be progressively eroded and ultimately lost to future generations. Good design, which responds sensitively to its context, should overcome these problems.



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## i. Thames Vale

This area lies to the south and east of Witney, on the north bank of the Thames. Most of the area lies below 85 metres, and changes in ground level are barely perceptible. The area includes the Vales of Bampton and Eynsham, the Lower Windrush Valley and Eastern Thames Fringes, and the Western Thames Fringes Landscape Character Areas.

The flat, predominantly agricultural landscape is made up of floodplain pasture and vale farmland, and overlies heavy clay, river gravels and silts. The character of the landscape has largely been determined by the process of Enclosure. Large fields of regular shape with a strong structure of hedgerows are crossed by long, straight roads, with the occasional willow-lined ditch. There are significant blocks of oak woodland, and gravel extraction has created large wetland areas in the Lower Windrush Valley.

Distinctive building features include timber framing, and materials relating to the clay that underlies the northern part of the area, such as brick and clay tiles. The vernacular houses and cottages are typically long and low, with steeply pitched roofs.

### Walling materials

- Oolitic limestone in narrow beds
- Cornbrash limestone for field and boundary walling, laid in narrow beds
- Red 'Oxford' brick, sometimes glazed and with blue headers
- Timber framing
- Lime render on infill panels or rubble stonework
- Weatherboarding of elm, oak or chestnut, left natural to bleach silver grey, or stained or painted black

### Roofing materials

- Welsh slate
- Red handmade clay tiles
- Natural stone slate
- Thatch, long straw or combed wheat reed, with a plain flush wrapover ridge



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## ii. Limestone Wolds

The central area of the District, lying between the 85m and 200m contours, is formed by the dip slope of the Cotswolds. It comprises the Enstone Uplands, Eastern Parks and Valleys, Upper and Lower Evenlode Valleys, Wychwood Uplands, Upper Windrush Valley, and the Shilton Downs Character Areas.

The area has a highly distinctive open rolling landform. The northern and western part of this area of the Limestone Wolds is included within the Cotswold AONB, which stretches from Bath to Stratford. The undulating landscape is cut into by the rivers Windrush, Evenlode, Glyme and Swere. These create picturesque winding valleys with contained views. Historic Parkland (including Cornbury, Blenheim, Rousham, Ditchley and Heythrop) and fragments of the ancient Wychwood Forest, form landscape elements of exceptional importance. Fields tend to be large and regular. Dating from Enclosure, they are generally bounded by dry stone walling or hedgerows.

Distinctive building features include the famous, creamy limestone, which, together with the extensive use of limestone slates for roofs, creates built environments of strong local character and consistency. Long fronts, narrow gables, and steeply pitched roofs are typical.

### Walling materials

- Oolitic limestone, laid as uncoursed rubble, or squared and laid in courses, in a variety of bed widths and colours
- Ashlar limestone dressings
- Cornbrash limestone for field and boundary walling, laid in narrow beds
- Red 'Oxford' brick chimneys
- Lime render on rubble stonework

### Roofing materials

- Natural stone slate
- Thatch, either long straw or combed wheat reed, with a plain flush wrapover ridge
- Welsh slate



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## iii. Ironstone Valleys & Ridges

This small area in the north-east of the District has a diverse character and a complex, hilly landform. The distinctive orange marlstone and red soils result from an underlying geology rich in iron-bearing rocks and clays. The landscape features a patchwork of fields, hedgerows and woodland, and trees are unusually abundant.

The settlement pattern is sparse, with the scattered villages and hamlets typically occupying the sides or bottoms of the hidden intimate valleys that cross the area. The main settlements are Great Tew, Sandford St Martin and the Bartons.

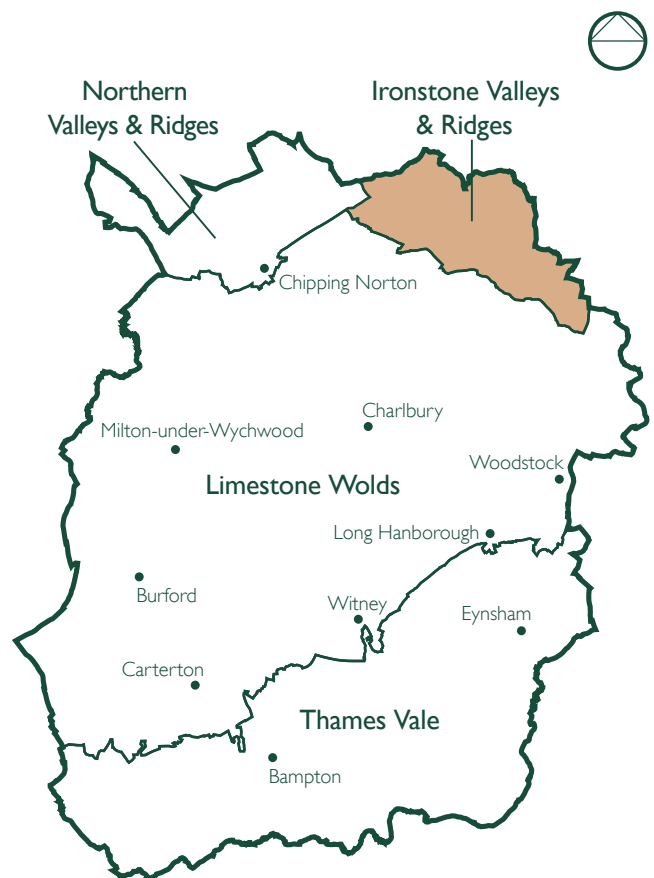
Distinctive building features include the striking orangey-brown ironstones. This material is generally used in larger blocks than the neighbouring oolitic limestone. Because it is often soft and easy to cut, its details and form tend to be simpler than those carved from the finer-grained stone. Stone dormers, stone copings and thatch are also relatively more abundant here.

### Walling materials

- Ironstone rubble or rough-dressed stone, in wide bed sizes. The stone may have a blue or green appearance when fresh, but oxidises to a deep, warm ginger-brown when exposed to the air, hence the name 'ironstone'
- Lias ashlar dressings, label mouldings and chimneys
- Oolitic limestone field and boundary walling, laid in narrow beds
- Red 'Oxford' brick used for chimneys, dressings and some outbuildings

### Roofing materials

- Natural stone slate
- Welsh slate
- Thatch, either long straw or combed wheat reed, with a plain flush wrapover ridge
- Clay tiles



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## iv. Northern Valleys & Ridges

This small area in the north-west of the District has distinctive open rolling countryside with high ridges overlooking the valleys below. The area has a variety of exposed geology on the valley sides. The local stone includes grey oolitic limestone, and ginger to light brown ironstone.

Chipping Norton, the principal settlement, occupies a high valley side setting. Most of the other Northern Valley settlements, however, occupy more sheltered sites, or lie in valley bottoms. Field size varies greatly here, and generally decreases as one descends from the open and elevated topography into the folded valleys below.

This topographical and geological diversity is reflected in the building materials and their use. Although oolitic limestone predominates, ironstone also appears. Stone walling appears in a variety of forms, featuring squared or rubble stonework, sometimes arranged in courses, sometimes not, and in a range of bed widths. Dormers carried up within stone gables flush with the face of the main wall, and Welsh slate on later houses, are notable features of the area.

### Walling materials

- Oolitic limestone rubble in a variety of bed widths and sizes
- Ashlar limestone dressings
- Ironstone
- Oolitic limestone field and boundary walls, usually in rubble in a variety of bed widths
- Red 'Oxford' brick chimneys, arches and dressings
- Lime render on rubble stonework

### Roofing materials

- Natural stone slate
- Welsh slate (particularly for the later houses)
- Thatch, either long straw or combed wheat reed, with a plain flush wrapover ridge
- Clay tiles



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