

Appendix L.A03

Landscape Character

Cotswold Character Area 7

Cotswolds



Key Characteristics

- Defined by its underlying geology: a dramatic scarp rising above adjacent lowlands with steep combes, scarp foot villages and beech woodlands.
- Rolling, open, high wold plateaux moulded by physical and human influences, with arable and large blocks of woodland, divided up by small, narrow valleys.
- Incised landscapes with deep wide valleys.
- Flat, open dip slope landscape with extensive arable farmland.
- Prominent outliers within the lowlands.
- Honey-coloured Cotswold stone in walls, houses and churches.
- Attractive stone villages with a unity of design and materials.

Landscape Character

The Cotswolds form perhaps the best-known of the stone-belt uplands that stretch right across England from Dorset to Lincolnshire. The dominant pattern is of a steep scarp and long, rolling dip slope cut into a series of plateaux by numerous rivers and streams. There is great variety of landform and vegetation and a number of distinct landscapes can be identified. However, in briefly describing these, the fundamental unity must not be underrated. This derives in part from the harmony of the ever-present honey-coloured oolitic limestone in walls, houses, mansions and churches. It dominates the villages which have a distinctive Cotswold style derived from repeating simple elements. There are many other common elements such as beech woods, outstanding landscape parks, valley bottom meadows and a strong sense of a long period of settlement and human activity. The latter derives from the many outstanding features ranging from prehistoric monuments to the dry stone walls of 18th century enclosure.

At the western edge of the Cotswolds, the scarp face, fretted by deep combes, dominates the Severn Valley.

Dense beechwoods, tree clumps, scrub, semi-natural grassland and prehistoric earthworks, most notably the Iron Age hillforts, contribute to an attractive and imposing skyline. Although hedged fields divide up much of the scarp's pastures, there are surviving commons, including Cleeve Common. Settlements on the scarp are confined to a few sheltered sites, but there are frequent villages where springs emerge at its foot. Around Bath, Stroud and Winchcombe, the landform is characterised by deep, wide valleys, often accentuated by densely-wooded ridge crests. Tree-clad streams wind down the steep slopes where fields are often small with overgrown hedges but, on the ridge tops, the landscape is usually open arable divided up by dry stone walls.



JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

The use of Cotswold oolitic limestone for buildings is one of the most dominant and characteristic features of the area. It can be seen throughout the built landscape of the Cotswolds especially in the great 'wool' churches.

Beyond the scarp to the north-west, there are outlying hills of which Bredon is the largest and best-known. They have an outward-facing radial form with field boundaries appearing to radiate from a central point. Several are crowned by ridges.

To the east of the scarp and its deeply-incised valleys, the landform becomes gentler and there are the broad rolling plateaux of the high Wolds. The large-scale, generally open landscape, is characterised by blocks of woodland and



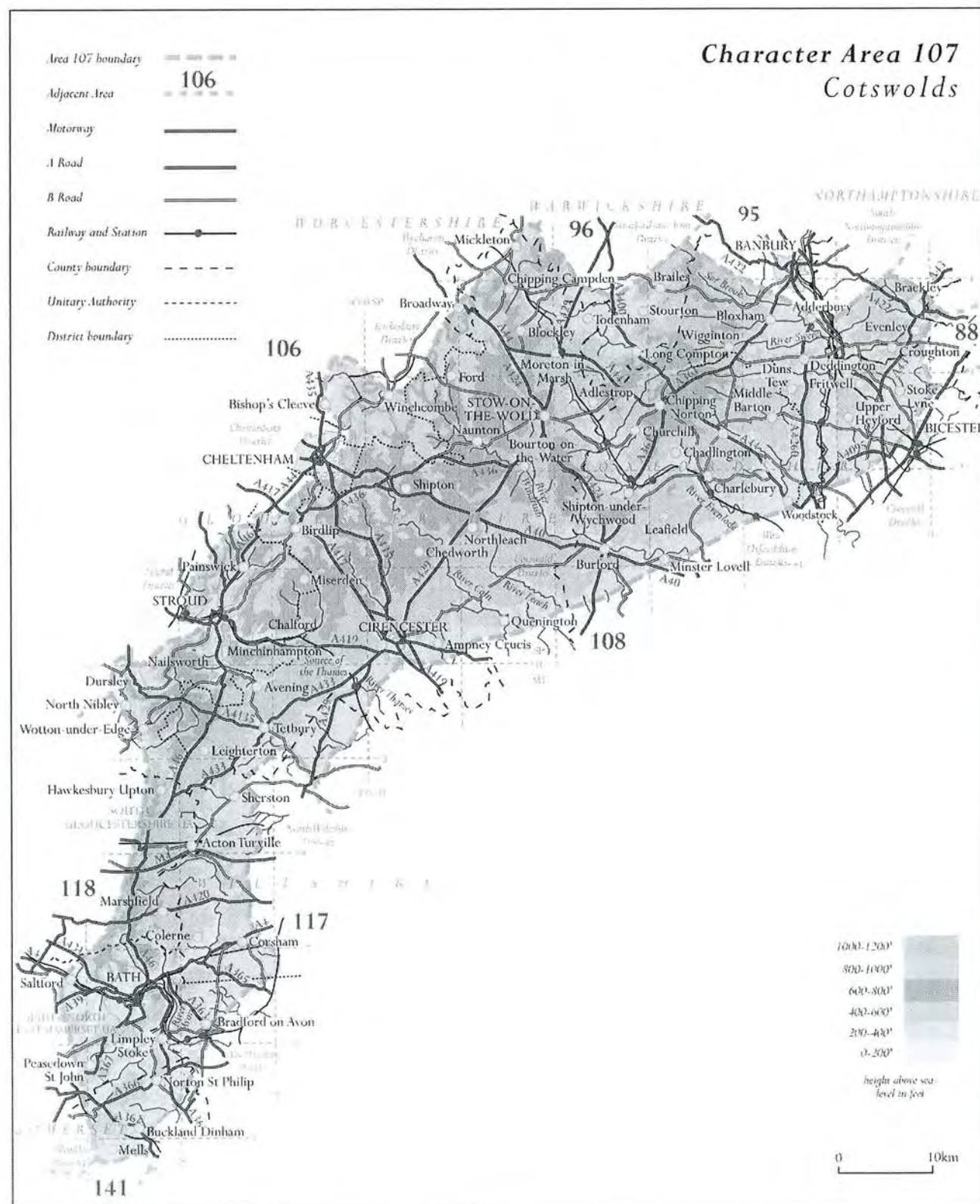
arable, but there are also lush, narrow, enclosed valleys forming a strong contrast, emphasised by the dry stone walls of the plateaux and the hedges of the valleys. Villages are near the spring lines, sometimes lying around a central common or green.

Finally, there is the dip slope which is yet more gentle than the high Wolds. The valleys, like those of the Windrush and Coln, are much broader and sometimes give the

impression that they are simply undulations in the plateau. Arable predominates, but marshy valley bottoms with willows, alders and watermeadows still survive.

Physical Influences

The north-west-facing scarp reaches its highest point just north of Cheltenham, becoming less prominent to the north and south. The Jurassic oolitic limestone of the upper scarp



forms the freely-draining high land of the northern and western wolds, as well as the ridge tops between the steep valleys to the south and east. Steeply-incised stream and river valleys cut through the scarp, flowing westwards towards the Severn. To the south and east, the oolite dips beneath wetter clays which form broad valleys around the main rivers and streams which flow eastwards.



JPI HALETT/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

To the north east an undulating wolds landscape with wide views, large fields, dry stone walls, plantation and shelter belts is broken by a lush, enclosed and settled valley.

Jurassic rocks predominate, the strata dipping towards and becoming progressively younger to the south and east. Small areas of Oxford Clay and coarse, crumbly Cornbrash occur at the south-eastern extremity. The Great Oolite underlies most of the plateau area but the massive limestone escarpment to the north and west is formed by the underlying Inferior Oolite which, if anything, is even more sought after as a building stone. Lower down the scarp face, and surrounding the northern and western fringes, the Lias shales, sandstones and siltstones of the Lower Jurassic are exposed. These are soft and easily weathered and have slumped or eroded to form the hummocky ground, stream valleys and bays at the escarpment foot.

Many of the Cotswold soils are derived directly from the parent rock and tend to be alkaline and of low fertility. Thin, well-aerated, brashy soils derived from limestone are common on the steeper slopes, particularly to the west. More fertile, deeper, clayey soils of alluvial origin are present along the valley floors and on lower-lying land to the south and east.

Historical and Cultural Influences

The Cotswolds have some outstanding prehistoric monuments ranging from the Neolithic long barrow of Hetty Pegler's Tump near Uley to the many impressive Iron age hillforts like Bredon Hill and Meon Hill. They are evidence of substantial human activity which almost certainly saw the clearance of areas with light and easily

cultivable soils at an early date and it was probably these that formed the basis of the extensive Roman occupation of the area. Villas and lesser settlements were frequent and the road pattern of the Foss Way, Ermin Street, Akeman Street and Ryknild Street is still very apparent.

It is not entirely clear whether the Saxons took over a substantially cleared and settled landscape or whether the clearance of the heavier land took place during the Anglo-Saxon period. However, by the late 11th century, the area was extensively settled and there was little woodland. Common fields were in use soon after, if not before, the preparation of Domesday Book and, at that time and in the ensuing medieval centuries, much of the land was in large estates, both ecclesiastical and lay. There were vast open sheepwalks which formed the basis of medieval prosperity and sheep were moved seasonally from low to high ground.



DAVID MORRIS/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

A plateau of large-scale arable farmland with a sparse settlement pattern of isolated farmsteads and hamlets.

After the disasters of the early and mid-14th century, large estates were consolidated and a prosperous cloth trade expanded from its early medieval beginnings with the many fast-flowing streams being used for fulling. Small market towns like Northleach and Chipping Camden expanded and many fine Perpendicular churches and merchants houses were built. The land market that followed the dissolution of the monasteries enabled the consolidation of the large estates, leading ultimately to the fine country houses and historic parks like Dyrham, Badminton and Compton Wynyates. Many of the villages owe their present uniform character to the strong influence of estates which, in many cases, has persisted down to the present day. Throughout the late medieval and post-medieval period, there was piecemeal enclosure of open fields, commons, waste and sheepwalks but many of the sheepwalks remained unenclosed until the late 18th and 19th centuries and the prominent rectilinear patterns characterise much of the higher ground today.

In the early modern period, the cloth industry concentrated in the valleys around Dursley, Stroud, Chalford and Painswick. Although it was originally a cottage industry, by

1800 large mills were built with cottages nearby. However, by the 1830s the industry was in decline and, apart from quarrying, agriculture has been the principal industry of the Cotswolds in the present century. There has been large-scale conversion from grassland to arable, removal of hedges and conversion of broadleaf woodland to conifers. The other major change has been the growth of tourism and the expansion of settlement.

Buildings and Settlement

Settlements throughout the area are united by the use of the Cotswold stone and a relatively small range of architectural styles. The great wool churches were built in Perpendicular style, mostly in the 15th century. They generally have profusely ornamented square towers although spires are sometimes found. It is, however, the high quality of the domestic architecture that is distinctive, typically comprising a steep roof of graded limestone 'slates', parapeted gables with finials, stone mullions, rectangular dripstones, dormer windows in subsidiary gables and four-centred arches over doorways. Ashlar is usually used on the front of buildings at least and the overall impression is one of diversity on a common theme of refinement and simple elegance, blending seamlessly into the surrounding landscape.

The principal towns – Bath, Stroud and Cirencester – lie on the very edges of the area and the fine qualities of the oolite-dominated townscape of Bath in particular is too well

known to need description. The smaller towns and villages lie at the scarp foot, in the valley bottoms or on the valley sides with the gentlest gradients. Plans vary between compact and linear with some lying around a wide central green or common. Away from these sheltered town and village sites, usually never far from water, there are generally only small hamlets and isolated farmsteads, so that the higher ground often seems very sparsely populated. The settlements are linked by a complex network of roads. The oldest (the Roman roads) and the most recent (the enclosure roads) sweep across the landscape in almost straight lines but the typical Cotswold road is a winding lane linking villages along the valleys and rising over the high ground.

Land Cover

Much of the high ground of the plateau is arable, broken by occasional woodland blocks and shelterbelts with dry stone walls but also with hedges. In the valleys, at least on the steeper slopes, pasture predominates and along the valley bottoms there are meadows and tree-lined watercourses. On the scarp slopes, scrub, beech woodland, hedges and tree clumps are present and some areas of species-rich grassland survive.

The beech woodlands are of national importance and have a characteristic, if limited, flora. Other woodlands, typically located on the upper slopes of valleys and on the flat plateau tops, are more varied and contain a wide range of



The west facing Cotswold scarp supports high calcareous grassland and fine beech woods.

calicole shrubs and ground flora. The unimproved grassland, too, contains typical calcicole species. The streams and marshes have varied marginal vegetation and unimproved wet meadows with alder and willow carr.

The Changing Countryside

- Agricultural improvement and conversion to arable have brought widespread loss of semi-natural habitats and landscape features in the period since the last war. Much of the unimproved, species-rich limestone grassland has been lost, marshes have been drained and hedges and dry stone walls removed. However, these changes have now more or less abated.
- Loss of unimproved grassland has probably been checked but scrub invasion through declining grazing is affecting what remains.
- There is pressure for expansion of villages and for the creation of new rural settlements, particularly those within easy reach of major towns and cities. Much new building has been infilling and unsympathetic in design and materials. Many farm buildings have been converted to residential use.
- Tourism and through-traffic have brought a requirement for upgraded roads, bypasses and through-routes with associated upgrading and an increased number of signs for minor routes.
- There is pressure for facilities at tourist honeypots, with associated congestion, erosion of footpaths, bridleways and viewing points.
- Dry stone walls are in long-term decline: the limestone walls become friable with age and require regular maintenance which is labour-intensive and expensive.
- Some small woodlands have been converted to conifers. Many existing small woodlands are unmanaged.
- There are continuing pressures for landfill, quarrying and extraction of gravel and minerals.

Shaping the Future

- Much of the scarp would benefit from an improved management of the limestone grassland and a reduction of scrub.
- There are opportunities for the sound management of hedges, woodlands, copses and – particularly – the distinctive beechwoods.

- The sensitive management of wetland habitats of the valley bottoms including wet grassland, scrub, willows and the streams themselves should be addressed.
- There is much interest in the conservation of dry stone walls and hedge management. Priorities need to be set for the areas that are most important in the landscape.
- The quality of Cotswold villages is often jealously guarded. Local design initiatives offer a basis for turning this into precise guidelines and activity.



Cotswold streams provide interest in the landscape and are generally of high quality supporting brown trout, dippers and, in a few areas, native crayfish.

Selected References

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- Cotswold AONB JAC (1995), *Cotswold AONB Management Strategy*.
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Glossary

- calicole*: plant that grows best in calcareous soil
- carr*: a marshy copse