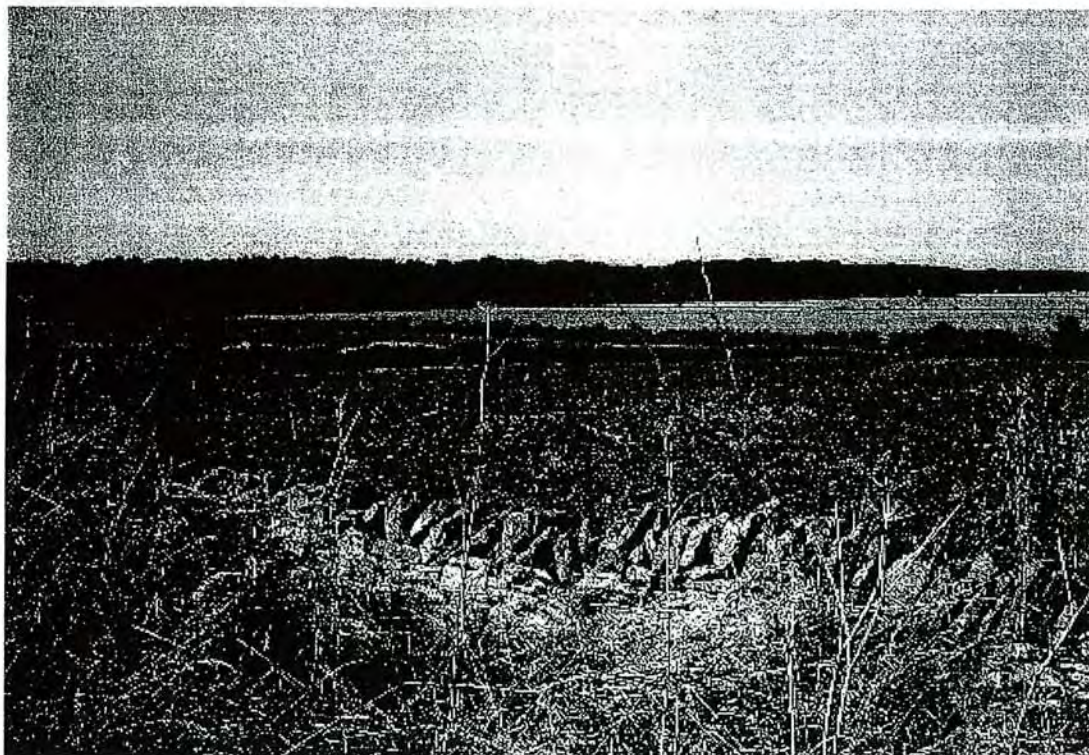


Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study
Landscape Types

Landscape Types:

Farmland Plateau



6. FARMLAND PLATEAU

Regional Character Areas

Cotswolds, Northamptonshire Uplands.

Location

This landscape type covers the plateau across the elevated northern part of the county. It extends across the areas between Chipping Norton and Banbury and is dissected by the Rivers Evenlode, Glyme and Dorn. To the east of the Cherwell Valley the plateau continues northeast of Upper Heyford and Fritwell. The most southern part lies to the northwest of the River Windrush.

Overview

This landscape type is characterised by a high limestone plateau with a distinctive elevated and exposed character, broad skies and long-distant views. Large-scale arable fields dominate the landscape, with some medium-sized plantations partially obscuring the otherwise open views.

Key Characteristics

- Level or gently rolling open ridges dissected by narrow valleys and broader vales.
- Large, regular arable fields enclosed by low thorn hedges and limestone walls.
- Rectilinear plantations and shelterbelts.
- Sparsely settled landscape with a few nucleated settlements.
- Long, straight roads running along the ridge summits.

Geology and landform

The rocks are of the Middle and Lower Jurassic periods. The upper strata of the sequence is the hard limestone bed of the Great Oolite, which dominates much of the area and gives rise to the distinctive smoothly rolling plateaux. In places, it reaches heights of around 200 metres. The lower series of Inferior Oolite, along with a band of Marlstone and a shelly ferruginous limestone of the underlying Middle Lias series, occurs mainly across the north of the area. They are referred to as ironstones because of their high iron content. The limestone gives rise to thin, well-drained calcareous soils with a distinctive orange-brown colour where the ironstones prevail.

Land use and vegetation

The light and easily cultivated soils have favoured the intensive arable farming that largely dominates the landscape. There are some smaller, semi-improved grass fields used for pony and sheep-grazing. Characteristic features dominating the skyline include the small to medium-sized regular plantations and long, wide shelterbelts bordering roads and field boundaries. They are particularly prominent when associated with large estates, and are mostly mixed and deciduous plantations with ash, field maple, beech and occasionally oak. Beech plantations are also typical of this landscape type. Small patches of secondary woodland with similar tree and shrub species can also be found.

Otherwise, there is very little semi-natural vegetation. There are pockets of calcareous grassland confined to steep railways embankments, disused quarries, airfields, and road verges. Bracken and patches of gorse are also found along road verges and on disused quarries and golf courses.

Cultural pattern

This is a characteristic, planned, late Parliamentary enclosure landscape. There is a large-scale geometric field pattern surrounded by low hawthorn hedges and stone walls. Hedgerow trees, which are mainly ash, sycamore, field maple and sometimes oak, are sparsely scattered throughout and do not detract from the openness of the landscape. Occasionally, in places like Glympton where there is a strong estate character, hedges support species such as privet, dogwood, wayfaring tree, hazel and field maple. The hedgerow trees are also much denser in this area. Another characteristic feature is the straight roads which reinforce the geometric pattern of this planned landscape.

The exposed high plateau has not favoured settlement, and it is characterised by sparsely scattered farmsteads and a few nucleated villages. Farmhouses are generally located in the open countryside as a result of parliamentary enclosure.

The use of local limestone for building materials gives a very distinctive character to the village settlements. The pale cream-coloured Oolitic limestone and stone tiles on the roofs feature in most of the buildings. Some houses are built with the warm orange-brown coloured ironstone and local Stonesfield slates. The vernacular character is particularly prominent in villages such as Fritwell and Souldern, and in small hamlets such as Ledwell.

BIODIVERSITY

Overview

This landscape supports a wide range of locally important habitats along with some ancient semi-natural woodland and patches of unimproved limestone grassland.

Key characteristics

- Bioscores/biobands range from low to medium-high but are predominantly in the low to low-medium range.

- Priority habitats include ancient woodland, species-rich hedgerows, calcareous grassland and occasional wetlands such as streams and ponds.

General Description

This is a large landscape type occupying around 9% of the rural county. It supports a relatively wide range of locally important habitats including secondary woodland, plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hawthorn hedges. Parts of the limestone plateaux, either side of the Cherwell Valley from Chipping Norton in the west to the area Upper Heyford in the east, score more highly. This is largely because they still support fragments of priority and important habitats, such as ancient semi-natural woodland, species-rich hedgerows and limestone grassland. These tend to be relatively small and isolated in locations such as Stoke and Worton woods and often associated with marginal areas such as Ardley, Taynton and Rollright Quarries and parts of the Upper Heyford airfield. Similarly, there are isolated pockets of acid grassland and heath to the west of Banbury, with Tadmarton Health Golf Course being the best example. Only Ardley Quarry has any statutory protection, and this is mainly due to its geological interest. A number of others have been designated as county wildlife sites.

LOCAL CHARACTER AREAS

A. Shutford (NU/17, NU/20)

Landscape Character

The area is characterised by prominent, tall thick hedges enclosing medium-sized, regularly-shaped fields. Land uses are mixed, but arable farming dominates the area to the south of Shennington Gliding Club. Ridge and furrow is apparent in the small grass fields around Shutford. Tree cover is limited to a few hedgerow trees. The hedgerow network is generally in good condition, and hedges bordering roads are often support a number of shrub species.

Biodiversity

Bioscores/biobands: 19/L; 31/LM

This area supports a limited range of locally important habitats including deciduous woodland, plantations, scrub, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. There are no recorded priority habitats.

B. Hornton to North Newington (NU/22)

Landscape Character

The area is dominated by large, regularly-shaped arable fields. Long, wide shelterbelts and medium-sized, rectilinear coniferous and mixed plantations are also a distinctive feature. Fields are enclosed by these shelterbelts and low, gappy hawthorn hedges.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 50/LM

There is a range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. Other important habitats recorded include some ponds and patches of gorse scrub.

C. Hanwell (NU/24)**Landscape Character**

The area is characterised by medium-sized, regularly-shaped arable fields enclosed by very low, gappy hawthorn hedges. There is some grassland, particularly where the landform is steeper and more undulating. There are a few small mixed plantations and scattered hedgerow trees of young ash and sycamore.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 39/LM

There is a limited range of locally important habitats including mixed plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. There is a small area of calcareous grassland at the Bretch to the west of Banbury.

D. Croft Farm (CW/37)**Landscape Character**

The area is characterised by small fields with a range of different land uses including pony paddocks. The hedgerow pattern is generally intact throughout. Hedges bordering roads are generally taller and thicker. They are dominated by species such as hawthorn and field maple and are associated with a dense pattern of mature hedgerow trees including ash, field maple and sycamore. Collectively, these features create a strong structural element in the landscape. By contrast, internal field boundaries tend to be much lower in height with fewer hedgerow trees.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 19/L

This area supports only a limited range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. There are no recorded priority habitats.

E. Wigginton Heath (CW/36)**Landscape Character**

The area is characterised by medium-sized fields with a mix of different land uses. Hedges are generally in good condition and dominated by hawthorn. A dense pattern of mature hedgerow trees, mainly ash and sycamore, is the dominant landscape element. There is only one medium-sized plantation and a few groups of trees around farmhouses.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 60/M

There is a range of locally important habitats including a deciduous plantation, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. Parts of Tadmorton golf course still supports significant amounts of acid grassland and some heathland, although it is still a relatively small and isolated site.

F. Chipping Norton (CW/30: CW/31: CW/41)

Landscape Character

The area is characterised by large, regularly-shaped arable fields, and rectilinear mixed and deciduous plantations and shelterbelts. Thinly scattered hedgerow trees of oak and ash are also a unifying feature throughout the area, particularly to the east of Great Rollright. Localised pockets of semi-improved grassland, used mainly for pony-grazing, are found near Heythrop, Gaginwell and to the east of Great Rollright. The field boundaries consist mainly of hawthorn hedges and stone walls, with the latter being particularly prominent to the southeast of Chipping Norton. Some species-rich hedges are found around the estate at Glympton. Hedges are generally low and gappy, and stone walls are often in poor condition and overgrown with hawthorn scrub.

Biodiversity

Bioscores/biobands: 80/M: 76/M: 113/MH.

This area supports locally important habitats such as plantations, deciduous secondary woodland, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges. There are also surviving patches of unimproved grassland near Chipping Norton, limestone grassland at the Rollright Quarry, along the banks of the disused railway at Hook Norton and within the upper section of the River Glyme. There is also some ancient semi-natural woodland at Stoke and Worton woods, species-rich hedgerows and limestone grassland at Ardley and Whiteways quarries, but they are mostly small and isolated sites within this very large landscape type.

G. Swerford Heath (NU/4)

Landscape Character

The landscape is characterised by shelterbelts and rectilinear, mixed plantations bordering roads. There is a scattering of hedgerow trees including oak, ash and beech. Land uses are mixed, with medium-sized fields enclosed by hawthorn and elm hedges. The latter are generally in good condition, but are lower and gappier where they surround improved grassland.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 25/L

This area supports a limited range of locally important habitats including deciduous woodland, plantations, and species-poor hedges with trees. There are no recorded priority habitats.

H. Fritwell (CW/57)

Landscape Character

This area is characterised by large, regularly-shaped arable fields and medium-sized mixed plantations. There are small fields of semi-improved grassland surrounding villages. There are also a few large blocks of ancient semi-natural woodland, including Stoke Wood and Stoke Little Wood, which add to the wooded character of the area. The field boundaries are dominated by hawthorn and blackthorn hedges with scattered hedgerow trees, although the latter are almost totally absent to the south of Upper Heyford airfield. Hedges are generally low in height, except around Fritwell and Ardley where they are taller and more species-rich.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 112/MH

There is range of locally important habitats including meadows, woodland, plantations, scrub, semi-improved grassland and species-poor hedges with trees. Even though there are a number of priority habitats such as ancient semi-natural woodland, examples being Stoke and Worton woods, species-rich hedgerows and limestone grassland at Ardley and Whiteways quarries, they are mostly small and isolated sites within this relatively large landscape type.

I. Shipton Down (CW/16)

Landscape Character

The area is characterised by large, regularly-shaped arable fields. Hawthorn hedges are low and fragmented and the stone walls are often overgrown with scrub. There are very few hedgerow trees and tree cover is mainly confined to small copses in fields. There are some plantations and shelterbelts associated with restored quarries.

Biodiversity

Bioscore/bioband: 52/LM

This area supports a range of locally important habitats including plantations, semi-improved grassland, scrub and species-poor hedges as well as some limestone grassland near Taynton.

FORCES FOR CHANGE

- Agricultural intensification, particularly the conversion of grassland to arable has resulted in the loss of semi-natural vegetation and fragmentation of the hedgerow network. Hedges along roadsides are generally in a better condition, but many internal hedges bordering arable fields have been removed. Stone walls are also redundant, in poor condition and overgrown with scrub.
- The open plateau landscapes are very exposed and agricultural buildings and other large structures, such as the industrial units at Enstone Airfield, are particularly prominent. Similarly, the structures associated with Upper Heyford airfield are very visible across the Cherwell valley.
- A number of the ironstone quarries in the north of the county have been restored to low-level agriculture and one, near Alkerton, is currently operating as a landfill site. There is also an active quarry to the south of Hornton and permissions exist for new workings in the area. A number of tree and shrub belts have been planted to screen these operations.
- There is new residential development where the use of building materials has not always been appropriate. However, in many settlements including Fritwell, the scale and use of building materials is in keeping with the local vernacular character. In towns such as Chipping Norton there are small-scale industrial units bordering some of the main routes into the centre.
- Other development such as golf courses can have a suburbanising effect on the landscape.

Landscape Strategy

Conserve the open and remote character of the landscape, and maintain the large-scale field pattern.

Guidelines

- Conserve the open, spacious character of the landscape by limiting woodland planting on the more exposed ridge tops. Locate new planting in the dips and folds of the landscape and establish tree belts around airfields, quarries and other large structures to reduce their visual impact using locally characteristic native tree and shrub species such as ash, oak and beech.
- Strengthen the field pattern by planting up gappy hedges using locally characteristic species such as hawthorn and blackthorn.
- 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 all remaining areas of semi-improved and unimproved grassland and encourage conversion of arable to pasture.
- Maintain the sparsely settled rural character of the landscape by concentrating new development in and around existing settlements. The exposed character of the plateau is particularly sensitive to visually intrusive development, large buildings and communication masts.
- Promote the use of local building materials, such as limestone and ironstone, and a scale of development appropriate to landscape type.
- Encourage appropriate restoration and after use of quarries to strengthen and enhance landscape character.

Biodiversity Strategy

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

Guidelines

- Priority habitats in this landscape type are relatively small and isolated. They include limestone grassland, acid grassland and heath, and species-rich hedgerows.
- Limestone grassland is largely associated with marginal areas such as quarries and airfields. Within the quarries, aim to establish a balance between species-rich limestone grassland and scrub, and 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.
- 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 is only a limited amount of acid grassland and heath within the landscape type, and this is primarily associated with Tadmarton Heath golf course. The priority is to ensure that it remains in favourable condition and management. Opportunities for extending this habitat type are limited.
- There is some ancient semi-natural woodland at places such as Stoke and Worton woods. The priority must be to ensure that these sites are in favourable condition and management.
- Opportunities for the establishment of other locally important habitats, such as semi-improved grassland and deciduous woodland, should be promoted in order to strengthen wildlife corridors and enhance the local landscape character.
- 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 open, sparsely settled character of the landscape whilst maintaining and strengthening its pattern of hedgerows, stone walls, small woodlands and tree belts.**
- **Ensure that all priority habitats are in favourable condition and management.**