

APPENDIX 10.2

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREAS EXTRACT

107. Cotswolds

Supporting documents

Introduction & Summary

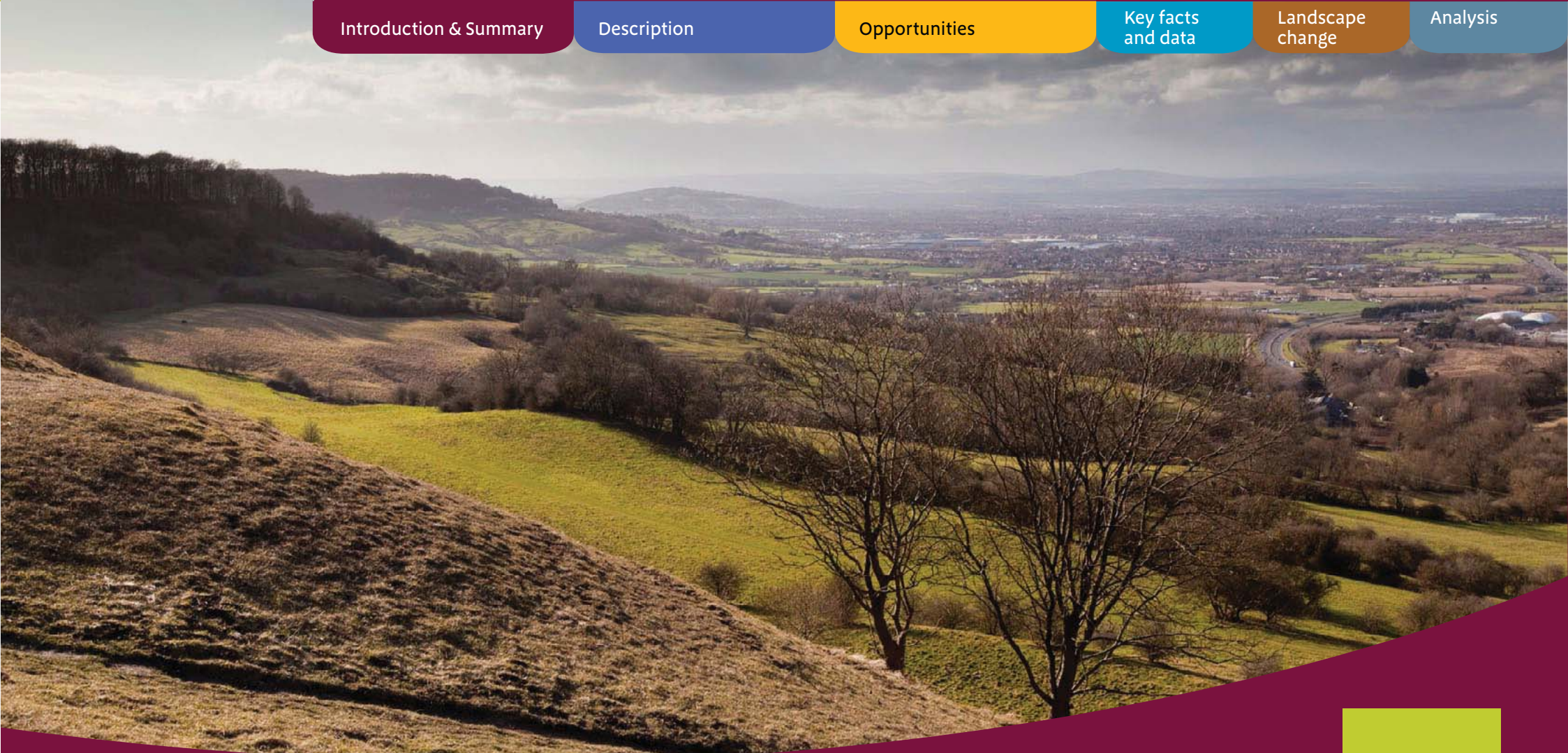
Description

Opportunities

Key facts
and data

Landscape
change

Analysis



www.naturalengland.org.uk

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Toggle full screen

1

Next »

Summary

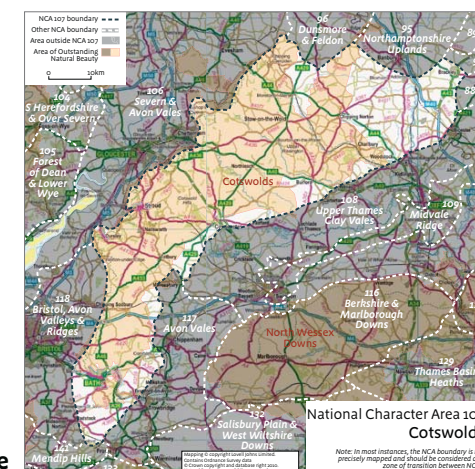
The Cotswolds form the best-known section of the predominantly oolitic Jurassic Limestone belt that stretches from the Dorset coast to Lincolnshire. The dominant pattern of the Cotswold landscape is of a steep scarp crowned by a high, open wold; the beginning of a long and rolling dip slope cut by a series of increasingly wooded valleys. The scarp provides a backdrop to the major settlements of Cheltenham, Gloucester, Stroud and Bath and provides expansive views across the Severn and Avon Vales to the west. Smaller towns and villages nestle at the scarp foot, in the valley bottoms and on the gentler valley sides at springlines. Scattered hamlets and isolated farmsteads are found on the higher ground. The limestone has been quarried and used locally in buildings and walls, bringing a distinctive harmony to the area. Settlements are linked by a complex network of roads and public rights of way.

Nationally important beech woods feature in the landscape and are a notable feature on the scarp edge and in a number of the incised valleys. Mixed oak woodlands are concentrated on the upper slopes of valleys and on the flat high wold tops. Woodlands can contain a wide and notable range of calcicole shrubs and ground flora. Parkland and estates are characteristic of the area. Farming is mixed, with much of the high wold dominated by arable on thin, brashy soils prone to erosion. Pasture is predominant in the valleys, and in particular on steeper slopes and on more clayey soils. Meadows and tree-lined watercourses are found along the valley bottoms.

Important habitats include unimproved limestone grassland along the scarp, for example Rodborough Common Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and wet meadows with alder and willow and springline flushes. Two further SAC are

also designated: Cotswold Beechwoods SAC and Bath and Bradford-on-Avon Bats SAC. Steeply-incised stream and river valleys cut through the north-west-facing scarp, flowing westwards towards the Severn. The watercourses of the dip slope provide the headwaters of the Thames and flow eastwards within broad shallow valleys, and these rivers and underlying aquifer are an important supply of high-quality water for populations within and around the area.

The area has a rich history, with nationally and internationally important evidence of prehistoric, Roman, medieval and later settlement in the form of archaeological sites, historic buildings and the wider historic landscape. Roman roads are prominent, including the Fosse Way which extends from north to south through the whole area. It is a notable visitor destination and has a longstanding reputation as the 'quintessential English landscape'. Much of the area is designated as the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.



Click map to enlarge; click again to reduce

Description

Physical and functional links to other National Character Areas

The Cotswold scarp, rising to 330 m, provides long, expansive views westwards over the Severn and Avon Vales to the Forest of Dean and Wales, to the Malvern and Shropshire hills and the nearby outliers such as Bredon Hill. From the dip slope, long easterly views can still be seen across the Vale of the White Horse to the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns. Unlike the scarp, the eastern side of the National Character Area (NCA) merges gently with the neighbouring NCAs. The scarp forms the backdrop to the Severn and Avon Vales and in particular the setting for Cheltenham, Gloucester, Stroud and Bath, a World Heritage Site (WHS).

Most of the principal rivers in the NCA are tributaries of the Thames and flow south-eastwards into the Upper Thames Clay Vales, providing strong ecological and functional links. Rivers in the south and west flow into the River Avon and then the Severn Estuary. The area is underlain by a limestone aquifer, and both this and the rivers are a key supply of high-quality water for this and the surrounding areas, including the Cotswold Water Park.

The Cotswolds provide drinking water for populations as far away as Birmingham and London, but also provide outdoor recreation and learning, and many other services. The Cotswolds are also internationally renowned and popular with overseas visitors and as a domestic short-break and day-trip destination. There is an extensive network of public rights of way, particularly

footpaths, including the start of the 184-mile Thames Path National Trail, the majority of the 102-mile Cotswold Way National Trail and parts of the National Cycle Network, which connect beyond the Cotswolds. The A46 and A429 run the length of the Cotswolds along the route of the former Roman road, the Fosse Way. The A41 follows the route of Akeman Street, another former Roman road, from east to west. These Roman roads connected Exeter to Lincoln and St Albans and Cirencester respectively. The M4 and A40 cross the area from east to west linking it to major cities and communities, as do the M40 in the north-east near Banbury and the Oxford to Worcester and London to Bristol, Bath and South Wales railway lines.

The Cotswolds area is famed for its building stone, used extensively within the NCA but also much further afield, for example in Oxford and London.



Limestone grassland at Swellshill

Key characteristics

- Defined by its underlying geology: a dramatic limestone scarp rising above adjacent lowlands with steep combes, and outliers illustrating the slow erosion of escarpments. The limestone geology has formed the scarp and dip slope of the landscape, which in turn has influenced drainage, soils, vegetation, land use and settlement.
- Open and expansive scarp and high wold dipping gently to the south-east, dissected by river valleys.
- Arable farming dominates the high wold and dip slope while permanent pasture prevails on the steep slopes of the scarp and river valleys with pockets of internationally important limestone grassland.
- Drystone walls define the pattern of fields of the high wold and dip slope. On the deeper soils and river valleys, hedgerows form the main field boundaries.
- Ancient beech hangers line stretches of the upper slopes of the scarp, while oak/ash woodlands are characteristic of the river valleys. Regular blocks of coniferous and mixed plantations are scattered across the open high wold and dip slope.
- Large areas of common land, important for unimproved calcareous grassland, are characteristic of the scarp and high wold around the Stroud valleys and along the crest of the scarp to Cleeve Hill.
- The majority of the principal rivers flow south-eastwards forming the headwaters of the Thames with the exception of rivers in the west which flow into the River Avon and then the Severn Estuary.
- Rich history from Neolithic barrows, iron-age hill forts and Roman roads and villas to deserted medieval villages, grand country houses, cloth mills and Second World War airfields. The field patterns largely reflect both the medieval open field system, with fossilised areas of ridge and furrow, and later planned enclosures.
- Locally quarried limestone brings a harmony to the built environment of scattered villages and drystone walls, giving the area a strong sense of unity for which the Cotswolds are renowned. Bath stone is also famous and has been used for building since Roman times, both locally in the principal buildings and streets of Bath and more widely, for example for Buckingham Palace in London. Parkland, gardens and historic designed landscapes are features particularly of the dip slope and broad lowland, such as Lawrence Johnston's garden at Hidcote, and Heather Muir's garden at Kiftsgate, parkland at Stanway, Chastleton and Blenheim Palace.
- Prominent natural and built features in the landscape include the City of Bath WHS, Brailes Hill, Broadway Tower, Cleeve Hill, the Tyndale monument, Freezing Hill, Kelston Round Hill and Blenheim Palace WHS.

108. Upper Thames Clay Vales

Supporting documents

Introduction & Summary

Description

Opportunities

Key facts
and data

Landscape
change

Analysis



www.naturalengland.org.uk

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Toggle full screen

1

Next »

Statements of Environmental Opportunities:

- **SEO 1:** Along the Thames and its tributaries, promote sustainable farming and best practice mineral working in order to conserve and restore semi-natural habitats, historic features, geodiversity, soil quality and soil carbon stores and also to regulate water flow in this area and downstream. Ensure conservation of Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation and North Meadow and Clattinger Farm Special Area of Conservation. Engage the public in river heritage and maintain traditional land management practices where appropriate.
- **SEO 2:** Manage farmland across the Upper Thames Clay Vales to produce food sustainably and to maintain sense of place. Taking a catchment approach, improve filtration of pollutants and regulation of water flow by realising a farmland habitat mosaic that incorporates strategic areas of wet grassland, reedbed, wet woodland and ponds as well as ditches and hedgerows.
- **SEO 3:** Ensure that heritage assets, especially characteristic features such as ridge and furrow, abandoned medieval villages, Roman roads, canals and historic parkland, including Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site, are maintained in good condition. Integrate conservation of these features with sustainable food production and provide public access to key examples. Seek opportunities to restore the wider historic setting of a feature, particularly in relation to the historic Royal Hunting Forests of Bernwood, Braydon and Wychwood.
- **SEO 4:** Realise sustainable development that contributes positively to sense of place and built heritage. Ensure adequate greenspace in association with all development and most importantly in growing settlements such as Aylesbury and Swindon. Create and manage greenspace to provide benefits for biodiversity, floodwater management, filtration of pollutants, tranquillity and recreation, and secure strategic access routes between town and country.



Rural and urban areas are at high risk of flooding. There are opportunities to slow and store water run-off across the NCA.

Introduction & Summary

Description

Opportunities

Key facts
and dataLandscape
change

Analysis

Description

Physical and functional links to other National Character Areas

The Upper Thames Clay Vales National Character Area (NCA) covers an extensive area of low-lying land extending from west of Swindon through to Aylesbury in the east, and completely encircles the Midvale Ridge NCA.

Around 3 per cent falls within North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), with smaller areas falling within the Chilterns and Cotswolds AONBs. To the north, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales adjoin Cotswolds NCA, while the Vales of White Horse and Aylesbury border the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs and Chilterns NCAs to the south. Avon Vales is to the west; Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands lies to the north-east.

The Oolitic Limestone of the Cotswolds is a significant aquifer and gives rise to the rivers that cross into the NCA, including the Windrush, the Churn, the Coln and the Thames itself. Farmoor Reservoir relies on the Cotswolds for 60 per cent of its water. Principal aquifers associated with chalk bedrock in the Chilterns and Berkshire Downs also extend a little into this NCA. Main surface water abstractions are for the public water supply. To the east, the majority serves London, while Farmoor Reservoir provides for Oxford, Banbury and Swindon in neighbouring NCAs. The catchments of the rivers Ock and Thame in the south and the tributaries in the north (including the Evenlode, Windrush, Leach, Cherwell and Colne) all drain south-west into the Thames.

The Chalk scarp of the Chilterns and the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs forms a backdrop for many views from the Vales to the south.

The area is crossed by many transport corridors, including the M40, M4, A419 (M4–M5 link), Oxford and Grand Union canals and railway lines linking to the Midlands, and to the north and west of England. Cycle routes such as National Cycle Route 45 and The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails also pass through the area.

Distinct areas

- Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales to the north and west of the Midvale Ridge
- Vales of White Horse and Aylesbury to the south of the Midvale Ridge



People enjoy the views of the Vales from the high ground of adjacent NCAs, including the escarpment of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Introduction & Summary

Description

Opportunities

Key facts
and dataLandscape
change

Analysis

Key characteristics

- Low-lying clay-based flood plains encircle the Midvale Ridge. Superficial deposits, including alluvium and gravel terraces, spread over 40 per cent of the area, creating gently undulating topography. The Upper Jurassic and Cretaceous clays and the wet valley bottoms give rise to enclosed pasture, contrasting with the more settled, open, arable lands of the gravel.
- The large river system of the River Thames drains the Vales, their headwaters flowing off the Cotswolds to the north or emitting from the springline along the Chilterns and Downs escarpments. Where mineral extraction takes place, pits naturally fill with water, and limestone gravels from the Cotswolds give rise to marl formation. There are a high number of nationally important geological sites.
- Woodland cover is low at only about 3 per cent, but hedges, hedgerow trees and field trees are frequent. Watercourses are often marked by lines of willows and, particularly in the Aylesbury Vale and Cotswold Water Park, native black poplar.
- Wet ground conditions and heavy clay soils discourage cultivation in many places, giving rise to livestock farming. Fields are regular and hedged, except near the Cotswolds, where there can be stone walls. The Vale of White Horse is made distinct by large arable fields, and there are relict orchards on the Greensand.
- In the river corridors, grazed pasture dominates, with limited areas of historic wetland habitats including wet woodland, fen, reedbed and flood meadow. There are two areas of flood meadow designated for their importance at a European level as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). There are also rich and extensive ditch systems.
- Gravel extraction has left a legacy of geological exposures, numerous waterbodies and, at the Cotswold Water Park, a nationally important complex of marl lakes.
- Wetland habitat attracts regionally important numbers of birds including snipe, redshank, curlew and lapwing and wintering wildfowl such as pochard. Snake's head fritillary thrives in the internationally important meadows. The area also supports typical farmland wildlife such as brown hare, bats, barn owl, tree sparrow and skylark.
- Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site, including its Capability Brown landscape, is the finest of many examples of historic parkland in this NCA. There are many heritage features, including nationally important survivals of ridge and furrow, Roman roads, deserted medieval villages and historic bridges.
- Brick and tile from local clays, timber and thatch are traditional building materials across the area, combined with limestone near the Cotswolds and occasional clunch and wichert near the Chilterns.
- Settlement is sparse on flood plains, apart from at river crossings, where there can be large towns, such as Abingdon. Aylesbury and Bicester are major urban centres, and the outer suburbs of Oxford and Swindon spread into this NCA. Market towns and villages are strung along the springlines of the Chilterns and Downs. Major routes include mainline rail, canals, a network of roads including the M40 and M4 and The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails.